

"The Menace of Spirit River"-A complete novel of Hashknife
by W. C. TUTTLE — "Hot Beaver" — ARTHUR H. CARHART

Short Stories

July 25th

Twice A Month

25c

In the new
world was
peril for the
Army of the Rhine!

H. BEDFORD-JONES

Pa

"... Has a Pr..."



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.

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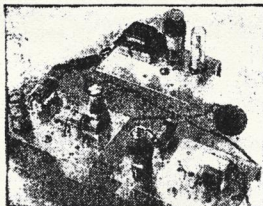
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Short Stories

TWICE A
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THE

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OF

AMERICA'S

ACTION

ADVENTURE

MYSTERY

THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

4

FREEDOM HAS A PRICE

(First Part of Four)

H. Bedford-Jones

6

*Island of the Blest, Richest Colony Ever Possessed by
Any European Nation, Flying the Flag of France
—and Breathing Oppression, Quivering
Danger and Acute Invisible Peril*

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D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

July 25th, 1947

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of
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EVERY
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AND
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NO
REPRINTS

The Story Tellers' Circle



Freedom Has a Price

IN THIS issue of SHORT STORIES there begins a new Bedford-Jones serial. B-J is, of course, known to all our readers. He has done us mystery stories, adventure stories of present-day wars, stories of the Orient in peace and conflict, but "Freedom Has a Price" is something different. Its author has long been a student of Napoleonic times, and in the course of his readings was struck time and again by the drama of Napoleon's great attempt at power in the New World, on the island of Hispaniola, later to be San Domingo and later on again to become the black republic of Haiti.

It is a somewhat remarkable fact that the story of Napoleon's essay at power in the New World seems almost unknown today. As a story, it is notably dramatic in all its details; and on the author's word the drama presented in "Freedom Has a Price" is wholly historic. Behind the story, however, are deeper and darker touches, such as the Corsican's implacable hatred of all blacks, and the cynical manner in which, fearing deeply the army that had conspired against him at Rennes, he despatched it to the New World in order that his imperial ambitions might not be hindered.

One of the odd things about this story, is that it involved almost no racial conflict. The blacks of Haiti, as it was soon to be named, were citizens of the French Republic. There had been, it is true, a fearful racial conflict on the island; it was in 1802—the time of the serial—ended. With the abolition of slavery the island became a black republic—but only as part of the

French Republic. The Napoleonic soldiers were welcomed as brethren. The black soldiers were incorporated into this army. Had it not been for the secret orders imparted by Napoleon only to his brother-in-law, Leclerc, Haiti would today very probably remain part of France. It was the dramatic revelation of those secret orders which laid bare the perfidity of Napoleon and created such a fury as totally destroyed the finest fleet and army that France had in generations.

The story as told by Bedford-Jones had no need of heightening in dramatic effect. Out of his great knowledge of the period he has based it upon memoirs, unpublished letters and papers of those concerned, and upon the available historic sources. Tobias Lear, one of Washington's aides, was a consular representative in Port-au-Prince, and much of the matériel of the black armies was supplied from Philadelphia.

Fishing for Votes

"*WHEN I was walloping out 'Satan from Cariboo Lake' "* writes its author, H. S. M. Kemp, "*and found that Joe Fielding was in a jam over his election-trip, I was reminded of another election held at Cumberland House many years ago. Thirty-five of 'em, to be exact!*"

"*In this affair, two solid citizens were battling it out; we all knew the result was going to be pretty close. So close, in fact, that much depended on thirteen half-breed votes aboard a French Company York-boat that was due to reach Cumberland from the north on Election Day.*"

The boys aboard her had started out with their big load of freight a week or so before, and they had promised to reach home again in time for the election. They not only knew their duty as good citizens, but they were well aware of the general blow-out that would follow closing of the polls.

"*Now it happened that a full half of the boat-crew were in some shape or form related to one of the candidates. They, naturally, would vote for their relative. And as the rest of the crew would string along with their pals, Mr. X. was assured of thirteen*

straight votes once the boat had docked. But something happened. Maybe '13' was the unlucky number; maybe Fate, Kismet or some other agency took a hand; but when the crew reached Budd's Point, just six or seven miles away across Cumberland Lake, they found the wind was howling, the seas running mast-high and all hopes of crossing eliminated. To this day I can see Mr. X. biting his nails staring out across that white-capped waste and praying to the gods of his particular party for the wind to abate enough for those thirteen good votes to come across. His prayers were answered, but not in time to do him much good. The boat docked half an hour after the polls were closed, he was beaten by, I think, seven votes, and the successful candidate not only won that election but all the others that followed in the next twenty-five years!

"Again in the yarn, when Joe Fielding had his tough break up on Crawfish Lake it reminded me of another incident out of the past. Quite a few years ago, a drill-crew of us landed on far-northern Reindeer Lake to go to work on some likely-looking property. One of the first sights to greet us was the burned-out bulk of a plane. In those days, planes were somewhat of a rarity in the North, and to find one of the first a total wreck stirred our interest. We later learned that, a month or so before, the pilot of the ill-fated craft had flown a couple of prospectors into the country, had been ready to leave, and was warming up his engine while packing-up in the tent. He, too, heard a strange noise—just like Joe Fielding—and when he emerged he ran into what Joe ran into, too—his good plane going up in smoke. It was a tough break. They were five hundred miles north of civilization, sans grub, sans radio, sans pretty nearly everything; and how they ultimately got out, I don't know. But they must have got out, for, if my information was correct, the pilot was that pioneer bush-flier, Stevenson, who was later killed in a crash at The Pas in northern Manitoba and in whose memory Stevenson Field in Winnipeg is named."

H. S. M. Kemp

Who Knows Pigs

"I'VE gone and got myself in a jackpot," reveals Caddo Cameron. "It's up to me to make good on something I wrote, or

apologize all over the place and being more or less human I don't like to apologize. Now, ever since you bought my first story a long time back, Mr. Editor, you've been very helpful and I'm wondering whether you— But let me tell you how come, first:

"The situation goes like this: In one of my recent yarns a character made the remark, 'Happy as a pig in a punkin patch!' Sounds like a perfectly innocuous pearl of wisdom, doesn't it? Well, maybe it is and maybe it ain't. I've got a mighty good friend down in Polk County, Arkansas, who knows pigs and porcine psychology and he says it ain't. After reading the story, he sat down and wrote me thisaway, 'A pig don't like a punkin until it's made into a pie.'

"Now, many's the pig I fed when a boy, (usually under parental compulsion and propulsion), but that was a long, long time ago and to save me, I can't recollect whether our pigs went for punkins—or did we have to hold their snouts to make 'em eat them. Of course, our pigs were Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas pigs. Maybe Arkansas pigs, being more highly cultured, have acquired more discriminating tastes. After all, a punkin is a plebeian vegetable, (or is it a vegetable?) sort of an under-dog among vegetables, one that you plant any old place and leave it be and expect it to grow and prosper unaided. Can it be that Arkansas pigs are too good to eat a lowly punkin, or is that idiosyncrasy characteristic of *all* pigs? Frankly, I don't know, but I've got to find out and here's where you come in, Mr. Editor.

"They tell me that city folks do some astonishing things in four-room apartments. The bigger the city, the more astonishing. New York being the biggest of all cities—did you, during the meat famine, fatten a pig in an apartment? Did he like punkin?

"I shall, of course, accept your answer as proof positive and apologize or not."

Caddo Cameron

A pie-eating pig in the city,

Could have apple or punkin, we trust.

But to fill up his greed, one thing he'd sure need

Would be the whole heck of a crust.

—Editor, SHORT STORIES

FREEDOM

Part I



I

THE city of Cape Francois, usually known simply as "Le Cap," was sweltering, but the pleasant headland fronting the harbor was cooled by sea breezes. There, after the burning of the city in the previous spring, a palace had been erected. In this place, toward the close of the year 1802, was the nerve-center of the gigantic shadowy grip whose claws had stretched from the Old World to sink into the New—the grip of the Corsican.

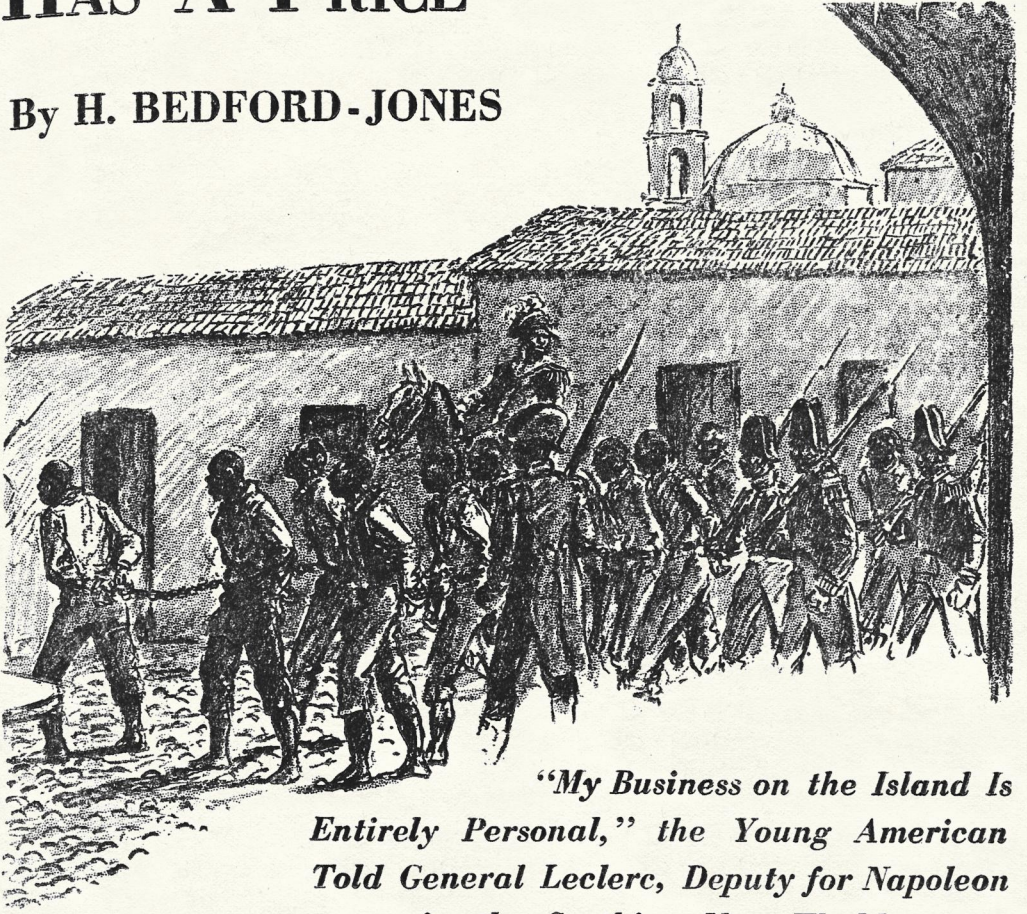
Hispaniola that had been, San Domingo that now was, Haiti that was soon to be!

This isle of the blest, richest colony ever possessed by any European nation, once more flew the flag of France, after revolt and freedom. Bonaparte, given peace at home, had reached afar. The veterans of Frejus and Marengo and the Pyramids, backed by the total resources of France, had seized upon the revolution-torn island. The old Army of the Rhine was now here, and had firmly planted the Tricolor in the Americas.

Within an airy room of the palace, conferring with his staff officers and dictating dispatches, was the man who had married Bonaparte's sister. But during these months

HAS A PRICE

By H. BEDFORD-JONES



"My Business on the Island Is Entirely Personal," the Young American Told General Leclerc, Deputy for Napoleon in the Seething New World

youth had forever fled this short, placid, yet daring cavalry leader, whose genius had blossomed in Italy and Egypt; he had become thin of lip and unflinching of eye, his innate kindliness had changed to a stark and terrible cruelty. Within him had been evoked an iron will, fed by secret terror, which every day imposed its dictates more ruthlessly. His curious resemblance to Bonaparte, heightened by gesture and manner, had increased, as his blond hair thinned. Such was Victor Emanuel Leclerc, Captain General of France in the New World.

"This American, this man Langlade who asks an audience!" he said in the jerky fashion of the Corsican. "The name is familiar. There is something about him in the files. Look it up! Well, what is it?"

Secretaries scurried. An aide saluted, extending a folded paper.

"A memorial, citizen general, from Surgeon Monnier."

"Oh, yes! He's with Valette's column. What is it about?"

"The uniform of the troops, my general. He claims that it is wholly unsuited to the climate, that it should be altered to thinner materials and—"

"Monnier! That madman!" burst out Leclerc irritably. "Always inventing something new to plague headquarters! Thank heaven he's away from here. New uniforms! The men who made the uniform of France immortal in Europe are not going to abandon it in America. Throw the memorial away. Well, where's that information about this American?"

"Here, citizen general." A secretary came forward. "I presume it is the same—one Charles Langlade, of Philadelphia?"

Leclerc glanced at the letter he was holding in his hand, asking audience.

"Yes, the same," he said. "First, where did that report come from?"

"It was drawn up by Colonel Friquet, now with General Valette's column."

"Friquet!" Leclerc made a slight gesture of distaste, of annoyance, almost of fear. "Well, in that case the report is reliable. What about this Langlade?"

"Marked dangerous, citizen general. His business firm in Philadelphia supplied arms and munitions for the revolutionists here. He himself is from a family of planters who formerly inhabited the island. Hernan Dupuche was his chief agent here."

"Dupuche!" murmured the Captain General, frowning. "An evil man and dangerous, whom we've been unable to catch; under sentence of death, is he not?"

"Yes, citizen general. This Langlade was the chief source of supply for powder and muskets, according to this report, under the revolution here."

"Nothing more about him? Hm!" Leclerc glanced again at the letter he held. "I see his business here is of a private nature; it has some connection with General Valette. That looks suspicious in itself. Get in touch with this Langlade. Have him watched with care. We know that shipments of arms have reached the blacks in the south recently; if they came through him, have him tried and shot. Draw up a memoir and address it to Colonel Friquet."

"Colonel Friquet, citizen general, is away with Valette's column."

"Precisely; just the same, do as I say. Inform this Langdale that I shall see him in a day or two; then postpone it for several days, while he is watched. If he gets in touch with Christophe or other leaders here, we must know it. With disaffection brewing, with revolt threatening us on every side, we must block every avenue by which arms can reach the blacks. Making an example of this American may help greatly."

"Is there not an American consul here—"

"There was; there is not. He died a fortnight ago."

A BURST of gay laughter reached in from the adjoining room. Leclerc caught it, and his troubled brow smoothed. With a gesture to those around, he strode

into the room whence the laughter came, and a moment later was stooping to press his lips against the brow of Bonaparte's sister.

Pauline, her own toilet finished, sat languorously superintending that of little Dermide, their son, who was being bathed by two blacks. Leclerc kissed the boy, nodded to the women and officers grouped behind Pauline, and stood touching the lovely head of the most beautiful woman in Europe.

Through her thin, silken gossamer gown, Pauline's exquisite body was clearly visible; she desired it to be visible, she was proud of it, she displayed it with a charming if somewhat startling confidence that all the world would delight in its beauty. She reached up, took Leclerc's hand, pressed it to her lips, and made a little *moué* at the crinkle of paper.

"Letters!" Her voice became eager. "Darling, has a ship arrived?"

Leclerc glanced at the forgotten letter.

"No; an American has arrived who desires an audience."

"An American?" Pauline clapped her hands, and her eyes danced. "A savage? Does he carry a scalping knife? Has he rings in his ears? I must see him!"

Leclerc broke into a laugh. "Eh? But you saw Americans in Paris, my dear!"

"Oh, that was different. They were gentlemen."

"Well, this one is no savage; he has a French name, Langlade."

"Anyway, I want to see him." Pauline looked up, her gaze suddenly intent. "My dear Victor! Tell me—is the news any better?"

Leclerc's face clouded. The strained anxiety returned to his eyes.

"No, it is not," he said in a low voice. It mattered nothing that his words reached the ears of the officers; they already knew the worst. "Out of thirty-four thousand men, I have not a tenth of that number of effectives—but never mind. My dear, I've decided that you and Dermide shall go aboard ship and leave this pestilential island."

"There's no argument on that matter, Victor," she said gravely. "I'm your wife. While you remain, I remain."

Leclerc groaned. "But, my dear, you don't understand! You're a woman."

"A woman who is the sister of Bonaparte. Come! Send word to all officers that my

salon will be open every evening." Animation came into her face, her voice. "We must uplift a screen of gaiety to hide disaster, Victor. We'll give dances, charades, fetes! Bring in some of those charming women from the plantations—the very idea! Have Valette's daughter come here to stay with us. Let me do my utmost, Victor, to help give our poor men new life, fresh heart!"

"God help us all, do what you like, and bless you for the desire!" With a sigh, Leclerc lightly caressed her hair again. "Yes, you're right. We must do all this; we must conceal the grinning skull behind a laugh—"

"And don't forget," Pauline broke in upon his ominous words, "that I wish to see this American, savage or tame, when he comes!"

"You shall see him before long."

II

THE American with the French name was one of the very few men in Le Cap who did not wear a uniform.

From the moment he set foot on the island, for the first time since his childhood, Charles Langlade devoted himself to gaining a comprehension of the appalling situation of things here. Luckily, he spoke French and the island patois with fluency. Le Cap was not as he remembered it, or as he had anticipated; perils and surprises lay on every hand. If he were to accomplish his work and depart alive, some understanding of the place and the teeming maelstrom of conflict here was imperative. Either of his errands—for he had more than one—would serve to destroy him, were it suspected.

Le Cap had seen French rule overthrown, and a republic emerge, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture. It had seen an English fleet and army conquer the island, only to be utterly vanquished by Toussaint. It had seen the black republic merged in that of France; these men who had won freedom, became French citizens, enrolled by thousands in Leclerc's army of occupation. It had seen Toussaint seized and sent to death in France; Bonaparte had an aversion to black men.

Now, as he waited for his interview with Leclerc, Charles Langlade moved calmly about, talking here and talking there, keeping his eyes open. Today, as he paced along

unhurried, he came upon the little park with its Shrine of Liberty, a charming spot on the outskirts of the city. A circle of columns supported a roof, and upon the columns were the names of island patriots who had died to win freedom.

The black sentry before the portico, gaudily uniformed, saluted Langlade with a grin, putting aside his musket and accepting the proffered cigar. This Negro was one of the ex-slaves whom Toussaint L'Ouverture sent to Paris for education, for training as a teacher; now he was a mere soldier again. All the plans of Toussaint were gone, and the only teacher remaining was the musket.

Langlade's musing gaze sought the shallow harbor before the town. Once a continuous mighty commerce had lain here, where now were only ships of the dead. Then he became aware that the soldier was speaking, in easy camaraderie.

"Curious, Citizen American, what changes this city has seen! Ten years ago, it was the wealthiest city in all America. A few thousand aristocrats were the masters; under them were whites, blacks, mulattoes, in tens of thousands, uncounted. And what happened?"

Langlade turned. In the black features he discerned a suppressed effort at comprehension, a struggle of dawning intelligence to break the bonds of heredity.

"The slaves rose, Citizen American. It was not all at once, but wave upon wave, and the slower the wave, the more terrible it was. The aristocrats fell, the whites fell, the mulattoes fell. The Spaniards came in conquest, and fell. The British came in conquest, and were driven into the sea. Was your revolution in America like this?"

"It had no massacres like yours," said Langlade.

"Without blood, you know not what revolution means; wave upon wave of blood and fire! France arose, a republic, hailing us as children. Toussaint is gone, now. We are under the flag of France, free men, invincible, incorporated in the armies of the republic where all men are brothers! Do you realize the compliment Bonaparte paid us in sending his army here?"

Astonished, Langlade saw that the man was in sober earnest.

"These French troops were the Army of

the Rhine, the greatest army in the world! It was formed from the waves of republicans in Paris. Like us, those men killed aristocrats. The Army of the Rhine beat all of Europe, sustained the republic, upheld the revolution. Some of it went to Egypt with Bonaparte and won new fame. And now these men are sent here to visit us!"

This was all it meant to one black soldier, more intelligent than most. Langlade passed on with polite murmurs of assent. Yet, as he strolled along, he realized that the fellow had expressed the whole history of Le Cap in one phrase.

During two hundred years the city had waxed incredibly great; reeling with the loot of filibusters, drunk with the vast wealth of the fertile plantations, rich beyond the avaricious dreams of Caesars or Caliphs. Then came the first wave, when for three whole days the city burned, and its flames were quenched in blood.

THAT was only ten years ago. Since then, wave upon wave, and now the last. The army of freed slaves gabbled the phrases of revolutionary France, and welcomed the host from over the sea, as brothers. Thirteen generals of division, twenty-eight generals of brigade, with Leclerc as Captain General and Pauline in a presage of imperial luxury. It meant nothing to the jubilant blacks that hatred of Bonaparte ran through this army like a consuming fire.

In forty days the island was subdued, without conquest. The black generals embraced the French and sang the "Ca Ira"; their men, who feared nothing in this world except slavery, found themselves French citizens and wept with joy. Toussaint L'Ouverture disappeared—gone to France to visit Bonaparte, said Leclerc. With his going, the one vivid intelligence in the island was extinguished.

Now Le Cap sheltered troops, townfolk, returned émigrés, crops of sugar and rum and coffee, huge army stores, and dead men. All summer, the Captain General had been gone at the pleasant isle of Tortuga.

Now he and Pauline were back, forced by grim skeleton fingers, and gradually Langlade came to a comprehension of what lay behind the scenes. He did not gain it

swiftly, but he was unhurried, finding greatest luck in leisure.

The men with whom he spoke today were dead tomorrow, but he walked the streets without fear, talking with black soldiers or with Polish lancers. Death struck inexorably to right and left, but Langlade had been through yellow fever epidemics in New Orleans, and accepted the gamble of cholera with a shrug. When he found that Hernan Dupuche, his quondam agent, was not in Le Cap and certainly would not be in Le Cap while the French were here, he altered all his plans and waited, and watched.

In the black leaders, he found perpetual amusement and astonishment. Leclerc had confirmed them in their fantastic ranks and titles, their looted wealth and estates. Their men were incorporated in the French army as colonial infantry, until the time when Leclerc might dare to disarm them. Each black general retained a demi-brigade of his own personal followers around him.

These former slaves had burned, fought, massacred for liberty alone, and Leclerc guaranteed them liberty. But probing deeply, Charles Langlade caught the hideous threads of rumor, and discerned below the surface of things a strange, shuddering uncertainty.

Leclerc proclaimed disarmament, calling in muskets from the whole island, and groups of blacks resisted. Revolt flared in the hills. These insurrections were allotted the Negro generals to handle with unchecked savagery. French detachments were scattered in forts and garrisons throughout the island; each small body of white was aided by a large force of black allies. The small became ever smaller; the large, ever larger.

Imperceptibly, the yellow fever gained, and cholera lifted its head. Leclerc could not disarm the black troops yet; he needed them. The whole structure he had built was beginning to quiver.

On the surface, the black and mulatto generals swaggered bravely. Their men fraternized with the French. One and all prattled volubly of liberty, equality, fraternity, the republic one and indivisible; the days of Paris in '93 were come again. But the former slaves learned from the Army of the Rhine about the Corsican, about his ambitions, his treachery to the republic, how he had mounted on the ruins of freedom to the place of First Consul. Next he would be

king, said they; these veterans hated Bonaparte with a terrible and awful hatred.

IT WAS through Christophe that Langlade's eyes were opened to realities.

Christophe, born under the British flag, was among the chief native leaders. The gigantic black was just leaving one of the extemporized hospitals. He glittered with scarlet, gold and decorations. His tricorne hat was surmounted by immense ostrich plumes of red and white. He caught sight of Langlade and abruptly halted him.

"Ha, Citizen American!" he exclaimed in English. "I am Christophe. I know all about you; I want to talk with you."

Langlade smiled. Those extraordinary eyes were alive with an intelligence, a gay frankness; instantly, he found himself liking this giant.

"What do you know of me?" he asked lightly.

Christophe laughed, took his arm with easy familiarity, and piloted him to a café opposite. It was deserted. They settled down at a table and a staring waiter took their order. Christophe laid aside his hat, unbuttoned his gold-stiff tunic, eased his bare feet comfortably, and began to eye Langlade appraisingly while he talked.

"Your name is well known; your father once owned the finest plantation on the island, down near St. Marc. Before the revolution, he sold it; wise man! He and his brother left here. He took his family to America. Right?"

"No," said Langlade. "Wrong, Christophe. His family went to America. He and his brother went to France; they died there, under the Terror.

Christophe regarded the calm, gray eyes, the high-boned features, the thin nostrils, the chiseled lips and chin.

He nodded. "They say you look like him. Good. Are you here on business?"

Langlade sipped his coffee, met the shrewd, probing eyes, and plunged.

"Partly. Have I any reason to confide my errands to you?"

Christophe grinned. "Every reason. We are your friends here, all of us—that is, all but one. Your firm in Philadelphia helped us gain freedom; it was from you that old Toussaint bought powder, arms, machinery, supplies. We know this. Perhaps the

French know it; if so, they will not like it. Thus, you and I can talk freely, without lies."

Langlade understood perfectly that he had received a definite warning.

"Thanks, Christophe. You mentioned one man who's not my friend. Could he, by any chance, be the former agent of my firm here? A certain planter named Dupuche?"

"I do not lie to you," said Christophe. "I know all about you, about Hernan Dupuche, about everyone; I make it my business to know. Dupuche is never seen here in Le Cap; he is extremely rich now; he has secrets, that man, and will come to a bad end some day. You will do excellently to leave him alone."

"Thanks, again. Did you bring me here to give me this warning?"

"No; not at all." Christophe chuckled and relaxed. "I was in America once, the slave of a French officer in Rochambeau's fleet. Now I'm a general. Rochambeau's son is a general, and we exchange salutes—odd, eh? No, I want you to tell me something, for you've nothing to gain from lies. Something I want to know."

Langlade was startled by a somber tensi-ty that underlay this naive giant's earnest words.

"I don't lie for small cause, Christophe. What do you want to know?"

"It is hard to express." Christophe ordered more coffee, then told the staring waiter to keep away. "When they sent old Touissant to France, the Captain General swore there would be no return of slavery. Bonaparte affirmed it; I saw his letter. This Leclerc is a fine fellow. There across the street stood the tavern where I was a slave, a billiard marker. Now I'm a general of France, and rich. So is Charles Belair, nephew and heir of Touissant. So is Dessalines. Pétion, down in the south, was a member of the French convention. We accepted the terms, kept our rank and wealth, and are all honest Frenchmen. But, I ask you, how honest are the French?"

Christophe was perspiring heavily now. He went on with fumbling words.

"There is only one way to rule this land; by terror. Leclerc has learned this. He sends me, Dessalines, Belair and others, against the insurrectos. We kill, we impale, we bring in men with arms and shoot them;

hence, we rule. It is we who are feared, not Leclerc. Behind all this, where lies the truth?"

"You're not the first ruler to ask that question," said Langlade, and was astonished when Christophe nodded and smiled in recognition of the allusion.

"I know what you mean. Père Simon told me about it once; a great man, our Père Simon!

"He is off in the hills now with General Valette. Well, there are rumors. Charles Belair is uneasy, so are his officers. These French soldiers say Bonaparte is a devil and may even make himself king. Who knows the truth?"

"Just what are you driving at?" demanded the puzzled Langlade.

"Slavery!" The immense black hand crashed down on the table. "It is whispered that Bonaparte believes the colonies cannot grow rich again without slavery. General Richpanse has just reconquered Guadeloupe from the mulattoes there. It is said he means to reestablish slavery. I hear Leclerc will do the same here. It is said they have secret orders from Bonaparte. Tell me—is there any truth in these rumors?"

IN a flash, Langlade had a frightful vision. Behind the horizon of this man's talk, he caught a mental horror that shook him with its possibilities.

"I don't know," he said. "I come from America, not from France. I know nothing of Bonaparte's orders."

Christophe eyed him, grimly intent. "Have you heard of secret orders? It's said that Bonaparte mapped out every detail for Leclerc to follow."

"I know nothing, I've heard nothing, I've not even seen Leclerc yet."

"You go about talking with anyone. When there's fire at the bottom, those at the top smell smoke."

"I've smelt nothing, Christophe. I've come here, for one reason, to find a man who is with the army. One Colonel Friquet. I hear he's gone with General Valette."

"As second in command," Christophe said promptly. "To an important place, Morne Rouge; in English, Red Peak. Two hundred French troops, six hundred colonials under General Noyer, who is one of us. I do not lie. I tell you what I know."

"If I knew anything of your problem," said Langlade, "I'd tell you."

"Did you come here to sell guns and powder?"

"I did not," Langlade said curtly, and then swung around.

While they talked, an odd shuffling sound had been imperceptibly growing. Now the cause appeared. In the white-hot sunlight that followed the morning's rain, a throng of men were tramping through the drying mud. Some fifty black men, arms bound, escorted by colonial infantry with fixed bayonets. The commander on horseback was a short, bulky Negro aglitter with gold braid.

"Who are they?" asked Langlade.

"The officer is Charles Belair; his troops form the 7th Demi-brigade. The prisoners are men found with muskets in their possession. The French fear that Belair might revolt, and consequently his brigade acts as executioners of their own people."

The files marched past. Belair caught sight of Christophe, waved his arm and rode on. Langlade turned, finished his coffee, and looked at the giant.

"And you? Do you, too, think about possible revolt?"

Christophe burst into a laugh and raised his glass.

"Vive la République! There's my answer. If the republic perished, if liberty no longer existed—then I might think. Well, you've spoken frankly. I thank you!"

Rising abruptly, Christophe went stalking away, his ostrich plumes nodding.

As he waited, over the following days, Langlade absorbed many curious things, and most of all rumors; for rumors were everywhere, about everything and everyone. He wondered if rumors about himself had gone forth, across the plains, across the jungle and hills, to Hernan Dupuche. Langlade tried not to think about Dupuche, lest thought itself travel afar in this strange land; he tried not to think about the letters secured with the gold in his belt.

RAIN succeeded sunlight, hot steamy mist followed rain in endless round, steadily Le Cap became a city of the dead. The equinox should have brought relief, but delayed. The warehouses, filled with rum, coffee, sugar, cocoa, lay untended. Few ships came for the precious cargoes, except rare vessels

tempted by the high profits involved; on one such, Langlade had arrived.

Traders and merchants died; émigrés, who had returned after the troubles, died. The white planters remained almost untouched. Many had been gathered into the city and formed into companies of a national guard, but Hernan Dupuche was not among them.

The soldiers, the thousands of seasoned veterans, wagged loose tongues before the approach of death. To Langlade, as to anyone, they talked freely. Everywhere he found a vicious intensity of hatred for the Corsican.

"Speak the truth, since we die tomorrow!" exclaimed a grizzled captain, as he and Langlade sipped their morning coffee. "You don't know what troops compose this army, and why they were sent to this living hell; but we know."

He wiped his mustache and snarled an oath.

"This army was sent to perish! This fool Leclerc was given command at the last minute. Leclerc, who apes the Corsican; Leclerc, who married to get his general's rank. Such a man commands the army that preserved Paris and won liberty for all France! Do you know what happened at Rennes? Of course, you don't.

"Ten minutes changed the destiny of the republic. By that much! We'd have marched on Paris and guillotined Bonaparte. The generals were with us; Moreau, and Bernadotte, others. The accursed First Consul might well fear us!"

Following his coffee with rum, the veteran fell into incoherent diatribes.

Suspicion and hatred of Bonaparte did not prevent these men from nailing the tricolor to the island peaks. If some derided Leclerc, others worshipped him; they all grumbled, and their grumblings had inspired vaguely terrible fears in the blacks.

The last morning before his audience, Langlade was on the waterfront when the ships came with reinforcements, levies from northern countries — stolid Hollanders, laughing Saxons and Bavarians. Within ten hours these troops began to flood the hospitals. Leclerc could not wait to season them. Disarmament was at hand, was ordered angrily by Bonaparte; full disarmament of the colonial infantry at all costs! The moment had come.

For Leclerc, a moment of bitter anguish, watching the passion of his army from the headland where cool sea breezes dispelled heat and mist. Pauline had gathered a gay circle from the remnants of planters' families, boasting the noblest blood of old France. Here where these gay souls danced and sang and told stories, pleasantly inventing a new Decameron to while away the time, bided a man whose soul was being wrenched asunder. His hands were tied. He could no longer smash the insurgents with Napoleonic strokes.

Passing were the splendid veterans of the Rhine and Egypt. Passing were the new levies, the officers, the very generals. Dugua, chief of staff, rebelled against the cruel enormities, and put a bullet through his brain. Black troops deserted daily with their precious muskets, to join bands of rebels. They were executed by the hundred, their officers shot, their women bayoneted; they still deserted.

Widespread terror held many loyal. Down the coast at St. Marc, Rochambeau ruled like a madman, with talk of completely exterminating the blacks. Desalines and others in French service were ravening wolves; but they were beginning to fear lest their own turn come ere long. The scattered insurgents gave terror for terror. If they took prisoners, only fragments of flesh were found; the French killed themselves rather than fall into such hands.

AGAINST this background, Langlade was ushered into the presence of the Captain General.

The room was large and pleasant. From the outer terraces overlooking the water, rang the laughter of women. Leclerc was striding up and down, dictating to secretaries; he flung the visitor a nod and then forgot him in a torrent of words. The querulous, tormented voice beat upon the silent room in waves that rose and fell.

"A new insurrection has broken out at Port de Paix. It is impossible to send European troops; they drop on the road. All my corps commanders are dead, save two. The 11th Light Foot reached here 1,900 strong; today it has 163 men fit for duty. The 71st of the Line, originally a thousand strong, has seventeen men with the colors. So far, the occupation has cost us 29,000 dead. I

bet you, Citizen Consul, to do nothing that will make these people fear for their liberty—until the moment when I shall be prepared."

At these words, Langlade stiffened, incredulous, aghast. The voice beat and beat upon the air, like the fluttering of a broken-winged bird.

"Dessalines is at present the butcher through whom I execute my odious measures. Christophe is not to be feared. The others are imbeciles. Charles Belair is the most dangerous, for he is intelligent and his men are devoted to him. Certain measures are now being taken—"

Turning about in his stride, Leclerc caught sight of the visitor and checked himself abruptly.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Yes, yes; Citizen Langlade. I've been expecting you. I believe you're the man responsible for providing these blacks with arms and ammunition."

"Not at all," said Langlade coolly. "When Touissant L'Ouverture was in command here, my firm sold him large orders of powder and arms; he was struggling for liberty, fighting against the Spanish and English. A righteous cause, in our opinion."

This quiet riposte to the unexpected attack, sobered Leclerc; his over-wrought nerves calmed. He produced a snuffbox, lifted a pinch of snuff to his nostrils, and sniffed deeply. His eyes lifted as a door opened and an aide came in, saluting.

"Citizen General, madame is informed that the American savage has arrived. She desires that he be presented."

A ghostly smile touched Leclerc's lips for an instant.

"Presently. Has any news come from General Hardy?"

The face of the aide stiffened. "A few moments ago, Citizen General. He—it—"

"I see. He is dead. My poor Hardy! Well, what is it you're trying to say?"

"General von der Weid—this afternoon, Citizen General—it was sudden—"

Leclerc drew a sharp breath, gestured the aide away, and turned to Langlade.

"The ladies imagine that Americans have scalps at their belts and rings in their ears. Hm! So you've come here to sell more muskets and powder, have you?"

"I have not," said Langlade bluntly. "I

desire your permission and a pass to seek Colonel Friquet, who is at present in the hills with General Valette. I have business of an important but purely personal nature, with Colonel Friquet."

Leclerc's face was swept by momentary astonishment.

"Indeed! You demand the impossible. The roads to Morne Rouge have been washed away by rain and landslides, or cut off by insurrectos. Our communications with General Valette have been interrupted."

"One might go around by way of St. Marc."

"It is possible." Leclerc fell into abstracted thought. "Who knows what has happened there at Morne Rouge? Rochambeau, at St. Marc, has heard nothing from them." His head jerked up. "You seem to know the island, citizen."

"I lived here as a boy. With your permission, I can find my way around."

Leclerc's gaze narrowed. "You have been in touch with the agent of your firm, one Dupuche?"

Langlade smiled, his gray eyes warming.

"I've not seen or heard from the man. He ceased to be our agent over a year ago, when he embezzled or restrained a large sum of money due us."

"Oh!" Leclerc laughed shortly. "I'm tempted to believe you, Citizen Langlade. One more question. What do you know about a certain large shipment, said to contain over thousand kegs of powder and ten thousand or more muskets, hidden somewhere on the island? We know it is here; where, remains a secret. We know that many of the blacks and others have huge fortunes. They could well afford to pay for these arms, and pay highly. Such a shipment, of course, is not hidden under a forest leaf; this adds to the mystery. It would be a pity to have it fall into rebel hands. Well?"

Bewildered as he was by this question, Langlade lost patience. He spoke sharply.

"Citizen General, until this moment I've heard of no such shipment. I'm not a spy, I'm not selling anyone anything; my business on the island is entirely personal. I merely ask your permission to reach Colonel Friquet, and I assume full responsibility for all risks encountered in the effort."

"Friquet—ah, of course!" murmured Leclerc, and his face cleared. "Very well. Will

you have the kindness to deliver him a packet of papers, and other despatches to General Valette?"

Langlade bowed. "Of course; with the greatest of pleasure."

"Good. They'll be sent you this evening, with a passport. At sunrise, an escort of colonial infantry, excellent men who know the trails, will be furnished you, with horses. All settled to your satisfaction? Come, then—"

Suddenly as pleasant and gracious as he had just been suspicious and wary, Leclerc took his guest by the arm and led him out to the terraces, with affable and complimentary expressions.

The daily rain had passed; here looking upon the sunlit sea was an apparently care-free group of officers and demoiselles, engaged in putting up fruit preserves. The officers hastily came to attention, as Leclerc led his guest forward.

"Madame, the American savage," he said gravely. "Allow me the honor of presenting Citizen Charles Langlade, who has not as yet done any scalping in Le Cap."

Pauline was the first to break into a peal of laughter.

She bent upon Langlade the full force of her impetuous personality, introducing him to those around, and questioning him with vivacity and a real curiosity upon America and everything in it.

The artificial atmosphere was surcharged with emotion. Wine sharpened appetite and tongue. Servants brought sherbets and cooling drinks; ice, most precious of all delicacies, cooled these laughing lips. Forced gaiety was carried to extremes of jesting, of flirtation, of licentious folly. Langlade found himself engulfed by it all upon the instant, and taken into almost intimate companionship; he met those around him halfway, threw off his studied and wary reserve, and plunged wholeheartedly into the proffered gaiety.

IN THE confusion and laughter, most names escaped him completely; he noted only that of Julie Valette, daughter of the general who was at Morne Rouge. A whirl of laughing figures, and he was out of the throng, in a vine-screened arbor with another of the group—a slender, dark, lithe figure with riotous but warning eyes and golden-

brown cheeks. He bent his lips to her fingers, lifted, met her eyes, and something passed between them, sharp as a knife-stab.

Langlade forgot himself, forgot everything. She was in his arms, her lips were yielding to him, half in laughter—a breathless, incredible, ecstatic instant. The gay throng swooped, separated them, she was gone, someone with a fiddle had struck up a tune, and they were all whirling gaily, preserves and fruit forgotten.

Down the terrace, he halted. His partner was Julie Valette, a grave, delicately beautiful girl of twenty.

"I am leaving in the morning, mademoiselle, to join your father's column," he said impulsively. "Have you any message to send him—perhaps a letter?"

"Oh, you heart of gold!" she exclaimed, with a sharp breath. "Yes, yes! I'll write at once. We've not heard from him in weeks. Everything is in confusion and disrupted. How can I reach you?"

Langlade nodded toward the figure of Leclerc.

"He's sending me dispatches tonight, to take your father. Have him include your letter."

"Thank you." She hesitated. "Might I impose on your kindness—another letter—"

"Oh ho!" Langlade broke into a gay laugh. "Someone else who deserves a letter, eh?"

"Yes." She colored slightly. "Lieutenant-Colonel Jourdal."

"With all my heart, of course! By the way—look!" Langlade indicated the dark, slim girl of the kiss. "Who is she?"

"Oh, Marie Soulastre! She is of the island; she has a *habitation*, as they call it, a plantation—"

She broke off; a change came in her face; she turned, listening. Langlade also listened, as a name was uttered by one of the officers. Now it came again.

"I tell you, this Friquet is really a superhuman person! You cannot imagine what stories cluster about him!"

"Ah, but I can!" It was the dark girl, Marie Soulastre, who made swift reply. "Not superhuman; you should say inhuman! If the devil were on earth today, his name would be Friquet. It is said that the ghosts of those whom he has murdered—"

"That is enough," intervened the gravely

resonant voice of Leclerc. "Citizen Colonel Friquet is one of the finest officers of the republic. I can tolerate no disparagement of him in my hearing."

Marie Soulastre curtsied ironically.

"Ever loyal to your officers, Citizen General, even though they be hangmen!" she retorted. "Since you cannot tolerate the truth, I shall relieve you of my presence and return to my habitation, if that damned rebel Sylla hasn't burned it. Adieu!"

"Wait, Marie!" Pauline exclaimed imperatively. "My carriage is ready; I'll take you to the city. No, gentlemen, you need not escort us. I choose to ride alone with this poor girl, so brutally crushed by the brother-in-law of Bonaparte!"

Jests, laughter, gay voices, escorted them from the terrace. At leaving, the dark girl paused; her eyes swept the throng, came to rest upon those of Langlade for an instant. She smiled, blew him a kiss on her fingers, and was gone.

Langlade turned, to hear the soft laugh of Julie Valette.

"An extraordinary young woman! She lives alone with an old aunt on her plantation; she fears nothing, respects nothing, and exercises a freedom of word and act that might scandalize even Paris. A charming little savage."

Langlade, watching her, smiled. "You are so friendly with the amiable Friquet?"

The pupils of her eyes dilated, as though the name lashed her.

"A friend of that monster—but I forget. Perhaps you know him."

"I never saw him in my life," said Langlade. "What is he like?"

"He is the best-hated man in the whole world," she breathed, and then turned away as the Captain General approached them.

Langlade scarce thought of Friquet again, for Leclerc looked him in the eye and hesitated, and then spoke.

"The letter I was dictating while you waited—"

"I heard nothing, Citizen General," Langlade said quickly. "Nothing."

"Sufficient." Leclerc pressed his hand. "The passport and dispatches will reach you in an hour. In case you lose them, tell Valette to remain where he is. He has stores, artillery, powder, sufficient for an army. While Valette holds Morne Rouge, that en-

tire district is safe from revolt. It is just now worth an army corps to me, tell him that. Farewell, citizen!"

Yes, Langlade had plenty to think about; his brain had caught at those words addressed to Bonaparte, and their implication.

They had revealed everything. Even the significant mention regarding Charles Belair faded beside that one bitter appeal, and all it implied. Leclerc was not ready yet to proclaim the re-establishment of slavery. In that moment of agony and desperation his heart had been wrenched open, the secret had escaped.

When the time came, slavery was again to be established.

And Leclerc knew well that if this came to pass just now, the volcano on which he was perched would explode. Nothing could help him, then. The native generals might be bound to him in their own interest; but there existed some thirty thousand black troops trained in ten years of fighting. Now, under the flag of France, liberty was more than ever their goddess.

Of all this Langlade was thinking as he came, afoot, back into the city. Before him opened the great central square, with the fire-scarred cathedral at one side; all deserted now, in the heat of the afternoon.

Across the street showed two figures. One soldier of the 71st had fallen face down; his comrade was trying to lift him. They were struck down by sun or cholera, and helpless. Langlade started forward, but another was ahead of him.

Around the corner wheeled a low, open carriage, that of Pauline. She had evidently taken Marie Soulastre somewhere and was now returning; beside her sat the little blond Dermide. She gave a sharp order, and the carriage halted. Leaping out, she ran impulsively to the two soldiers. The coachman helped her lift the two into the seat—one senseless, the other reeling. She climbed in beside them, caught one in her arms, and touched his fevered face with cooling fingers.

"To La Providence Hospital, swiftly!"

The carriage moved on and rolled away. Langlade stood looking after it, then drew a long breath and turned toward his own lodgings.

"One never knows," he muttered.

He found a letter awaiting him; a sealed

missive left by some plantation worker. Langlade tore it open carelessly, without premonition. He read the unsigned words:

"The past is dead; better remember it."

Frowning, he tore up the letter. So Hernan Dupuche knew he was here, eh? This was a warning—Dupuche knew why he had come.

That night, however, Langlade learned something else, when he was summoned to find Christophe waiting for him in the street.

III

THE giant black took Langlade's arm and walked him to the square, and out to the center of it, then loosed him and grunted.

"Now we can talk. It is safe nowhere else. You are watched."

"Watched?" Langlade laughed. "Nonsense. I'm leaving for the hills in the morning; I've just received dispatches for General Valette, and a pass—"

"I know all that, citizen. There is something else." In the gloom, Christophe bulked sweaty and odorous. "We are friends; I came to warn you. Did you come here to the island in order to kill Hernan Dupuche?"

"Kill him? No, certainly not—"

"No loss; he cheated your firm, he cheated old Toussaint, he cheated all of us. But we do not want him killed, citizen. Not yet. He knows something that some of us want very much to know."

"What?"

"Where there's a great supply of powder and flints and muskets. He hid them away, and then killed the men who helped him; he alone knows."

Langlade's brain flashed back. "Ah! That's what Leclerc quizzed me about—asked if I knew about it. I told him the truth. I never heard of it before."

"Very well. If you see him, you'll not kill him."

"Good lord, Christophe!" broke out Langlade angrily. "What do you take me for? I'm not killing anyone. I'm here on business. Private business."

"That's all I wanted to know. Luck to you; we'll meet later."

Christophe faded into the night, Langlade went back to his lodgings, but not to sleep.

Watched, eh? By whites and blacks alike, it seemed, since he apparently had no secrets.

This mysterious visit, all the talk about the huge, hidden store of arms, was disquieting and bewildering. Yet Langlade, pondering it, caught a glimpse beneath the surface. Such a stock of arms and powder had tremendous possibilities. If it fell into the hands of revolted blacks, it might mean victory; if the French found and destroyed it, their safety might be ensured.

The rain poured down, then its hot, seeping monotony lessened and died. Langlade struck a light and looked at his watch; the hour was getting on toward midnight. The moon broke through the clouds, briefly bathing all the gasping city; with dawn would come more rain thudding down upon the roofs, beating the sun-baked earth into new mud.

Langlade drew on his boots, threw his riding-cloak about his shoulders, and went out for a stroll, enticed by the cool freshness of the moonlight. Not a breath of air came from sea or hills. There was no life anywhere. Upon this silence the slam of a nearby door startled him; a moment later, farther along the street, another door slammed shut. Yet, apparently, no one had left or entered the houses.

He became uneasily aware that a queer stir of motion was trembling in the air, a stir felt rather than heard. He was curious to learn what it meant, at this hour when all Le Cap should be asleep. He studied the house fronts. Here and there he discerned motionless white bundles. Where the door had slammed, was another of these formless and shapeless white things. Then he understood.

Drawing back against a shop-front, he stuffed his pipe, got out his tinder-box and struck a light; tobacco was supposedly the best preventative in such pestilent air as this. Monnier came into his mind—the crazy surgeon with Valette's column. Several persons had mentioned the man; sunstruck and mad, they said, with queer theories of isolation for plague victims. He believed that people should be smoked with sulphur, that they could actually carry the contagion with them.

Yet, reflected Langlade, the motion might hold sense; it would do no harm to favor Monnier's ideas and be prepared. The fact

remained that those surgeons who had laughed at Monnier were now past laughing. Yes, he might take along his unopened packet of clothes, and some sulphur. Just as well to humor a sunstruck man.

At a splash and thud of footsteps, he saw two men turning a corner, bearing lights and short ladders. They crossed the street, talking loudly and carelessly, as though at high noon instead of midnight. They were relighting the street lanterns extinguished by the last heavy downpour. They halted at a dead lamp nearby, ignoring Langlade's motionless figure, probably unaware of him. Both men seemed white; they were probably men of color, as the mixed bloods were locally known.

"If this keeps up we'll be ruined; I tell you it's a disgrace!" one exclaimed as he mounted the rungs. "This fellow Servaut at the corner of the Rue des Fosses, is the latest. I saw him this morning. Would he pay? Not a gourde dollar, not a portugaise! The soldiers had put in the street lights, says he, so their quartermaster might settle my monthly account. Besides, he might be dead any morning, and why pay for what he didn't want or need? Where do we get paid for our work, if everyone takes the same view?"

"Aye, it grows serious, citizen," said the other, holding the ladder. "We can't even complain to the town council; there is none. Telemaque, the mayor, died yesterday, and the officers laugh at us. Careful, aristocrat! Trim that wick more evenly!"

"Devil take the wick and you too!" grumbled the man above, as he started down. "The carts are coming now; we labor for their benefit. I know that Citizen Servaut! He's the son of a garrison officer. His mother was a slave, a beauty, white as milk. Clairvaux impaled her and she sat on the stake two full days before someone shot her to make room for another. Look here! Suppose we make the collections together. I'll take a whip along. One slash over the face, and Servaut will pay up promptly. Eh?"

"Agreed. We'll try it." The men picked up ladder and lanterns. "But mind, have some of these printed receipts ready! These cursed soldiers insist on formalities. If the scheme works on Servaut, we'll try it on some of the others—"

The voices lessened as the two worthies plodded on.

Puffing at his pipe, Langlade watched the moonlight play on shining mud and wet street-stones. One hand touched his belt; letters there, tucked away. One letter in particular, put into the Paris post nine years ago. Year Two of the Republic, one and indivisible!

Long after, it had reached New Orleans. Then, still later, he had found it among his mother's effects. He knew it by heart, but he must read it anew before coming face to face with Friquet. Perhaps he had missed some word, some turn of a phrase—but no matter now. His thoughts drifted on, to halt as a memory; the querulous voice of the Captain General.

"Certain measures are now being taken—"

Measures? Against whom? He knew the answer; against Belair's 7th Colonial demi-brigade, of course. General Charles Belair was the nephew of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the heir of his prestige, power and estate; a humane, pleasant, able man. During the massacres he had saved large numbers of whites. For Leclerc to take "certain measures" against this man was incredible folly. Christophe had said that Belair suspected something and was worried—ha! Exactly the point. Belair was intelligent; he had brains enough to suspect the truth, and men enough to defy it.

"Therefore, he's dangerous," mused Langlade, puffing slowly at his pipe. "Disarmament? There's the nub. Leclerc fears to come into the open, so he'll take certain measures and that means treachery. One by one he'll destroy these black generals, who all hate and fear each other. Divide and rule!"

THE moon poured down floods of radiance. The white bundles in the doorways moved not. Midnight had just sounded from the cathedral bells, the echoes lingering under the low house-eaves. Still the half-felt, unseen motion continued to drift above the city. The streets glittered with silver pools and puddles, silver streaks filled the cart-ruts.

Langlade turned and looked down the street. A dark mass had appeared there; the voices of women rose in a low, monotonous chant.

A trampling, splashing through moving slowly, unpausing, feet thudding. The moon struck upon bayonets, and details became visible. A Negro officer strode in front, his enormous sabre clanking, his huge epaulets rising and falling. Soldiers followed; they surrounded a dozen women, black women, arms bound.

"Halt!"

The officer had sighted Langlade's figure. His bare feet splashing, he came up and spoke in the island patois.

"Citizen! At this hour no civilians are allowed abroad without a pass."

"Here's mine, signed by the Captain General," Langlade replied in the same patois.

The officer recognized the signature, at least. He saluted and returned the pass.

"Whither bound?" asked Longlade curiously. "Who are these women?"

"Wives of the officers of the 7th Colonial. They've just been condemned for inciting to mutiny; to the execution ground."

The procession moved on and away. Langlade felt a crawling shiver pass up his spine. Only terror could rule this land, Christophe had said, but, beyond death, where was the terror?

"Belair is intelligent," he muttered. "He and his officers suspect too much; so their wives are shot. Certain measures, certain measures—poor Leclerc! And what will happen when the secret plans of the First Consul become known?"

The question beat at him with frightening reiteration. First disarmament, then slavery again. Thirty thousand muskets had been collected; but more remained to collect. Would it be done? Was slavery really in the secret plans of Bonaparte? Then, for the sake of Leclerc, for the sake of every white in San Domingo, it must remain secret, even as Leclerc himself so desperately pleaded.

The vague distant moonstruck masses of the hills loomed on the sky. From all the hospitals went up a constant, unending moan to a deaf heaven. Oppression, quivering danger, acute invisible peril, weighed upon Langlade. He knocked out his pipe and turned to seek his lodgings again, and a snatch of sleep.

He thought of the slim, dark girl with the eyes and lips of fire. Marie Soulastre; she was one to remember. A queer some-

thing had passed between them. The very remembrance of it left Langlade shaken and wondering.

A creaking sound had been slowly, imperceptibly coming into his consciousness, advancing by fits and starts upon him. Langlade made out the vague shape of a plantation cart, one of those huge sugar-carts called a cabrouet. It made short halts. The four men accompanying it carried burdens from the closed doorways and tossed them in. White bundles, shapeless wrapped things.

The cart drew along and halted. From the doorway that had slammed upon the silence, a white bundle was lifted. Once man or woman, now mere clay destined to vanish into the quicklime pits with generals, seamen, staff officers, privates.

"The moon is bright." One of the four Negro workers spoke in the patois. "What fools these whites are! Look at them now, and look at us!"

"Right, citizen, right!" came laughing response from another. "Ten portugaises a head for collecting them—well, that's something! The more who die, the better we're paid. A good job, eh? They are gone, we remain."

The cart moved on, creaking slowly until it made another halt. Langlade turned away. The words lingered in his mind for a long time after, like a prophecy.

"They are gone, we remain."

IV

THE torrential downpours of the rains had swept out bridges everywhere and washed away hill roads; also, sporadic rebel bands, such as that of Sylla, had wrought more havoc to impede the French troops. The general paralysis of all administration prevented repairs. Thus, what might have been covered in two days of riding now required four, and still Morne Rouge lay far ahead.

Forced to come roundabout via St. Marc with his escort, Langlade found the country apparently peaceful. Patrols were on the roads, carts rumbled along with loads of produce or surrendered muskets, men and women were at work in the fields. At St. Marc came warning of insurrection, fighting, banditry. To ride for Morne Rouge was madness, they said; at the moment,

Sylla and his insurrectos had cut all communication.

Langlade rode on regardless. The heavy rule of Rochambeau was evident enough in these parts. Bodies decorated every landscape; the breeze stank with the odor of decaying corpses. Black bodies, crucified, impaled, dangling from trees. Men caught with forbidden arms. Rochambeau would become Captain General if anything happened to Leclerc.

Now St. Marc lay behind, and in the steamy morning, Langlade spurred ahead. Here in the rising uplands was no sign of peril. The plains were falling away into the distance, the roads wound by fertile valley and mountain flank to still higher ground.

Langlade liked these men who escorted him. They were simple, friendly fellows. The officer had once been a slave in company of Touissaint L'Ouverture; he spoke much of Belair, also of General Noyer, who commanded the colonials serving with Vallette. An iron fellow, this Noyer, but literally adored by his men. Of other things, they spoke carelessly. Passing a village, the officer pointed to it, laughing, and told of seeing Dessalines gather three hundred captives there, lop a foot from each, and leave the group to perish. The very essence of humanity had been altered, in this island.

Once in the hills, six men rode far in advance, the others followed with Langlade. More abandoned and burned plantations now, fewer people. With mid-morning, the usual downpour of rain ceased; the sun came out, hot and blinding white. So slippery was the mud that the horses could barely keep erect; coming to a crossroads where the vanguard were waiting, the officer drew rein. He spoke of visiting a plantation for a few hours, until the roads should be dried out.

"What plantations lie near here?" queried Langlade. Oddly enough, the country seemed totally unfamiliar, he had recognized nothing. The officer hesitated, then pointed to the right-hand road.

"There, Citizen Langlade, lies the habitation Paradis. And there, to the left—"

"Paradis!" echoed the startled Langlade. "Paradis!" For an instant his heart leaped. He had not dreamed that it could be so close. "Ah! We must go there, Captain."

"No, no!" exclaimed the officer in some

agitation. "Citizen Langlade, I understand; I have heard of you, I know your family lived there, perhaps you yourself. But now—no! It is better not to go near there, where Citizen Dupuche now lives. Go the other way, to the habitation Soulastre. We shall find welcome there."

"Soulastre!" The shaggy dark brows of Langlade drew down over his gray eyes. Why, of course, no wonder the name had seemed familiar. He remembered vaguely that the Soulastre family had lived near Paradis. "But this is destiny, Captain! If you're afraid to risk Hernan Dupuche, go to the Soulastre plantation and await me; I have an errand at Paradis."

The officer stared in dismay. "But I'm responsible for your safety—"

"Then come with me."

The black features loosened with indecision, then set firm again.

"Good. We go with you, Citizen American. It is very close."

But the men would not go; they refused pointblank. Finally they went off to the left; the captain and Langlade turned to the right.

CLOSE, indeed; he remembered now. Would it be like his boyhood memories? The great, lovely house of stone, with its porticos and terraces, its columns and gardens? And the one thing he had come here to get—but perhaps that was gone now. Still, he must see. Queer, how a man will risk so much for a tiny object of sentimental value alone!

An avenue of trees opened up again. The gates were gone. Beyond the trees lay the lines of a house; it was there, the same house. Yet everything else was gone, and ruin had swallowed the other buildings, ruin and fire. The jungle had crept in close. Gardens and fields had largely vanished.

No one appeared. The place seemed deserted and empty. Under the porte-cachere, Langlade dismounted, while the uneasy officer sat his horse, waiting. Langlade strode up to the wide doors. As he approached them, one swung open. Two black men appeared, staring, musket in hand.

"Where is Citizen Dupuche?" inquired Langlade. "Is he here?"

"No," said one of the two. "He has gone riding."

"Very well. Come with me. I've come to get something that belongs to me."

Before they could object, Langlade pushed past. His air of authority, his command of the patois, bore them back; they followed him uncertainly.

He stepped into the great hall, turned out of it, turned into the room on the right, and halted in surprise. It was almost as he remembered it from childhood. The furniture was the same; dusty, wracked and warped with age and heat and moisture, yet the same. The pictures were the same. Nothing had changed since the family fled in terror.

Beside an old secretary in one corner, on the wall was a miniature in gold frame, the gold now blackened and dull. Curiously enough, it was not a beautiful or delicate thing; the oval portrait was heavily cased for protection from the elements, the gold edging and decorations were clumsy. Yet, from his earliest youth, Langlade remembered this miniature with peculiar affection. It was one of those often trifling things which can mean most to the human heart. He reached out and took it from the wall.

"So, mother, you come back to me!" he murmured, and slipped it into his pocket. Turning, he saw the two staring black men, smiled, and reached out a coin. "Here's money for you. Tell Citizen Dupuche that I came to get the picture of my mother. That's all."

"But, citizen, we cannot—it is not permitted—"

"Be quiet," said Langlade. Cowed by his abrupt voice, they stood aside and let him pass out to the sunshine again. He gestured to the officer, mounted, and headed away.

Then, a hundred yards from the house, he drew rein, frowning at a heap of ruins. By some odd chance, perhaps by logical, subconscious sequence, the voice of Leclerc came into his head and jerked at boyhood memories.

There, where only black, tumbled ruins now showed, had stood the old warehouse for rum and sugar, built a hundred years ago.

He recalled playing about its mysteries; chiefly the enormous and extensive cellars, used for storing great barrels of wine. The cellars had been largely boarded up and

disused, even in his boyhood, for they dated back to the primitive days when provision for a year at a time was stored up.

"Such a shipment, of course, is not hidden under a forest leaf," Leclerc had said.

Stores of powder and arms securely hidden from all eyes by Hernan Dupuche—ha! Why not? No one would know of these cellars, covered years ago by blackened ruins, gone from sight and from memory; but they would still exist, having been hewn in the rock. A smile came to Langlade's lips, and a quick laugh.

"Anything wrong, citizen?" inquired the black captain.

Langlade shook his head. "No; on the contrary, Citizen Captain! Let's go."

AN HOUR later, slithering in the drying mud, they approached the Soulastre plantation. Langlade was eager to see that girl's home, the girl herself. Ahead of them grew two pillars of stone, where gates had once swung. Beyond these rose a double line of the magnificent wild chestnuts so commonly used for lining driveways in the island.

As they neared the house at the end of the drive, two horses became visible near one of the pillars; two persons stood there on foot, watching their approach. Something very like a groan escaped the officer.

"Ah, citizen! That is Hernan Dupuche himself."

Langlade made no response. Marie Soulastre, yes; his glance touched on her, then settled on the man in white. A tall, bony man of perhaps forty, with oval features, very arrogant and handsome. The eyes heavy-lidded, the jaw narrow and square-fronted beneath the black mustache.

Riding up, Langlade saluted the girl and dismounted. He turned abruptly to Dupuche.

"My name is Langlade," he said without preliminaries. "I've just been at your house, Citizen Dupuche. You were not there, so I went in and took something I wanted—this." He displayed the miniature. "The picture of my mother. I trust you'll not object?"

The girl was tense, anxious, poised. No expression showed in the olive features of Dupuche; he glanced at the miniature, and eyed Langlade anew.

"Your impertinence may be objectionable, but the cause is sufficient excuse," he said stiffly. "When I last saw you, I think you were a small boy. You are still impulsive."

"No; calculating." Langlade produced one of the old letters he had carried in his belt till this morning. "To judge from a letter I received in Le Cap, you have some apprehension as to my business here. When you bought the plantation from my father, you gave him an acknowledgment regarding the unpaid balance of two hundred thousand francs. You recognize it?"

Dupuche took the folded paper, opened it, and nodded. "Perfectly."

"I did not come to collect that money," said Langlade. "I came to get the miniature. Now that I have it, you may tear up the letter and call our accounts square."

A STONISHMENT flooded into the liquid, dark eyes. Dupuche looked at the American steadily; then with a slow motion, as though testing the words, tore the paper across. More rapidly, he tore it again, tore it into tiny fragments, dropped them. He still showed no emotion, as he spoke.

"Very well. I trust you will find our climate healthy, Citizen Langlade."

"Oh, don't mistake me! I still have business with you; not for myself, but for my firm in Philadelphia." Langlade smiled, but his gray eyes were sharp and glittering. "A matter of, roughly, one hundred thousand dollars, which you owe the firm."

The lips of Dupuche curved thinly, to show white, strong teeth.

"Indeed!" He lifted his riding crop and stifled an affected yawn. "You begin to bore me, Citizen American. Had you not better be on your way?"

"One would think you were master here," said Langlade.

"So I am," rejoined Dupuche lazily. "Come, come, we cannot stand here talking all day—"

Langlade crowded back his growing anger.

"Very well, but first make a slight calculation, Dupreche," he said briskly. "Your debt to us, which you can pay as usual by a draft on your Philadelphia or New Orleans bankers, as against—how shall I put it? Just what might be the value of, say, a thousand

kegs of powder, ten thousand muskets, and other things, delivered in the island?"

Dupuche caught his breath, leaned forward slightly, and his dark eyes dilated.

"Ah! What do you mean? What do you mean?" he demanded softly, rapidly, intently.

"Do you think the habitation Paradis has any secrets from me?" said Langlade.

Dupuche suddenly exploded. A furious oath burst from him; the riding crop slashed forward and cut Langlade across the face. With his other hand, he reached inside his coat as though for a weapon—and then reached no more.

For Langlade, catching him by coat lapel and shirt in one hand, shook him. Shook him back and forth, head jerking and lolling, arms flailing ineffectually; shook him with amazing ease and power, and sent him reeling back against the nearer horse, to clutch at the saddle and gasp hoarse, incoherent words.

"Pay your debts," exclaimed Langlade, "unless you want to lose what's hidden. And do it soon!"

Dupuche steadied himself, pulled up into the saddle, and went spurring away with a leap and a scramble of hooves. Langlade turned, to meet the wide eyes of Marie Soulastre and her low cry.

"Oh! If I had only dared do that! But it means trouble."

"Forget it." Langlade smiled, and bent over her hand, and looked into her face again. "Perhaps you'd rather I didn't stop in for an hour?"

"I'd be delighted. I've expected you since yesterday."

"Expected me?" he echoed, astonished. "You didn't know I was coming?"

"Of course. The drums; word passes into the hills, you know. As soon as I got here, my men told me you were on the way. Tell your officer to join his men, and come inside."

THE grinning captain departed around the house. Langlade accompanied Marie up the wide steps, and she gave him a whimsical query.

"What did Julie Valette say about me, down there?"

What a flame of fire she was, this girl! Langlade felt his pulses hammering at the

very smile of her, at the impact of her eyes, her personality. He paused.

"She said that you respect no one, and make everyone respect you."

"Liar! A pampered butterfly like Julie could never think up such an epigram. She'd not say it if she could think of it. So you refuse to be frank?"

"Not at all. I refuse to reveal confidences." Langlade looked out at a group of men digging among a cluster of trees, a hundred feet to one side. "What are they doing? Digging a well?"

"No; a grave. Some bandits came last night to steal horses. I shot two, and my men killed the other four. They were from Sylla's army."

"You shot two?"

She shrugged. "Any woman who has lived through the past few years here is either a gibbering idiot or else a competent sort of person with no use for pretense."

"But why don't you have soldiers stationed here?"

"Bah! My blacks are faithful; they were soldiers under Toussaint, and have arms. Unfortunately, they're afraid of Dupuche. One can't ignore him. I half believe he's behind Sylla's revolt. He has bought our plantation; he owns most of those around here. He's very rich. You did wrong to forgive him any debt. Well, come in, come in! My aunt's at the St. Martin plantation for the day and we have the place to ourselves. You're on your way to Morne Rouge?"

Langlade followed her into the house. "Yes."

"I meant to ride up there myself, but had no time. I had to make a quick business trip to La Cap—where I met you. Now we're packing," and she indicated the confusion of open trunks and half-packed boxes all about.

"Packing? And you sold the plantation? You're leaving?"

"Yes. I'm getting my aunt off in the morning to St. Marc, with our personal effects; an English schooner from Jamaica is there, and will take her. I'll remain here, finish packing, and follow by another boat. I want to get her safe away before hell opens under our feet."

Langlade gave her a quick glance. "You too, eh?"

"Certainly; I know what's coming. Ah, I wish I might go to Morne Rouge with you! I know some of those officers; they're grand fellows. But that's impossible, unless you'll wait here till I get my aunt away. Will you wait?"

"No," Langlade said.

She flung him an amused laugh. "We'll get on. Make yourself comfortable; here are cigars. I'll change out of my riding clothes."

She swept away, her voice sending rapid orders at the servants. The room seemed suddenly drab and bare, when she was gone.

What a glowing creature, thought Langlade. About her was something self-sufficient and splendid, something that quickened the pulses, all inexpressible energy and life. What a contrast to the delicate and rare flower that was Julie Valette! Here was a woman of the frontier, cool and capably efficient.

A colored print on the wall caught Langlade's eye, while he waited—one of the gaudy Pellerin woodcuts which were everywhere in France and the colonies. This merely showed the severe, black, spectacled figure of Robespierre seated at a table signing papers; behind and above towered a shadowy shape. The face was like that of the Incorruptible, wedge-shaped, a ghastly caricature oddly instinct with life and force.

Curious, Langlade rose and approached the print. The title read: "The Incorruptible and The Uncorrupted."

Marie Soulastre returned, now wearing a long gown of flowered yellow silk. Behind her, a mulatto girl bore a large silver tray.

"A smoke, a drink, then luncheon!" she exclaimed gaily. "The wine is cool; we hang the bottles down the well."

She gave Langlade a curiously penetrating glance, and flung another at the print on the wall. He nodded.

"Yes; your specimen of art caught my eye."

"And something caught mine, there at Le Cap," she said. "Come, my friend! You're resolute, wary as one of your own red Indians, but one can't disguise the flash of the eye, the slight twist of the lip. That was why I was impertinent to Leclerc; I was watching you, not him, and was repaid."

Langlade frowned, frankly puzzled. "I don't understand."

"But you understand this," and she indicated the print.

"No. It's merely a caricature of Robespierre, the Incorruptible."

She gave him a slightly incredulous look, then her face cleared.

"I see you're in earnest. I'm twenty-three; nine years ago when I was fourteen, my father was in Paris. He was guillotined there. True, he was an aristocrat. The man responsible, the man who met him on the street, recognized him and had him arrested, had been his business agent in Paris. You see his picture there."

"Who? Robespierre?"

"No, no! The one person Robespierre trusted absolutely, the Uncorrupted! A man whose entire life was given to the service of liberty. Police agent, spy, informer. He was greater, but less famous, than Robespierre, and he destroyed all who threatened his beloved idol, liberty. He was on the point of destroying Barras as a thief and bribe-taker, when suddenly Barras turned and destroyed Robespierre. The other man escaped, retired into the shadows, went on with his work until it ended, then went into the army and fought for his idol. A man hideous as death, because undeviatingly true to his principles—"

Langlade started slightly, turned, looked into her face. A quick laugh escaped her.

"There! That look again. A word touches the brain; the eye contracts, the blood ebbs. Something one cannot hide, my friend."

Langlade remembered how the pupils of Julie Valette's eyes had dilated at mention of Friquet's name.

"She called him the best-hated man in the whole world," he murmured.

"Who did—Julie? Yes; I heard that Friquet denounced her brother. I'm not acquainted with the details," and Marie shrugged lightly.

"You must be mistaken. Friquet is second in command under Valette."

"You don't know Valette. I don't know the circumstances. But this is a picture of Friquet, a shadowy figure. Some day I hope to meet the real man."

"Why?" Langlade's question was sharp, direct, probing. She met his look; he saw that her nostrils were white and quivering. Yet she forced a laugh.

"To avenge my father? Bah! I'm no stage actress; no fool either. No, I don't aspire to the role of Charlotte Corday. But I'm curious; that's one reason I'd like to visit Morne Rouge with you." She turned. "Come! We've forgotten our refreshments. Pick up your cigar before it burns the chair-arm, and tell me why you too, hate Colonel Friquet."

LANGLADE veiled his gray eyes, as he settled back into his chair.

"You're mistaken about that."

"Don't lie." She spoke coolly, as she filled the silver cups with wine. They broke into a tiny, beautiful beaded sweat. "I deserve better than lies from you."

Langlade broke into a laugh. "You're an extraordinary woman!"

"No; very ordinary, very curious. Why do you hate this Friquet?"

"Upon my honor, I don't hate him! I never so much as saw him."

"Neither did I. Well, keep your secrets!" A reassuring, friendly smile warmed her features, and Langlade suddenly regretted his reticence.

"It's no secret. I merely want to ask Friquet a question or two."

"Oh! You came all the way from America to ask him a question?"

"Damnation!" exploded Langlade, and then flushed. "Your pardon—"

She flung back her head with a peal of merry laughter.

"Ah, my savage American, you're such a nice person! Damnation! A pox upon the woman! Damn her curiosity! Yes, I can swear for you; I know all the words men use."

"Last year I had charge of a hospital for whites that Touissant built, after the Moyse massacres; I learned a lot. It's queer and amusing how men mouth curses and obscenity with no thought of the actual meanings involved."

"And you've no hospital now?"

She shrugged. "Six months ago I begged Leclerc to acclimatize his men and institute proper measures to save them; so did General de Lacroix. The poor idiot called me a forward wench, and then strutted in the style of Bonaparte. Now his army's melting like snow. Are you going to tell me your business with Friquet?"

Langdale was startled, a trifle angered, by the abrupt question.

"No."

"Then let it pass." She waved her hand, smiling gaily. "Here you see my life, the life of one who has steered a middle path through war and revolution and terror, countering risks and men and beasts, remaining safe by yielding here, compromising there, buying off danger when necessary. Tell me of your own life. Is it like this, in America?"

"In the west, along the Indian country of the Ohio, yes," said Langlade. "But my life hasn't been spent there."

He reviewed for her, for himself, the background of his existence since he had left these shores as a boy. The settlement with his mother and other refugees in Philadelphia. The life there, quiet and sedate, with exciting adventure close over the horizon; the life of a merchant, touching the glamorous on all sides yet evading contact with it. And, for himself, the plunge over the dividing line.

"I've traveled," he said. "Down the Ohio, on down to New Orleans, learning the country and the people; always a merchant. My firm in Philadelphia has done well. When we dealt with Touissant L'Ouverture, here, I was away in New Orleans. My chance to come here did not arrive; indeed, I did not then expect to come. It was only after my mother died and I found the letter—"

He checked himself.

"So! It is a letter that brings you to see Friquet!" she observed. "And your wife?"

"Wife?" Langlade gave her a glance, laughed, and relaxed. "Oh, my wife still awaits me in the future, Marie! Perhaps I've found her—who knows? In fact, I think that may be the case, but it's nothing to hurry about."

"Life is short," said Marie Soulastre, and then fell to talking about other things.

IT WAS two hours before Langlade departed. He walked with her out to the drive then off across a field, while the men waited. She had something to show him, she said.

He was admittedly carried off his feet by this girl. She fascinated him, wakened a riot of emotion in him, swept him into tu-

multuous ecstasy; her cool self-reliance was a joy. Her slim dark beauty was backed by steel of character forged in the flaming conflict and peril through which she had grown. And she liked him. He had known this from the first moment of meeting.

Now she led him to a little patch of trees remaining from the primeval forest. Rain was threatening again, the sky was darkly ominous, the sun gone. She pointed to an immense locust tree.

"Look at it carefully."

Vines encircled the trunk and lower arms, twined about the branches, and vanished amid the upper growth. Langlade perceived that the extremities of the huge limbs were yellowed and dead.

"Well? What about it?"

"The tree is this island. The vine, the *figuier maudit*, the barren fig cursed by Christ as is said. Three years ago this tree was magnificent, now it's dying. The vine curls about it, continually contracting, crushing the bark and branches, growing in a solid mass. Five years from now, there'll be only a stump enclosed within a solid mass of vines. The tree is the island; the vine is the rule of the blacks. An interesting metaphor, parable, what you will; but true! Well, that's all. I'll say goodbye here."

Langlade bent over her hand, met her eyes for an instant—and resisting temptation, turned toward his waiting escort.

V

THE sunlight slanted and sifted down through rain-wet branches. It left golden speckles and splotches of light across the muddy trail and the men there. The sentry at the barricade, above, had summoned his officer.

"Now the officer appeared, a captain, his face red, hard-lined, grim; a shaggy mustache half hid his thin, hard lips.

He stood on the rising curve of the trail, gazing at the dozen black riders in their colonial infantry uniform; that is to say, the uniform of France. He looked at the single white man who wearily pushed his horse forward.

"Your name?"

"Charles Langlade, with an escort from Le Cap."

"A pass, Citizen Langlade?"

"Here. From the Captain General. With despatches from him, also."

The captain was not impressed. "Your business here?"

"Is private. My despatches are for the general and for Colonel Friquet."

There was a long, interminable silence. The splotches of hot sun made steamy points where they touched the wet mud. The trees hereabouts closed out all breeze; under these giant upland growths rested an intolerable sense of suffocation.

The captain was by his uniform of the 90th, therefore a veteran of the Rhine. Despite the rain, the heat, the wilderness, he was immaculate; not a drop of mud showed on his uniform, his pipeclayed belts were spotless, his boots shone. He sucked at his mustache, seeming unwilling to speak. Three more of his men appeared, all from the same regiment. They grounded arms and stood eyeing those below.

The trees still dripped from recent showers. A huge double rainbow overhung the southern peaks, half hidden by one vast shoulder of Morne la Selle. Here on Morne Rouge, whose massive plateau dominated the roads and valleys and villages all about, everything was as the name indicated, red. The soil underfoot was reddish. The scattered rocks around, unlike most of the island formations, were red and angry. Scarlet vines mounted the grayish trunks of the nearby trees.

"I am Citizen Captain Gouget," said the officer abruptly. "You just pardon my surprise. How did you get here? We thought the roads were closed."

"I came around by way of St. Marc."

"Then St. Marc still exists," said Gouget slowly, giving the American a long and morose regard from beneath his shaggy brows. His words seemed to conceal questions he dared not utter, as though implying a query whether the world itself still existed.

"Of course." Langlade felt oppressed and stifled, and flung open his riding cloak. "General Rochambeau is in charge there, you know."

"I know," repeated the dully monotonous voice of Gouget. "Rochambeau; son of the old *maréchal*, eh? Big nose and pig's eyes. A furious devil who can wallow in atrocity. He'll pull through, the blasted aristocrat. Yes, we know him, devil take him!"

Langlade was astonished. For a mere captain to speak thus before his men, was significant. The whole air of Gouget expressed something more than mere democratic frenzy; it occurred to Langlade that something terrible must have recently happened to this man. He had the manner of one crushed by some terrific blow of destiny.

The wet earth steamed. The trees dripped upon the silence, the masses of cloud rolled on toward the south. None of the men moved. From the valleys, from the impenetrable masses of vegetation, lifted the raw smell of tropic rankness, the odors of wet soil, incense to the gods of fecundity.

Suddenly Captain Gouget moved, stirred, came out of his abstraction. He beckoned Langlade's escorting officer, who came forward, dismounted, and saluted. A deferential yet defiant gesture, as typical, as significant, as the contrast between his plumed hat and his naked black feet. White man and black regarded one another in a straight stare of powerful restraint. The eyes of Gouget were, like his voice, lifeless.

"You and your men halt here, Citizen Captain," he said. "You'll be sent food and cognac; there are huts and good water handy. Dismount, and my men will show you to your quarters, while I take Citizen Langlade to the fort."

The blacks all dismounted; Langlade shook hands, gave him a little money, bade them adieu for the present. They started up the path. The French soldiers spread out to keep their distance, as though fearful of any slightest contact. All disappeared, the sentry shouldering his musket and pacing down the road.

Captain Gouget produced an empty clay pipe, sucked it, and regarded Langlade. He was gaunt and drawn; the droop of his shaggy mustache echoed the morose droop of his lips, his shoulders, his eyes.

"Is there any news?" asked his dull voice. "From France?" The two last words were forced, as though he sought news not from France, but from elsewhere, and feared to ask.

"Reinforcements arrived." Then Langlade studied the man curiously. "The Polish Legion, under General Jablonosky; the 7th Light, the 83rd of the Line. Bavarians, Danes, and others. That was some little time ago."

"We get no news here," Gouget said. "We are in a world cut off. I suppose those new troops are all dead by this time."

"Nearly all."

"No matter. Today the greatest calamity possible has just struck us. After this, nothing matters. Follow me. It's nearly a mile to the fort, so ride; our crazy surgeon orders any animal that comes in from outside, shot at once. Ride while you can."

He turned and started along the trail; it was singular how, the moment he stepped out, the man took on a different air. He became the soldier again, marching with quick, proud step, but he did not glance around or display the least interest in the visitor.

Once out of the trees that hemmed the trail, Langlade gratefully drank in the mountain air, the breeze drifting down from the flanks of Morne Rouge. In this suddenly fresh and cool atmosphere, all the recent days and nights were swept away like figments of wild nightmare. All, that is, except the meeting with Marie Soulastre. The thought of her burned within him; though it was but yesterday he had left her, he was hungry for a sight of her again.

In his pocket lay the note she had sent after him:

My American:

At Morne Rouge you are safe; even so, I am anxious for you. That man can reach far. Keep on your guard, I beseech you; and I throw you a kiss in farewell.

MARIE.

To distract his own thoughts, he flung a query at the officer ahead.

"Much sickness here, Citizen Captain?"

"None," said Gouget, without turning.

"None? You say none?"

"Monnier, our surgeon, picked up some notions in Egypt; they seem to work."

"That'll be good news down below."

Gouget made no reply, displayed no interest.

They went on in silence until the trees thinned and a sharp descent faced them, deeply scored by artillery wheels. A ravine lay ahead; beyond was the plateau where the Morne Rouge village had once stood. The trail plunged into the ravine and up again; bridge and road were being rebuilt.

"Once there was a village," came Gouget's voice. "Monnier sent away the people and burned it."

Huts, fields of bananas and plantains—all had vanished into naked red mud and rock that stretched to the fort. Outside the walls was a triple line of new huts; obviously, cantonments for the colonial infantry of General Noyer.

The fort itself was a large oblong with bastions at each corner, enclosing a huge parade ground and clusters of buildings. Along the walls, at intervals, stood cannon covered by tarpaulins. Inside were enormous storehouses for supplies and ammunition, with stables, barracks and other structures. All were whitewashed, immaculate.

ON THE parade ground, a squadron of the 19th Dragoons was going through evolutions, brass helmets flashing in the level sunlight of late afternoon. These dragoons were of small use, here in the hills. Black troops were being drilled by white officers; their precision and dexterity astonished the veterans who stood watching. Suddenly there was a low, short roll of drums, just as Langlade and his guide left the ravine and approached the fort.

From the trees ahead emerged a dozen dismounted dragoons, heading for the gates of the fort. Behind came four black soldiers who bore a covered litter. In the rear followed a dozen men of the 90th. All moved slowly, carefully.

More drums; a bugle rang out. The drilling halted. The sentries along the walls presented arms, the gates swung open. Groups of soldiers stood at attention. Upon everything had fallen a singular inertia. Langlade became aware that his own weary horse had halted and was standing with lowered head. The veteran Gouget had stopped and now stood motionless, his cap off, his gaunt features stern and set.

Two tears slowly escaped from his eyes, crept down his seamed red cheeks, and for a moment glittered on his shaggy mustache.

The breeze had fallen completely with nearing sunset. The flag above the fort hung listless. Man and nature alike seemed breathless, as though pausing to regard the slowly moving litter with its escort. The sun seemed poised in the west, shining crim-

son through a veil of distant smoke, reflected again from the red earth and rocks.

More drums. The litter and escort vanished inside the fort gates. Motion came again; even the flag stirred and blew out for a moment.

"What was that procession?" Langlade asked. Gouget replaced his cap, turned, and looked up with sombre gaze.

"That, citizen, was the passing of Citizen General Valette."

"Eh? In that litter?"

"Yes. He took the Germans, the 90th, and some of the blacks, trying to break a way through to Etang des Platons. The others had failed; now he has failed. When he was struck down, the republic received a mortal injury. Now we shall see the damned Corsican make himself king. With the Army of the Rhine gone, with Valette gone—"

Langlade was bewildered. "Wait. You mean the general is dead?"

"You saw him return; mortally hurt, they say. Come along. Danton once called our general 'the first pillar of the Revolution'—but you're an American. You know nothing about France. Come."

He turned again and stepped out.

NOW Langlade comprehended the singular air and words of the man. Gouget had received a frightful inward hurt, searing his whole spirit. He was hardly responsible for what he said, was keeping himself in hand by grim will-power. Sometimes grief is like that.

"Where or what is the Etang des Platons?" Langlade asked.

"A fort seven leagues from here. It commands everything to the north and east; upon it, we depend for safety from that quarter. Colonel Friquet commands there, with a hundred of the 90th and three hundred colonials under General Noyer. We cannot reach him. We don't know if he's alive or dead. Twice we've tried to relieve him. This time—well, we've lost a better man than that hound of hell Friquet ever was!"

"General Noyer?" repeated Langlade. "Oh, of course; the black general, the friend of General Charles Belair. I don't suppose, by any chance, that the men under Noyer could belong to Belair's 7th Demi-brigade?"

Gouget turned and regarded him with singular attention.

"About half of them do. Well, go on!" he rasped suddenly. "Go on! Say it!"

Langdale met that fierce, inquiring gaze with steady eyes.

"On the day I left Le Cap, the wives of the officers of that unit were shot. It was the preceding night, rather. I don't think the men of my escort knew about it."

Captain Gouget choked down an oath.

"Why, this news would unleash hell. Luckily, your escort will be gone in the morning. We bar out news and pestilence alike. The drums talk, but apparently they can't give names. You'll be turned back at the gates."

"I have dispatches and permission—"

"Devil take all that. Monnier is the elder brother of God here."

Gouget resumed his way, cursing mechanically and awkwardly, as though seeking relief in the words and finding none. He was, as a matter of fact, a usually devout man. At the moment, as Langlade had divined, he was scarcely responsible for what he said.

They mounted a crooked trail along the side of the ravine; upon gaining the top, the south or main gate of the fort was directly ahead. The sun had sunk from sight, and with it the vibrant redness had departed from Morne Rouge. The two men went on to the gate. A sharp challenge, and it was drawn partly open.

An officer barred their way, a colonel of dragoons, short, bow-legged, wide-shouldered, who spoke briefly with Captain Gouget and made Langlade a peremptory gesture.

"Wait here, citizen," he said, and turned to the officers and men crowded behind him to see who had come. The name of Monnier flew from lip to lip. Captain Gouget saluted Langlade and strode away, back toward his outpost, as though indeed nothing mattered.

The dragoon colonel played nervously with the hilt of his sabre, an enormous weapon ornamented with gold, a memento of the Egyptian campaign. His stolid features displayed worry, hesitation, and presently he spoke almost apologetically.

"I regret the delay. I am Laporte, in acting command here. We can admit you

only upon authorization of our surgeon." "I understand; I heard of him at Le Cap." Langlade dismounted. "No fever here?"

"Nor cholera, thank heaven."

Colonel Laporte earnestly regarded the visitor as though with questioning he feared to utter. Langlade met the look and understood. The wordless silence was eloquent.

"There is someone?" Langlade asked quietly.

"My brother," Laporte bit at his mustache. "Adjutant of the 7th of the Line."

Langlade hesitated; but, after all, Laporte was only one of thousands.

"The 7th? Of its fourteen hundred men, a hundred are in hospital, eighty are with the colors. That is all. Not an officer remains."

Colonel Laporte turned white under his bronze; for an instant his eyes closed, then they opened again. The blow was absorbed, all in a moment. At a sudden commotion, he swung around. A small, stoutish man was shoving through the crowd with furious energy. He had bright, blue eyes in a very red face and was only half dressed.

"The general? I don't know. They're preparing him for my examination," he was saying. "Who in the devil's name is here? Laporte, send him away at once!"

"An American, bringing dispatches for Colonel Friquet and for the general," Laporte said. The bright, hot eyes of Surgeon Monnier stabbed appraisingly at the visitor.

"What the devil brought you here?"

"Private business, citizen surgeon," Langlade replied. "An hour ago I bathed, used disinfectants, and donned these clothes freshly smoked with sulphur. I understand that the dispatches have all been fumed through holes punched in them."

"By all the angels!" cried Monnier. "Have they adopted my methods, then, at Le Cap?"

"No; but I have."

"Trying to escape from the hell down there?"

"Apparently I'm immune. I've had the fever before this."

"Very well, come in." The surgeon turned. "Laporte, have that horse shot at

once! Why was it permitted past the ravine? Thunder of heaven! Must I always deal with fools? Let this man enter."

The acid-tongued surgeon darted away. Laporte touched Langlade's arm and spoke with forlorn appeal.

"Did I understand you to say that—that none of the officers of the 7th—"

"None," Langlade said gently. "I'm sorry; that's what I heard. None."

He entered the fort. It was as though he passed into a tomb, not of the dead but of the living.

THIS enormous Morne Rouge was like an ark in which a few people found refuge from the deathly flood overwhelming all others. Thanks to the choleric Monnier, no eddy of that flood had penetrated here. No one from the lower country had entered.

Not that these men, white or black, sat idle in garrison. The district was patrolled and muskets brought in. There was no insurrection here. Sylla and his mulatto bandits had cut off the position at L'Etang des Platons, but they were outsiders; they had appeared suddenly, ignoring this stronger fort and bottling up Friquet and the black General Noyer. A deep personal hatred existed between Noyer and Sylla. When Sylla took prisoners, if they were Frenchmen he merely shot them at once; if they were from Noyer's troops, he impaled them. And when Noyer caught any of Sylla's men, it must be confessed that, if no French were about, he crucified them.

Langlade had heard talk about these things. Sylla was clever, educated, and highly intelligent. Friquet's position was impregnable. Had Valette, in his supreme effort, lived one half-hour longer, Friquet would have been relieved and Sylla's force wholly exterminated.

Such were the hot words flying now, all around. Friquet was still cut off. Hearing the conversation, Langlade was startled by the suggestion that now Friquet would never be rescued at all.

"Impossible!" he thought anxiously, desperately. "They cannot mean what they say! Friquet must be rescued at all costs, at all costs!"



HOT BEAVER

By
ARTHUR H.
CARHART

UNREST had etched a rebellious pattern in Casey Melton's thoughts before he entered The Mint Club. In the two hours he had been sitting at a stained, wooden table, slowly drinking slightly bitter beer, another feeling had deepened, an intuitive warning that he was being coldly appraised.

No exact time had been set for the contact with Luke Bond and it might be any moment between noon and sundown. Casey glanced at the watch on his thick wrist, scowled until a crease cut between brows that were straight, wiry and slightly kinked, and shifted his stocky body with a resentful flop. Luke Bond better show up soon or he'd not find Casey sticking around this crummy little deadfall that apparently was the headquarters of sin in the frowsy town of Elk River.

The building housing The Mint had once contained a store. The lower portion of the front windows now were curtained. The drably dressed proprietor, who looked on the world with predatory eyes, had delicately shielded his wayward patrons from stares of godly folk in Elk River. The curtains and smudgy glass above them fended off sunlight and the interior simmered in a strangled dusk. One shaded light bulb hung above the table in the rear corner of the

front room where three lumpy truckers played slough. They talked in monotones except for sudden brawling when one misplayed or lost a trick. They had given cursory glances as Casey had entered. None of his feeling of being under surveillance came from that group.

The dessicated proprietor drifted to pick up the empty bottle and Casey said, "Gimme another cold one."

He watched the owner of The Mint through the doorway to the back room where a bar extended across the rear. Out of sight around a flimsy partition, players mumbled and fingered poker chips that made a sound like snicking of small teeth. A thinnish customer leaned back against the bar, as though he was hung up there to dry. He methodically sipped straight liquor. This fellow could look out into the front room, and his eyes, above dried-out, whisker shadowed cheeks, maintained an insistent patrol.

Casey looked away from the man at the bar. That fellow and the proprietor staring at him, got on his nerves; this whole business was getting very boring.

The owner came back, set a fresh bottle on the table, wafted over to watch the card game. Casey yawned, and looked again at the slightly grayish man who sat tilted in a chair near the front of the room diligently

reading a Western story magazine. Several times Casey had caught a sharp glint under the slightly sunburned brows that were shadowed by a sweat-soaked, sand-colored hat pulled low over blocky features. Thrice Casey had given this man the agreed sign that was to be the means of identification between him and Luke Bond; a match scratched twice across a shoe sole without lighting and then lit on the third try. There had been a hint of deep caution when Luke Bond had instructed Casey to use this code sign as they had talked over the long distance phone two days before. The magazine reader, who was the only one in the place who could possibly be Luke Bond, had made no acknowledgment of the signal and Casey had decided this was just a loafing rancher who had drifted into this dusty eddy of Elk River's sluggish currents.

The man who had been at the bar came to a halt beside Casey. He held two glasses

of whiskey. He grinned, with his lips, and not his eyes, revealing discolored teeth.

The chair fell back as Casey got to his feet. The proprietor had come silently, swiftly. He shoved Casey back, got hold of the man's arm and said:

"You can't find a fight here, Lefty. Finish those drinks and go on about your business!"

"Oh, I've got business," said Lefty thickly.

He tossed off the two glasses of whiskey, slammed the empties on the table, turned, and slowly walked over to the old fellow who read the magazine, took a hitch in his range pants, shoved his hat back a little over slightly baldish forehead where thin hair straggled, and deliberately yanked the magazine out of the old fellow's hands.

"Why you don't say hello when you see an old side kick?" he challenged.

"I generally do that," said the reader and



*Casey Melton Had a Bad Case of What Had Been
Described as Hell in the Neck*

got up, slowly, stepping past Lefty, and walked over to the cigar counter.

Lefty threw the magazine in a corner and started to follow. The owner of The Mint blocked his way. There was a moment while Lefty said something quarrelsome, then went out into the street. The fellow who had been reading came toward Casey. His blue eyes twinkled and there was the hint of a smile on his straight mouth.

"Take a load off your insoles," suggested Casey, shoving an empty chair.

THE oldster sat, tilted the chair, packed tobacco in an aged pipe and sleepily took inventory. It was thorough, even to noting the flecks of brown in the gray iris of Casey's eyes, the close hugging of ears near slightly curling, dark hair, and the new checked western shirt, leather army jacket and whipcord trousers.

After this inspection, the oldish fellow said, "I'm afraid you can't wait it out. Must say, that's a disappointment."

"If that's your way of telling me you're—"

"I'm Luke Bond. And don't make a play of shaking hands here. We're only strangers passing the time."

"That's all I've been doing—killing time," said Casey half angrily. "I gave you the signal three times."

"Lefty," said Luke. "He was watching us. Anyway I wanted to see how much patience you might have. 'Fraid it's pretty thin. Lefty watching you riled you too quick."

"All right; it did. If this is a sample of getting undercover evidence on the bootleg beaver racket, it's dull as mud."

"At times," admitted Luke. "But always dangerous as hell. Tip Carnahan got impatient—"

"Bud Moore told me about Tip Carnahan and the accident."

"Some accident," said Luke, dustily. "If ever I get evidence to prove that's false, I'll deal my own justice. Tip was my partner, as Bud Moore seems to be your friend. He's that, and he trusts you, or Bud wouldn't have recommended you."

"I can use a job," said Casey. "With regular pay."

"Quite an idea, risking your neck for a monthly salary."

"All right, it's wanting to help Bud Moore, and it's the salary, and I've been on ten jobs in the past six months with everyone soggier and more uninteresting than the other. Thought this would be different."

"Maybe we better talk some, at that," said Luke Bond.

They left The Mint separately, as Luke suggested. Casey drove his car across Elk River, off a few hundred yards on a side road, and parked there. Luke said a car left there wouldn't suggest anything but an early season fisherman down in the willow thickets. Luke drove along, picked up Casey and they followed a pair of ruts across a sage-brush flat, to stop on a rise from which they could see in all directions.

"You seem to have an uncommon degree of pent-up hell-in-the-neck," mused Luke as he looked across the valley. "Tell me about it."

"Well," said Casey, "it starts with meeting Bud Moore. We trained at Camp Carson. I got into a fight and Bud threw in to help me. We teamed together then, Bud told me about what had happened here just before he came into the army."

"He was framed for fair," stated Luke. "Looked as though Bud had sold out to the illegal fur ring. Is it your idea, maybe, that you'd like to clear Bud's record?"

Casey watched the slow drift of cottony clouds over the round shoulders of shimmering hills of sage. Maybe he could make old Luke understand. Try it, at least. He'd never attempted to put it in words before. A fellow probably should make such an analysis if he was all of twenty-six and living with a skin full of what Luke had defined as hell-in-the-neck.

Nobody should relish going into a war, maybe, but once in, there was excitement ahead. But Moore was eager to get across and into the scrap; they'd talked about it a lot. They'd expected to go over together. Bud had gone; combat engineers. Casey was chained to routine instruction work. He'd tried to find some way to join Bud and share that thing going on overseas. While Casey Melton had sweated out routine training in homeland camps, the other fellows went across, got into it, did their bit.

Bud had got that bullet in his spine; paralyzed in the legs. Two more operations and the docs were sure Bud would be good as

new. That was okay. But it accented what Casey Melton felt—how he had been cheated out of being a part of the big show.

AFTER fighting stopped? Worse than ever. Unrest. Hell gnawing inside. Casey had kept traveling, trying to find something—something that would balance out a feeling of frustration. He'd found out where Bud was in the hospital. They'd talked about the beaver poachers and the hot fur racket. Joining in to break up the fur bootleggers' business sounded like an answer to Casey's hunger for action. That had led to Bud's letter to Luke, the telephone call, so Casey starting two days ago from the middle west had come to meet Luke in The Mint.

"Maybe I've not made it clear," said Casey. "I want to prove I've got what it takes—to myself at least. You probably don't get it."

"I do," said Luke, meditatively. "I was in the First World War. Didn't get across and felt the same way. One thing sure, you've got the advantage of being unknown around here and that helps if you are an undercover man. But if you're going to get full of fidgets—."

"I'll stay hitched," Casey said flatly.

"A word of warning before I forget," cautioned Luke. "This Lefty fits in with the illegal fur business somewhere. He's poison. Don't take any chances."

"Then you'll agree—."

"If I had a choice, I'd not trust your ability to stay hitched when things get tight and snarled. If we don't grab this outfit now we lose the chance until next season. Here's the play. . . ."

Casey had heard before, from Bud Moore, and Luke now reviewed in detail, how the illegal fur business operates throughout the west. The law said no person could trap beaver legally except the official state trappers. But poachers sneaked in on back country creeks, caught beaver, pelted them and then sold hides to representatives of the bootleg fur ring.

"Don't underestimate what's involved," said Luke, seriously. "Something between ten and thirty thousand hides are bootlegged each season from this one state. Prime hides sell for as high as sixty dollars. The hot fur boys operate in eight or ten other states out

here. The total in illegal fur runs into millions of dollars. Big stakes and they play dirty to get 'em. Just remember Tip Carnahan. And the job they framed on Bud Moore."

There was one place to trap the fur runners; when the illegal pelts were just loaded into a speed truck at the point where they were picked up from the poaching trappers. Once the truck reached a major road junction, after sneaking out from some back country road, it could race through the night in any direction, and a dozen state cars in pursuit had little chance of catching the outfit. Over the state line, counterfeit seals, manufactured in a little town up north, would be attached to the hides, there would be a fake bill-of-sale handy if the truck was stopped, and even in court, the driver of a car or truck would get clear. The seals were just so good counterfeits, the bill of sale from some person unknown and miles distant so difficult to prove spurious, no local court or officer would take the chance of risking convicting a man who might be innocent and lash back with a suit for damages.

"If this works out, you'll be in the middle of the trap baited to catch one of the big shots," said Luke. "We could catch poachers, but they're not the important ones."

"The first move—?" suggested Casey.

"You get jailed tonight," said Luke, and his eyes twinkled.

CASEY MELTON, alias Felton, which was near enough to his real name he'd answer to it automatically, hadn't realized how easily one might get jailed if he carried proper credentials. The dozen beaver pelts, planted in his car, fitted with counterfeit seals Luke had supplied, and a fake bill-of-sale turned the trick.

Casey had left Elk River after dark and had driven the forty miles to the town of Cottonwood. He'd been in the tourist cabin less than an hour when the local sheriff and Game Warden Matt Quigley pounded on the door, demanding that they should be shown what was in the trunk of Casey's car.

"I guess old Luke's tip was right for once," big Matt Quigley, the warden remarked.

"If you think you can hang anything on me, you're nuts," protested Casey. "Those hides are sealed, and here's a bill-of-sale."

"Seals and this paper look pretty good," said the Sheriff.

"We'll find out in court tomorrow," said Quigley. "If you've not got the guts to throw him in, I'll see what can be done about that!"

The one other occupant of the cell inside the squat, old brick jail, sat up, rubbing his eyes as the door slammed back of Casey. Luke Bond had said Jed Wilson would be in the cell; in for being drunk last Saturday. All signs indicated Wilson was tied in with the bootleg ring. He might be led into doing some talking.

"They've got nothing on me," said Casey as he and Wilson sat on the iron bunks inside the dark jail.

"They're stupid," said Wilson raspily, and coughed.

Casey had had a good look at this man before the light in the cell was turned off. Wilson was terribly thin and drawn. His skin was transparent and he was slightly bald. The racking cough that plagued Wilson wasn't cigarettes. Luke had told Casey that Wilson had got a touch of gas in the First World War and had come West chasing the cure. Had a little place up on Mill Creek, out from the town of Cottonwood. In the one look he had had, Casey saw Jed Wilson as a pathetic, haunted person trailed by an unseen but known nemesis.

"Quigley and his outfit make a business of hounding me," said Wilson after he had quieted his coughing.

"Hot beaver pelts?" suggested Casey.

"Just all-around outlaw according to Quigley," said Wilson. "They figure I'm go-between for poachers and the smart guys that run the hides to market."

"That true?" Casey probed a little.

"Maybe," agreed Wilson. "Nobody gives me any breaks. Hero, that's what I am. World War One. I suppose you were in this last war. Sure. You parade down Main Street when you come home. After that you're lousy bums. Get a bonus and a kick in the pants. Get sick. They throw you in a hospital. Beastly experimenting medicos use you as a guinea pig. When they get as far as they can with you there, they throw you out. Everyone bubbling over with gratitude. Say you saved civilization. Nuts! You'll find out if you haven't already."

"What do you think I had beaver pelts in

my car for if I hadn't found out?" suggested Casey.

"Sure," said Wilson. "Sure. But you'll have a hell of a chance if you're figuring on that sort of business in this district. You've got to be in with the right people."

"I can protect myself."

"Brave boy," said Wilson. "Very brave. Figure you'll not split the take with anyone. You've got a lot to learn."

"Who'll stop me besides Matt Quigley and his bunch?"

"Several individuals. If you've got the nerve to dispose of your fellowman, you might take over here. Like to clean out several of the rats myself. What's the use? Let's get some sleep."

THE next morning, Wilson was reticent. He was released before Casey was taken to court. But contact had been made, as Luke Bond had figured.

The Justice of the Peace was a raspy, law-quoting, hair-splitting squire, loath to take chances and unfriendly toward Warden Matt Quigley. The JP looked at the seals and the bill-of-sale, and promptly freed Casey.

Quigley stopped Casey outside the JP's office, and said, "You can't always get the breaks. I hope I never see you again."

"I'm almost sure you will," said Casey.

As he arrived at his car and threw the repossessed hides in the rear compartment, Jed Wilson sauntered up, shrugged his thin shoulders under his faded blue hirt and said, "Boots Kellman's in town. I'm to fetch you over to talk to him and Ace Gordon."

"I've got no business with any Kellman or Gordon," said Casey.

"That's the wrong attitude," said Wilson. "Come along."

They crossed the street to a place called The Pastime, Cottonwood's edition of Elk River's Mint Club. Two men, one very round, heavy meat and dark, the other stringy and undersized waited in the back room. The big fellow played a battered slot machine.

"Sit down," said the heavier man. "We'll be over in a minute."

Wilson indicated the big fellow was Boots Kellman, the other Ace Gordon. Kellman played his last nickel in the slot machine, lost, turned, held out his thick

hands expressively, and said, "That's really an air-tight racket."

Kellman walked with rolling motion, swinging his heavy shoulders that strained against an expensive, fawn-colored gabardine shirt, fancy with buttons. His whipcord trousers were of the frontier cut, his boots scrolled, and his big hat was in the thirty dollar bracket. Gordon was wispy and weasel-faced, a stark contrast to Kellman's round build.

Kellman heaved into a chair that creaked under more than two hundred pounds of weight and Gordon sat straddle of another chair, his back to the three at the table as though he couldn't be in a room and not face the door.

"Jed tells me, Matt Quigley caught you with some hot beaver hides," suggested Kellman. "That's very, very risky business to be in around here."

"Not if only Quigley has to be dealt with," said Casey.

"Very, very true," said Kellman, softly."

He fitted a cigarette into a gold banded holder, pursed his small mouth that pouted between mounded cheeks, and deliberately drew and expelled a deep breath of smoke, letting it billow toward Casey. Those cheeks crowded Kellman's eyes up into a continual squint. His expressionless scrutiny was as warm and friendly as slush ice.

"You've got by Matt Quigley once, and you probably could again," lisped Kellman. "Apparently you don't know that when hides out of this section go to market, I take 'em."

"Interesting," said Casey. "But it's a free country."

Kellman was silent again, letting cigarette smoke spill out between his protruding lips to rise and drift around the brim of the big hat.

"It's a free country!" said Kellman, after a pause. "A good slogan. Don't think that's going to protect your health if you try to cut in on my territory."

Kellman's tone was conversational. But every syllable whispered a threat. Again he sat, waiting, and Casey sensed a cunning mind was making swift appraisals behind those squinting eyes. The ashes fell from the cigarette, spilling over the gabardine shirt, and his big hand slapped them away without his eyes shifting.

"You better throw in with me and save yourself trouble," said Kellman, finally.

Ace Gordon whipped around, as though a gust of wind had whirled his thin body, and said, "What do you know about this fellow, Boots? Just met him. You're always a fool for taking risks with people."

Gordon's eyes, that were as glassy as any in a taxidermist's shop, fastened on Casey. His mouth, twice too wide for his thin face, was stretched into a crease.

"You're one to talk," said Kellman, thinly. "I didn't know much about you, either, Ace, except that you were smart enough to dodge a murder rap up in Montana—."

"You're always throwing that in my face," said Ace. "Some day I'll kill you if you keep on!"

"He talks very big for his size," said Kellman softly and for the first time he smiled, the bulges of his cheeks crowding harder against his eyes. "What you got against this tramp, Ace?"

"Oh, go ahead," said Ace Gordon. "You're the one who'll throw that fat carcass into a deadfall some day and we'll all get pelted."

"I resent being called fat," said Kellman, quietly. "I warn you, Ace, you'll say that some day and I'll lose my temper."

"Stick to business," rasped Jed Wilson. "Save your love-making for some other place."

"Give me a nickel, someone," demanded Kellman, and bulged to his feet. "I know a way to decide this."

Casey and Wilson both threw nickels on the table. Kellman looked at the dates.

"There you go again," said Ace Gordon, "looking for lucky signs."

"I'm lucky," said Kellman, and gave back the nickel Wilson had offered. "Date on this one adds up to Black Jack. Lucky number."

HE WENT to the slot machine that had been consistently passing any pay-off, put in the coin, yanked the handle and the machine whirled, then stopped. Kellman grunted as the tinkle of coins came into the receiver.

Blue plums; fourteen pay. Kellman cleared the plums and the machine clicked to a non-pay stop. He came back grinning,

pocketed the profit and gave one coin to Casey.

"You let slot machines do your thinking," said Ace. "I give up!"

"They got more brains than some people," said Kellman, hooking his thick elbows on the table. "You want in on the hide business here?"

"Say your piece," said Casey, shortly.

Kellman put his proposition coldly. It was running hot beaver pelts out of the state. Kellman's legitimate hide, wool and tallow business, a good reason for moving around in the country, was the blind back of which the bootleg beaver business operated.

"If you want to keep your health," said Kellman as he leaned back in his chair, "don't try anything funny. Another thing; anyone who ties in with me, puts up some money. They get their cut in the profits—and they have something to lose if things don't work out. How much you got to throw in on this?"

Casey hesitated. This was a demand not foreseen.

"Well, look," said Kellman shortly, "go on and peddle that dozen or so hides you've got. They'll bring four or five hundred. Make it up to a thousand, and we do business."

Casey nodded. Luke Bond, if he could be contacted, might know a way; there had to be a way with this opening setting up.

"All right," said Kellman, abruptly, and got up. "If you can buy chips, meet me at Jed Wilson's Thursday night. We're taking out some hides. Jed says there's a good haul. See you at Wilson's." He got up, Ace followed him, and they went into the street.

"And another thing," said Jed Wilson, "if you don't get that thousand bucks I'd advise you to travel elsewhere. Boots really opened up for you when your nickel paid on the slot machine."

Before noon Casey drove and doubled more than a hundred miles to put in a telephone call to Luke Bond. It was near dusk when the call was finally completed.

A thousand dollars was a big order, Luke said. But the Chief had always backed Luke without question, and probably would this time—the set-up was too promising to pass by.

Luke would drive out from Cottonwood

the next night about ten o'clock, toward Elk River, and when he winked the lights of the car twice, then after a few seconds flashed them once, that would be the signal always used, and Casey was to be ready to be picked up so they could talk while Luke drove the car.

NIGHT wind fluttered young leaves of scrub oak as Casey walked the Cottonwood-Elk River highway. Round-shouldered foothills massed against a faintly luminous sky. A coyote chanted beyond winking lamplight in a ranch home down valley. A car came, gave no signal, whizzed on, as Casey returned from the shadow of a giant boulder where he had crouched.

The night was redolent with quietude. The darkness was a powerful counter theme to the surge of expectancy in Casey Melton, now alias Ielton. The sudden and frantic leap of a jackrabbit nibbling brush beside the paved highway whipped a shiver of alarm through Casey. A tingle of false fear crawled his hide. If this could happen as a rabbit jumped from ambush—

Kellman and his crew weren't rabbits. They were prowling wolves. If something slipped, if there was one flaw in the play Casey had to make in the hours ahead, they'd turn on him.

But Moore must have felt this way before his outfit jumped off into the gamble of an attack. Bud must have wondered if he could go through without taut nerves breaking until a man became a blithering thing called a coward. Casey wondered if it had been like this the night before an attack. Probably. Well, he'd asked for this, just this.

The crying coyote burst out again. The song was of fang and claw. Casey halted, listening to the gibbering chant, rising, falling and rising again. Even the whispering of the wind in the new-fledged oak was sibilant with the hiss of wild forces. For a few moments, Casey Melton walked alone, facing the uncertainty of the hours ahead.

Another car swung around the butte that hid the lights of Cottonwood. Halfway up the straight stretch, the lights winked, twice rapidly, then a pause, then one more deliberate wink. Luke had said that was the standard signal flashed to establish recognition between the men who worked with him.

Casey suddenly felt the stability flowing from old Luke's presence as the car eased to a stop. Anyone who was tied in with Luke and his bunch wasn't alone; there were good men and true with him all the way.

"In the back seat," ordered Luke as he swung the door open. "Get down on the floor. If anyone comes along and recognizes me and the car, they'll think I'm alone."

The car rolled on toward Elk River as Luke talked. He got a chuckle out of the story Matt Quigley had told him earlier in the evening. Matt was laying for Casey. Of course Matt could be trusted, but every time anyone, even the chief, knew who was working under cover for Luke Bond, there was just another possible chance for an unguarded remark tipping off someone tied into the bootleg fur ring. Matt would be in on the finish, but he'd probably not know Casey's status until the last minute. It was a lot safer to play it all through this way.

"Here's the thousand dollars bait money," said Luke, handing a package over the back of the seat. "I've got a record of the serial numbers on those bills. You got anything more to report?"

Casey hadn't risked talking over the phone about the meeting with Kellman, Gordon and Wilson. He reviewed it now in swift details.

"Boots Kellman!" Luke exclaimed. "We've tried to get that fellow for months. This is made to order. Just what time will they be loading hides at Wilson's?"

That was the hitch. Casey didn't know. Kellman hadn't revealed that point.

"That throws in another hazard," said Luke, quickly sober, "There's a telephone at the Forest Service fire tool cache about a half mile down the road from Wilson's cabin. You'll have to use it without being caught. That phone runs directly into the ranger's office in town. I'll see the forest men when I get back to Cottonwood tonight and tell them a call's coming in. They'll ask no questions and play the game. If I'm not sitting on the phone waiting for your call, give them the hour. There'll be two other state men, Matt and myself, all set to come in whenever you give us the time."

Whatever else happened, Casey would just have to use his head.

They had reached the divide from where

the road sloped for twenty miles on toward Elk River. Lights of another car flooded over Luke's car.

"They may be trailing us," said Luke. "Coming faster now. You keep down, we'll let 'em pass, and I'll turn around and drop you a mile outside Cottonwood."

The car, a maroon panel truck Casey saw in a flash as it drew close, came at excessive speed. Luke pulled toward the side of the road. A blasting explosion raked in through the open window where Luke sat. The old man was knocked to one side of the driver's seat, the car swerved into the ditch, smashed to a stop and the truck tore on down the highway toward Elk River.

Momentarily, Casey fought numbness following the crash. Then he reached over to straighten Luke up in the seat. He felt the hot slick of blood.

Lights of another car lit the hillside as it hit a curve back of the divide. Whoever was coming couldn't miss seeing the wreck.

"Get clear," said old Luke, hoarsely. "I'll get help from whoever's coming. Get clear quick. Carry through. Phone Matt Quigley from the fire tool cache. Trust Quigley. Get clear, quick!"

For a moment Casey hesitated. The lights of the oncoming car were brighter on the brushy hill. He could dive out, and if the car didn't halt, come back and help Luke.

As he leaped into the thick brush beside the road, a spotlight leveled on him as he ran. Casey tumbled into a small draw. He halted, puffing, and heard the car with the spotlight, grind to a halt. It must be some official machine to have the spotlight.

Quietly as he could, hurriedly, Casey moved down the draw to the edge of the highway. Whoever was in the car that had stopped, was working over old Luke. Casey crossed the road swiftly, climbed a bank, halted in shelter and looked toward the wreck.

He recognized Matt Quigley as the warden ran back to throw the spotlight into the brush where Casey had disappeared. Quigley had a rifle cradled in his arm. The one chance in the moment was to move to the full safety of a boulder, call to Quigley, head him off from shooting first and talking afterward, and convince the warden of the truth of what had happened. But if he moved, brush would crack, and Quigley, the

spotlight, the rifle, would be in action. He'd have to wait until the warden was away from the spotlight. As Casey hesitated, another car came over the rise. Quigley waved down the passing motorist. Old Luke was loaded into the car that had stopped, Quigley ran back to his car, and as the one bearing Luke started a race toward Elk River, the warden swung his car toward Cottonwood. This chance to get contact with Matt Quigley was gone; Casey would have to find a way to see him in Cottonwood.

FOLLOWING the road was now dangerous. The trails cutting over the hills were brush-flanked, rocky, dim. Nearly two hours later Casey slipped across a vacant lot to where he had parked his car a block away from the tourist court. It had been a hunch that had led him to do this. Quigley lived a mile on the other side of town, and he could travel there more swiftly now, and wait for the warden to show up. That was one place any man-hunt wouldn't look for Casey. He must talk to the warden before anyone else met him—that was certain.

He opened the door of his car, slid back of the wheel, smelled pungent tobacco smoke and saw the glow of a cigarette. He braced back of the wheel, waiting. This was one of those tight spots. A touch of exultation came when he realized his heart was pounding, crazily, but he was suddenly calm, waiting.

"Maybe Boots Kellman saw something in you that I didn't," remarked Jed Wilson out of the dark. "You don't blow to pieces when a squeeze hits you."

"That," said Casey, "is a compliment most appreciated."

"You're in one hell of a jackpot," drawled Wilson. "Whether you threw a shotgun on old Bond or not, you're in a mess. They found the gun thrown into the edge of a little draw just ahead of where Bond's car smashed up, and your tracks crossing the road there. The hounds of the law are out with Matt Quigley patrolling the road. A dozen well-roused citizens are smooching around town here under the direction of the sheriff."

"And so—?"

"And so you take my pickup that's around the corner and I'll drive this car.

Lucky they didn't find it. I'll go ahead, out to my place. They'll never figure you'll go back on that stub road. When they check up and find your car's not in town, they'll guess you're running for the state line. So they'll go in that direction, blocking the roads. By tomorrow night, if they haven't picked you up, they'll figure you've got at least as far as Arizona. They'll be dragging the far-away places."

"Good: so far," agreed Casey. "Beyond that?"

"Let Boots figure that out," said Wilson. "If they're all tied up in a man-hunt, they'll not be paying any attention to hot beaver pelts. Maybe that's a break. Let's get moving before some tin-star deputy shows up. You'll have to leave whatever you had in that cabin. There are two limbs of the law all over that place."

As Jed Wilson eased out of town by a back road, Casey Melton suddenly confronted something he hadn't realized before. He didn't know but what the last words Luke Bond ever would speak were the ones he had heard. Old Luke had made a valiant effort to breathe those. If he cashed in without ever regaining consciousness—."

That was something to face! Only Luke could quickly and positively clear Casey of that shooting. This was fantastic. But he steadied, and knew what he was heading into was real.

DEER on the last leg of migrations to the high country crossed the road as they passed a bridge and bumped up the last few hundred yards to Jed Wilson's cabin. It was a log affair, built by Wilson, rough, unfinished, staunch. A little below the bridge they had passed the red-sided fire tool cache of the Forest Service and Casey fixed that spot in his mind.

Wilson ran Casey's car on into thickets on a bench back of the cabin. It was nearing midnight. Jed Wilson had stopped at his mail box on the star route several miles back on the road and picked up some magazines and two letters. He slit the envelopes, read one and tossed it to Casey. It was cryptic and unsigned.

"Boots," said Wilson as he began to read the other letter. "He gives the time we'll load the fur."

The pencil-printed message from Boots Kellman was merely two words: "Thursday" and "midnight." The time was set. The hazardous business now was getting a message to Matt Quigley and making him believe the facts.

Casey glanced at Jed Wilson. In the yellow light of the kerosene lamp, Wilson's face seemed more drawn and bitter than ever. He began to read the second letter again, slowly. Then sat, slumped, for minutes, before he tossed it on the table and sighed.

"Period," he said dustily. "Period and the end of a chapter in this lousy life of mine."

Casey saw the letterhead; the name of a hospital in Albuquerque. He glanced at Wilson; sensed the probable significance of the letter.

"If saying you have my sympathy—" began Casey.

"Godalmighty," flared Wilson, swishing up to rock on his feet. "If you're going to slobber sentiment because I just got word my kid sister's dead—" He halted, staring at Casey. "By God," he said slowly, "I believe you really meant that!"

Casey saw the surprise, hurt and confusion in Wilson's eyes, as he said, quietly, "I meant it, Jed."

"Something new," said Wilson, half whispering, as though to himself. "You're always running into something new and different. Now it's you, really sorry that kid's dead. That's funny."

He went over to the open door and looked out into the night and was silent for a moment. When he began to speak, there was a softness in his voice. If Casey was sorry, then he could stand for Jed Wilson talking about Junie, his sister.

She was a sweet girl. God's truth she was. Quit college and went to teaching, a little country school, so she could be near Jed when he was in Fitzsimons Hospital, the army place in Denver; and then down in New Mexico, and Arizona, and back to New Mexico. Then he'd come up here on Mill Creek and built his cabin. He thought she was still teaching school at Belen until he got a letter from the sanitarium where she'd gone; a letter demanding money. That hospital was a dump. Jed knew all about it. That's why he threw in with Boots Kellman when the chance came. Risky, trafficking in

illegal beaver skins, but it brought in money, so he could move Junie to a good sanitarium.

"That's the hold Kellman's had on me," said Jed bitterly as he came back to slump low in the old chair by the lamp. "Kellman thinks he owns me. I let him think so. Maybe that's been true. I couldn't find any other way to get money to keep her. He doesn't own an ounce of me this minute."

"He'll not let you quit this racket," suggested Casey.

"Let me!" Wilson snorted. "That piggy-brained swine let me? He can kill me. That will stop me from getting out of here. Going somewhere. Arizona, maybe. Or to Albuquerque. He can kill me and stop me from going—if I don't lose my grip and cut his filthy heart out first! But if you play around with the hot beaver in this section, you've got to go along, and swallow bile. Until hate and more hate boils and steams in your guts scalding the edges of what men call your soul. Scalding until—"

He broke off abruptly. Leaned over the table.

"If you think you're going to sell me out to Kellman by telling—" Wilson broke off, sharply, his eyes searching. "You sort of tricked me when you said you were sorry about the kid," he said, breathily. "I don't know why I told you what I did."

"It's no more than turn about for hauling me out here with a couple of posesses on my trail," suggested Casey quietly. "I'll say nothing to Kellman."

He was on the verge of suggesting to Jed Wilson that the way out for him was helping carry through the plans of old Luke Bond. Then came warning that Wilson might not agree. There were other times when Wilson had been party to the running of illegal hides. Somewhere along the trail ahead there might come a chance, since he now knew how Wilson felt and why he was in this racket, to help the poor, frail wreck of a faded hero.

WILSON sat, looking directly into the yellow flame of the lamp. Once he smiled, wistfully, as some happy memory trudged along in moments of yesterdays. Wilson might be wrung dry physically, harried mentally, but in a flash of the talk, there had come a clear picture of Jed Wil-

son, the hero that was; a fighting man, battered, bewildered maybe, but still a fighter.

The lamp had burned out when Casey awakened at dawn. He had lain out on a bunk; had gone to sleep, fully dressed. At the table, Jed Wilson's thin face was pillowed on his bony, folded arms. At first Casey thought he was dead. Then saw it was exhausted sleep, as though Wilson had fallen into slumber at the end of a wearying journey.

It was a good chance to get to the phone at the fire tool cache. Casey took it. He smothered the tinkling bell as he cranked the little generator in the square oak phone case. The line hummed in his ear as he listened. Then he realized the office at the other end of the line wouldn't be open yet. He reached up to put the receiver on the hook, but a metallic voice answered.

"Where's the fire?" the voice demanded.

"No fire," said Casey, quickly.

"What a hell of a time to call up to just be friendly," said the voice. "I was out in the warehouse getting a pack outfit together to ride Mirror Basin— Say, who is this? It doesn't sound like Tom Leathers."

"Pass that," said Casey. "Listen. I've got a message for Matt Quigley, the game warden."

"If you've got a tip on that fellow who killed old Luke Bond last night, you're crazy. That guy drove toward Utah and they've got all the roads blocked to the state line."

For a moment, the statement that old Luke had been killed, gripped Casey's throat. When he spoke again, it was harsh and hard.

"This is one of the state men," he said. "You've got to get word to Matt Quigley to drive out along Mill Creek. Tell him to turn off the road just below the tool cache, get out of sight and wait there until I can reach him. Tell him to mark two arrows in the gravel at the side of the road where he turns off and I'll find it."

"What's all the mystery; who is this?"

"If you don't get that message to Quigley—" began Casey, angrily. Then, "Listen, mister, I don't know who you are or you me, but this is something hellishly important. You tell Quigley, nobody else, and don't let this slip. It's important!"

He hung up, the phone bell began to

buzz, he went back to block it with a stick so it couldn't ring and call attention if anyone should come by, and then slipped back to the cabin. Wilson was still sleeping. Maybe he had moved a little, but he still breathed steadily, as though dead to the world that had treated him so roughly. He stirred, sat up, blinked and greeted Casey.

"Those dumb clucks won't come this direction looking for you," said Wilson as they finished breakfast. "Maybe it would be better, though if you weren't in the cabin. They'll not find that car. I'll brush out tracks to it. I've got to contact some fellows I should have met last night. I'll be away until late afternoon. You better take a lunch, and go back in the breaks toward the rimrocks. Enjoy yourself." He grinned, dryly.

This was an unexpected break. If Matt Quigley did come Casey could leave the cabin without having to trump up an excuse. If Matt Quigley didn't come—

Even if he did, there was the uncertainty of his believing what Casey would tell him.

FROM the shelter of thick bush junipers, Casey saw Matt Quigley turn his car up a stub side road, hide the car in a screen of thick young lodgepole, go back to brush out tracks across loose gravel beside the main Mill Creek road, and then mark the two arrows there.

Apparently Quigley was alone. Casey waited to make certain, then approached. Quigley heard him coming and was crouched in shelter beside a boulder when Casey stepped into the open.

There was surprise, sudden hard-knit scowling on Quigley's big face as he recognized Casey. He must have seen immediately that Casey was unarmed, for although the warden wore a belt gun, he made no move to reach it.

"So you're giving yourself up," he said.

"I'll leave that to you when we're done talking," said Casey.

"Talk fast." Quigley continued his scowling.

Casey talked fast. It was the truth. He showed the bills Luke had given him as evidence. Quigley fingered through them.

"Yeah," he said, uncertainly. "Luke gave me a duplicate list of serial numbers. But a thief could have got hold of these."

"If you could talk to old Luke—" began Casey, then remembered what the forest man had said. "Luke's dead?"

"That's the report," said Quigley, shortly.

"Well, I've told the truth," said Casey.

"Your story about the maroon-colored panel truck holds water," mused Quigley. "I was chasing it last night as it left Cottonwood."

"You'll play this through," said Casey.

Quigley bit a piece off a match stem he was chewing, spit it out thoughtfully, and remarked, "You're good as on ice if this isn't the truth. There are enough rifles, shotguns with buckshot and a couple machine-guns, pointing your way on road blocks out yonder, to cut down an army."

"Which wouldn't be the case if this deal I'm telling you works out," suggested Casey.

"Then it better work out," said Quigley dustily.

The hazards involved in the meeting with Matt Quigley were not ended when he and Casey parted. If Jed Wilson had seen the warden's car on the road, picked up any remark of others telling of that car driving up Mill Creek, there was danger of high level.

This was the period of tight waiting that Luke Bond had foretold. The chattering of a chickaree squirrel rasped on Casey's ears like a rough file. The crack of a dead twig in a stand of pines thrust a chilly sword through his entire length until he saw the buck deer, with horns just thrusting out in velvety knobs, sneaking to better cover.

For a time he sat near Mill Creek, watching a pair of water ouzels diving into the cold flood. But the water voices masked other sounds and he moved up to a sunny bench where big pines grew. The day droned along.

Darkness came as he prepared supper and he ate his share in twilight, setting the remainder on the stove to stay warm for Jed Wilson. Maybe something had happened to Wilson; he'd been picked up or other trouble had developed. It was a relief when Jed did come, and cached armloads of dried, circular beaver pelts under spreading junipers above the cabin.

Wilson ate in silence, while Casey sat on a bench outside the cabin door. A glance at the watch showed it was after nine. Two hours and some minutes to the appointed

time. Casey felt a tightening around his belly.

They had just finished washing dishes when auto lights came across the bridge on Mill Creek, swung the turn in the road and pointed back toward the bridge before stopping.

"Boots runs on a timetable," remarked Jed Wilson. "Straight up ten o'clock."

"His letter said midnight," said Casey.

"Sure," said Jed. "He always sets it up so you subtract or add two hours. His letter said Thursday, midnight. Giving the day first meant subtract two hours."

Casey Melton felt the freeze of crisis. He had set the time for Quigley to come in two hours too late. Boots Kellman came out of the diffused light near the truck.

"Okay," he said to Jed. "You show Lefty where to take the truck to load, while I talk to our young friend."

Lefty called from the truck. His voice slapped a second wave of stampede through Casey. Then Boots Kellman started talking, while Jed went to direct Lefty over to the mat of junipers hiding the hot beaver pelts.

"You got the money, or you wouldn't be here," suggested Boots. "Very, very smart. You'll get your cut in the take."

Casey couldn't trust his voice. He laid the packet of bills on the table beside the kerosene lamp. Boots took the bills, looked up over the lamplight.

"You look dam' near sick," he said suddenly. "What's wrong with you?"

"I'll get seasoned into this," said Casey, and fought a shake in his voice. "Remember it's my first time. I've got to get out of here, too. Something happened to a game warden last night—"

"I know that," said Boots shortly. "You're in a hell of a mess. I suppose you didn't shoot old man Bond."

"I didn't shoot old man Bond," said Casey. "Why should I?"

"Very, very true," said Boots. "Why should you? Why should anyone. Who would shotgun dear old Luke. Except the old coot has been trying to find out how that accident happened to Tip Carnahan, bless his blasted soul!"

When Boots Kellman whispered, and smiled, it was more sinister than when his face was poker-blank.

"You sure can't be seen around here," said Boots, and he still smiled a wicked, cherubic smile. "Never mind, I can give you credentials to someone in Oregon or northern Idaho who'll take care of you. Just like I'll take care of you now, my friend—my very, very good friend, since you're the one who shotgunned old Luke."

"And I didn't," said Casey sharply.

"It's wonderful that you did," said Boots, his lips twitching. "I like it that way. It's very, very nice that way. Nice!" Boots counted the bills and thrust them into his pocket.

Two pairs of booted feet clumped toward the door. Casey remembered one was Lefty. With a swift breath he blew out the light.

"What the hell!" demanded Boots. "What goes on?"

Casey was already easing toward the door. He said, "I thought I heard a car coming. Didn't you?" He was trying to get into the darkness, so Lefty couldn't see him. It might work.

There was a moment of tense listening, and Jed said, "Gee you're jumpy, Felton."

"Strike a match, someone," said Lefty suddenly. "I know this new guy."

The flame burst in the darkness as Boots struck a match. Over the flame he looked at Casey, then at Lefty, then back to Casey. His big face was suddenly wooden.

"What goes?" he demanded.

"I saw this guy in The Mint Club last Monday afternoon," snapped Lefty.

"You were probably as drunk then as you are on the way to being soused now," said Boots. "You always see things when you get liquored."

This was a tighter tight spot. Casey managed a smile, and said, "I saw him there, too. He tried to pick a fight. I wanted none of it."

"So you saw him and he saw you in The Mint last Monday afternoon," said Boots disgustedly. "So what?" He turned and lit the light, burning his fingers slightly, and cursing.

"Luke Bond was in The Mint at the same time," said Lefty.

"So you were there too, and Luke Bond was there, and this guy was there. Does that prove anything?" Boots was angry.

"Maybe not; maybe not," said Lefty. "Or

maybe it does. I watched them over two hours and they didn't seem to know each other. It sure gave me a turn finding he's the new man you took on. Just skip it."

"We don't skip anything," said Boots. "You've just given me an idea. You got your own car up here, haven't you, Felton?"

"Back in the timber," said Jed Wilson.

That was swell, said Boots. It would work this way. Casey would drive his car ahead; the truck would follow. Jed would ride with Casey to see no funny business developed.

"They're looking for that car on every road beyond Cottonwood," said Jed "What's the idea?"

Boots' face broke into a big smile, and he half whispered. "It's a decoy, made to order. I was worried some about the truck being stopped. Now you fellows go ahead, with the truck following you. When we strike a point where they're watching for Felton's car, they'll turn all attention to that. Won't bother the truck. This is a very, very bright idea."

"It's just brilliant," said Jed Wilson. "We let them shoot hell out of us while you pussy-foot away in the truck."

"You can outrun them," said Boots, indifferently. "That's all you got to do. You outrun them to Coal Creek on the main highway, and we'll take the cut-off and be there to pick up both of you when you abandon Felton's car. That will leave them hunting the country around Coal Creek for the next week. It's a very, very smart idea—perfect."

"Just simply delicious," said Jed Wilson.

"You do what I tell you to," whispered Boots. "You both better do what I tell you to do."

Jed shrugged, and said, "All right. Let's get the other hides up the creek. We've only loaded what I brought in today."

AS THE lights flashed up on the truck, Casey stared. He recognized the vehicle; he'd recognize it anywhere, even if he'd had only a glimpse as it hurtled by as the shotgun blast had hit old Luke Bond last night!

The panel truck, partly filled with hides, bumped up a stub road to where beaver

pelts were hidden in another juniper thicket. There were more here; perhaps three hundred total. Fifteen to eighteen thousand dollars worth when they finally went into the hands of the dealer back east, who would buy and ask no questions.

As they worked, without conversing, that design that had taken sudden form in Boots Kellman's mind became a certainty. It would block off any trail that might lead to his conviction for shooting old Luke, if Casey Melton, alias Felton, was shot to death running to get out of the state to dodge a murder charge. Matt Quigley might have the information to correct that later, but before that, trying to run a road block, guns blazing to stop his racing car—

If he got through, there was another answer. Boots Kellman figured he'd have the same hold on him as on Ace Gordon—an old murder charge. He believed he had a club there to make Casey his dog for all time. Shot down or safe through the road block, Kellman's calculations were a guaranteed hold on his new man.

The hides were loaded. Back at the cabin, the truck waited until Jed and Casey got into the latter's car, and were ready to start down the road.

"All right, it's past eleven," said Boots impatiently. "Let's roll."

They had passed the fire tool cache before Jed spoke. "What a sweet and lovely character our friend Boots turned out to be this time!" he said raspily, and coughed.

"Making us a decoy?" suggested Casey. He wiped the sweat from the palm of his hand, dragging it across his thigh.

"He's hoping neither of us show up at Coal Creek," said Jed. "If he gets you killed, he doesn't have to account for the thousand dollars or any cut in the profits. If I get rubbed out, he doesn't have to split what he gets out of those hides; three thousand bucks he'd have to give to me. I wouldn't put it past him to never show up at Coal Creek at all. That guy would strangle his grandmother for a dollar."

The plan that Casey had been forming, of overpowering Jed if necessary, making a run for Quigley to tell him to get someone to Coal Creek to intercept Kellman and the illegal furs, wiped out with the suggestion that bootleg fur in the truck never would go through Coal Creek at all. There had

to be some other play; and it had to shape up fast. This was the time Luke Bond had forecast when Casey would be on his own; have to use his head.

"The swine!" said Jed Wilson hotly. "The dirty, low-down, money-mad swine! If you've got any reserves to bring up, Mister Felton, or whatever your real name may be, it's time to blow bugles and call out the cavalry."

"You're suggesting—" began Casey.

"I'm just saying," said Jed raspily, "that if you can cook up any way out of this, do it fast. If you've got any jokers or trumps, it's about time to play 'em."

"You could get out on the fender, pull connections on a couple of sparkplugs, and we could—"

"End up like Tip Carnahan did, sitting dead as hell in the car while it went over the cliffs and into the river ahead."

"You know the facts about that?" demanded Casey.

"Enough to burn Boots Kellman. Now do some other quick thinking, and do it fast. I wasn't close enough to hear what you and Quigley said this forenoon so I'm not as well informed as you are!"

Casey grappled with that. Jed Wilson had seen the meeting with Quigley. He'd not told Kellman. That was significant.

"Car coming," said Jed suddenly, and pointed toward the glow ahead. It was filmy brilliance over a rise in the road. "If you know what you're doing, do it now. There's a narrow culvert ahead."

Casey barely heard. The car coming must have seen the lights of his own car; those other lights had winked! Twice quickly, once slowly. Then what Jed had said hit him—a narrow culvert in the road just ahead. He saw the side rails of the little bridge; concrete rails.

"Hold on tight!" he said to Jed, and sent the car slewing in the gravel of the road. As he did, he wondered if he had seen that signal at all. Any car, bumping on this road, the front rising and falling, might have simulated light flashing as a switch turned. The car that had been coming, the light misty above the road, had simply disappeared. It was a rancher, turning into a side road down the highway—not Matt Quigley coming—if Quigley had believed enough even to start out.

The car's fenders raked, crumpled and bit into the concrete siderails of the narrow little bridge. The lights still burning revealed the sharp, jagged gorge under the bridge. For a moment Casey was piled hard against Jed Wilson. Then he clawed free.

Whatever broke now, it was in his hands; delay until Matt Quigley and his men came. Maybe not that. Quigley might not have decided to come at all. If he had, he'd have been this far out on the road by now.

The lights of Kellman's truck flooded over the car jammed between the bridge abutments. Casey got out. Kellman and Lefty leaped from the truck.

"Car skidded in loose gravel," said Casey.

"Skidded! The hell it did," broke out Lefty. "I told you Boots, there was something fishy—"

"Fishy and it stinks," rasped Kellman. "We're not taking any chances."

"No chances," echoed Lefty, and he drew a gun.

"Put that away, you fool," said Kellman. "This is another accident—like we lined up for Carnahan. Double this time. Car into this little canyon."

He made a sudden swishing motion, and his hand raised with a blackjack that started to crash on Casey's head. Jed Wilson was flying between them. He had a tire iron in his hand. It cracked on Boots' forearm. The big fellow bawled.

Casey pivoted, dodging. He saw the gun hand of Lefty sweeping back toward a shoulder holster. He threw all his weight, swinging. The gun exploded. The bullet sang wild. Lefty tried to slip the blow, but it landed flush. He sagged, buckled, fell.

Casey whirled. Kellman's uninjured hand had hold of Jed Wilson's windpipe and the little fellow writhed and struggled. Casey's toe touched the blackjack. He swooped, gripped, swung. It caught Kellman squarely and he sat back on the hard road.

"Very neat, for a couple of second hand heroes," gasped Jed Wilson. "What would you suggest as a next move?"

"Don't anyone move," said the voice of Matt Quigley. "I'll run the show from here on." The warden, coming from a car that had coasted in with unlighted head lamps, climbed around Casey's car. The other men, with drawn guns, followed.

Kellman, his bawling suddenly hushed, watched Matt Quigley go to the truck, a flashlight glow in the interior, and then Quigley came back, grinning a little.

"Luke Bond told me you might not hold out but start your own war," said Quigley as he stopped beside Casey.

"When did Luke—?" demanded Casey.

"This afternoon," said big Matt. "We let out the report he'd died after everyone was saying you did it, so Kellman here would figure you'd have to play all the way with him. It worked, apparently."

"It almost worked too well," said Casey thinly, and he went over to hold onto the side of the car to steady himself.

LUKE BOND'S face was nearly hidden with bandages as Casey and Jed Wilson entered to find Matt Quigley beside the hospital bed. Old Luke managed to smile.

"So you're both heading for Arizona," said Luke.

"After I talk to Bud Moore on long distance," said Casey. "Matt here agreed I could tell Bud about what happened and that his job's waiting when he walks again. Jed wound up the sale of his place just before we came up here. We're both free to travel unless we should stay for the trial."

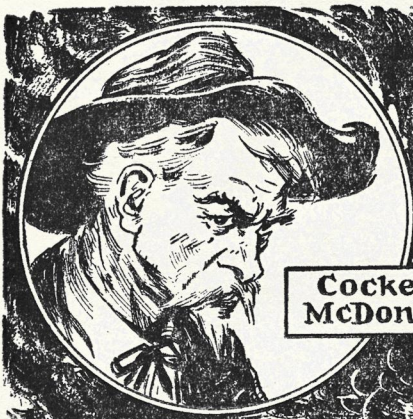
"Not necessary," said Quigley. "Kellman, Ace Gordon and Lefty are all trying to buy light sentences by spilling everything they know. Kellman's nailed with the murder of Carnahan and framing Bud Moore, Gordon's wanted in Montana and Lefty's admitted shotgunning Luke since he's found the charge against him isn't murder."

"Then Jed's free to go—?" began Casey.

"Threw in on the right side when the real squeeze came, didn't he?" countered Luke. "That and what you've told us sort of balances the books for Jed."

They were shaking hands. It was good to see Jed Wilson's shoulders squared up and his chin lifted. The highway to other places was open and calling. But Casey knew, when he hit out with Jed he'd leave behind the uncertainty and unrest that had shadowed him when he had walked into The Mint Club to meet old Luke Bond. Something lost, something gained—all to the good.

*Flying Was Joe Fielding's
Game—Not Electioneering,
Prospecting or Coddling
Any Old Timer Like
the North's Cockeye
McDonald*



**Cockeye
McDonald**



SATAN FROM CARIBOO LAKE

By H. S. M. KEMP

WHEN Joe Fielding bought an old tin Junkers and launched his Aurora Flying Service, he thought he had the world by the tail. But later when repair-bills for the old kite began to pile up, he

found himself wondering if that wasn't where the world had him. He didn't know if the ship was jinxed, or if she was about ready to fall to pieces; but the crystalization of his worries came when he found himself discussing the matter with Charles Stubbs,

The meeting was in Joe Fielding's combined workshop-office down on the shore of Whiterock Lake. Stubbs, traveling agent for the finance company, seemed sympathetic; but none knew better than Joe Fielding that the wheels of commerce couldn't operate on sympathy alone. As Charles Stubbs put it, "We want to give you ex-servicemen every break, but there's our shareholders to think about, too."

Joe agreed. "How much do I still owe 'em?"

"Twelve hundred dollars and sixty cents."

"The sixty cents could be handled," Joe said with a grin. "It's the twelve hundred that's worrying me."

Stubbs, who was beefy and prosperous-looking, rapped the ash from his cigar and asked what the trouble was. "No business?"

Joe laughed. "I've got business. More than I can handle. The trouble's in the kite herself. I'm replacing parts in her all the time. And the way they soak you for parts, you'd think they were studded with diamonds."

Stubbs knew. Or said he did. But he pointed out that the ship had been certified airworthy at time of sale.

Joe agreed, moodily. "I've told myself that. And I've told myself that the company I bought her from wouldn't gyp a guy. But I know something else—and that's for every hour she's in the air, she's two hours in the shop. Dunno," he shrugged; "mebbe she's just a lemon."

"Could be," agreed Stubbs. "Like, sometimes, with a car. How much," he asked, "did she set you back?"

"Thirty-five hundred. I put my war-gratuity into her, and you fellers are carrying me for the balance."

Stubbs looked wise. "Man can't expect much for thirty-five hundred. Not for this bush-flying racket of yours."

Joe said, cynically, "I should have bought a Constellation. Or one of those new D.C. jobs. Only trouble is a caviar appetite don't go with a ham-and-egg bankroll."

But Stubbs came down to hardpan at last. "I see your point; but what am I going to tell the company? You're slipping behind in your payments all the time, and I should get something."

"I can give you a hundred," offered Joe.

"Mebbe a hundred-and-fifty. That'll mean Blondie Simpson'll have to roll 'em thinner for a while and the rest of us won't eat."

Stubbs quirked an eyebrow. "You married?"

"Yeah. Celebrated getting back from overseas that way."

"And the 'rest' of you's the family?"

Joe squinted, laughed. "Not so fast, chum. The family can wait till I get this white elephant paid for." He explained, "Blondie's the mechanic; one of my ground-crew boys overseas. I pay him what I can, and he eats with us. But like I said, if you lift that hundred-and-fifty off me, there won't none of us eat."

Stubbs grinned. "Yeah; I know. I'm a dirty name. But I'd best make out a receipt for that one-fifty."

OUTSIDE, with Stubbs gone, Joe Fielding leaned against the door-jamb and scowled across Whiterock Lake. The lake itself, with its sun-tipped, dancing white-caps and spruce-and-rock shoreline, would have gladdened an artist's heart; but Joe was a bush-flyer with little of poetry in him, and any beauty in the scene was totally eclipsed by the battered old Junkers riding on her floats at the ramp.

Was a time, probably, when she had been a great old craft. She had been a thing of beauty and a joy to her original owners. But she'd been flown and flown and flown; and although she looked good at a cursory examination, Joe had apparently bought her when she was just about ready for the scrap-pile.

He still owed twelve-hundred on her. Twelve hundred, plus sixty cents. Joe didn't know where the money was coming from; for, as he had intimated to Stubbs, every time he took her out, her earnings about equalled her repair-bill. Joe knew what he should have done. That was to have gone out on a limb for a thousand or so more and picked up something he knew was good. Like that later-model Junkers he was offered at six thousand. Like a Norseman he could still get at around seven.

But his musings were interrupted by the appearance of his wife and Blondie Simpson.

Beth Fielding was dark, wholesome, the sort that any man would fall for, even

though she'd have to watch her calories later on. She now gave Joe a smile and asked after Stubbs.

"He's gone," Joe told her, grimly. "And my last hundred-and-fifty went with him."

"He took it?" She seemed amazed.

"That's what he came for," pointed out Joe. "You didn't think, did you, he was traveling for his health?"

She laughed, then. "You poor boy! Why didn't you give him the ship? You'd have been money ahead if you had."

"Y'can say that again!" put in Blondie Simpson.

Joe frowned at his mechanic helplessly. "But what can I do? I'm like the guy that grabbed the lion by the tail—I can't let go, and I can't hang on." He added, "But we must have reached the end of our troubles. Can't be much more to go wrong with her."

"Don't kid yourself," advised Blondie. "She'll find something. And it won't be spark-plugs, neither."

Joe scowled, chewed on Blondie's gloomy prediction; then once more his train of thought was disturbed. And this time the disturbance was an oldish man in whipcords who came around a corner of the workshop and asked for Joe Fielding.

Joe revealed himself, asked what he could do to oblige, and was informed that a word with him was requested.

Joe nodded. He led the way through the workshop and into the tiny office. He kicked the door to, indicated the only chair for his visitor and took a seat himself on the desk. "Smoke?" he suggested, pulled out and extended a packet of fags.

His visitor thanked him, refused, and began to cram a battered pipe with near-niggerhead tobacco. And that gave Joe Fielding a chance to size him up.

The man could have been sixty or sixty-five; a shortish, bow-legged old rockrat if Joe had ever seen one. His skin was leathery, his eyes blue; and there was something about his white mustache and little pointed beard that reminded Joe of pictures he'd seen of gun-totin' sheriffs of bygone days. Then those eyes were looking at him, as though doing a bit of sizing-up themselves. Joe noticed a slight outward cast in one of them.

"Name of McDonald," Joe's visitor sud-

denly told him. "Thought, mebbe, we could do a bit o' business together."

Joe said that was nice; then had to wait till Mr. McDonald got his pipe to going.

"Sure it's nice," McDonald said at last. "Business is nice any time. 'Specially when a feller's just got to set on his fanny to get it."

Joe was puzzled, so McDonald proceeded to explain.

"The way I heard it, you're s'posed to head over to Injun Narrers on Monday and fly a bunch of the boys to Trout Lake for the election."

Joe nodded. "That's right."

"Well," suggested McDonald, "what's it worth to sorta forget all about it?"

Joe mulled this over, frowned. "I still don't get it."

McDonald got up, opened the door to the workshop, closed it again. Resuming his seat, he said, "You ain't that dumb; but mebbe I got to lay her all out for you. So it's this way:

"Monday's election. Fred Wilton, a real guy, is in the runnin', and so's George Shaver—a loud-mouthed bum. Both's runnin' on the same ticket, 'count the other parties figger they ain't got no chance ag'inst 'em. But where Fred Wilton's out for the good of the country at large, George Shaver's out for himself."

Joe nodded. "And you're backing Fred Wilton."

"I ain't backin' nobody," McDonald corrected him. "I don't live hereabouts at all. But friends of mine do—and I gen'ly stand by my friends."

Joe nodded again. "Okay. Go ahead."

McDONALD became more confidential. "Here's the set-up. This George Shaver is a rip-roarin', tub-thumpin' blowhard. Party or principle don't mean a thing to him. But he's got a knack of securin' what he goes after. And right now he's got an iron in the fire. Mebbe," suggested McDonald, "you've heard of his Muskeg River scheme."

Joe Fielding admitted he had. "Something to do with a big rat-ranch, isn't it? Some sort of a muskrat-conservation project?"

"Conservation' nothin'!" snorted old McDonald. "It's a glorified swindle to grab

the best rat-trappin' in the country for himself! The way it is now, a dozen Indian and halfbreed families trap on the Muskeg River and have done for years. It's their home, their reg'lar huntin' grounds. Trap-pin' there the way they do, nobody else butts in on 'em. But George Shaver don't like it. He ain't content with his minin'—and tradin'-activities; he wants into the fur-ranchin' business. But instead of leasin' a chunk of land, stockin' it and waitin' for Nature to take her course, he figgers to grab this territory and hog it for himself."

"But can he do it?"

"Sure he can do it! Mebbe the Guv'ment won't want to give way, but George'll holler and beller and pose as the savior of the rat-market till they'll be glad to do anything to shut him up. Then he's got friends—guys in this country who'll swear to anything he says. And you take a dozen 'r so loud-mouthed yaps preachin' ruin for the Muskeg River country if George don't take over, and public opinion 'll begin to get uneasy, too."

Joe put a match to his cigarette and thought over McDonald's recital. Finally, he asked, "But where do I come in? These ten or fifteen guys I haul in from Indian Narrows can't affect the outcome of a whole election?"

"They can't eh?" McDonald looked canny. "Well, that's just what you think. But me and a lot of other guys think different. In this scattered constituency, there ain't more'n three hundred votes all together. Over on the east side, in George Shaver's territory, they'll all go for him; but on the west side, they'll be strong for Fred Wilton. And where ten or fifteen votes might not have much effect on the whole three hundred, they might cut quite a nick into a mere split of a hundred and fifty. And the boys figger the thing'll run as close as that."

Joe Fielding gave a grunt. "How did previous elections go?"

"Five years ago," McDonald told him, "the lucky guy made it by a majority of twenty-four. Ten years ago, another guy got in by six. This time, she'll prob'ly be just as close. That's why we're concerned with them ten-fifteen votes up at Injun Narrers. If they was apt to be a fifty-fifty prop'sition, we'd say to heck with it and

take a chance; but she ain't apt to be like that. Them fellers up there are all drillin' on George Shaver's Princess Royal claims. They're all Shaver men, and naturally they'll vote for the boss."

"Yeah," said Joe. "I see. But I still don't see where you come in."

McDonald seemed to lose patience. "Listen!" he growled. "It don't matter to you where I come in! I belong up at Cariboo Lake, two hundred and fifty miles north-west o' here. But I'm down in this one-horse town on business, and I got plenty friends around here, too. At least, I got 'em on the Muskeg River. Them Nitchies was good to me in the old days when I was prospectin' up in their country, and I'll fight for 'em every time. So when I hear of the bald-faced steal George Shaver figgers on pullin' off, I reckon it's time I set in."

Joe Fielding reached over and ground out his cigarette on the cold stove-top. "I get a hundred dollars a trip for flying those men to Trout Lake and back again. It'll mean two trips. And that's two hundred dollars."

"Two hundred, eh?" McDonald scrubbed his wispy beard. "My way, you'll make five. And by what I hear around town, five hundred right now'd come in pretty handy."

Joe Fielding's face toughened. "Been doing a bit of snooping?"

"Snoopin'?" jeered McDonald. "Don't flatter yerself! I heard all about it before I'd been ten minutes in the place. Ast a guy what airline was flyin' outa here, and he said you was—till you broke your neck in that torn-down crate or the finance people took you over."

The toughness in Joe Fielding's face extended to his heart. The old Junkers was a liability, but no outsider was going to kick her around.

"No soap!" he told McDonald, shortly. "Not interested. Anyway, I wouldn't care for a cell in a jail."

"Jail!" Old McDonald's snort was one of pure contempt. "Who's talkin' jail? All you got to do is to put the old plane on the bum so's you can't fly in there, and every-thing's hunky-dory."

Neat, thought Joe grimly; pretty neat. And when he cooled down a bit, he told himself McDonald was right. He could use the five hundred; and if he took it and

carried out McDonald's scheme, no one would be any the wiser. But then he wondered if he needed five hundred just that bad. Taking it meant breaking a contract, going back on his word. George Shaver might be the biggest crook unhung, but if he welshed on him, it meant putting five hundred dollars ahead of principle.

But it was a temptation; and this little Satan from Cariboo Lake put things in a plausible light. Too plausible, in fact. And Joe knew if he dwelt on them too long, he might weaken. So—

"Nothing doing," he said shortly. "Thanks for your offer, but I'm not for sale."

"Y'ain't, eh?" Old McDonald looked at him searchingly, drilled him with one, at least, of his cold blue eyes. "Not if the price was upped?"

"Not if you upped it to ten thousand," was Joe's flat answer. "It's just as I told you. I'm not for sale."

For almost a full minute, it seemed to Joe, the two tried to stare each other down; then McDonald got to his feet, yanked his old felt hat over his eyes and headed for the door. But there he turned.

"You was in the Air Force, wasn't you?" he asked.

Joe nodded.

"Bomber pilot?" pressed McDonald.

Joe nodded again.

"No wonder we won the war!" was McDonald's sour comment. "With a bunch of thick-skulled kids who didn't know when they was licked, we couldn'ta done nothin' else!"

IN TIME, Joe walked up the town's one street, turned left and came to his small three-room dwelling. Beth was there, humming to herself as she prepared the noonday meal.

Joe clumped into a chair, shoved his hat to the back of his head and began gnawing on his lip. She faced him, asked, "Whatever's the matter?"

But she had to ask twice before her question registered; then he asked if Blondie was around. When she said he had gone to get a haircut, he told her the story of McDonald's visit and his offered bribe.

"And when I turned him down, the old coot got mad."

She was silent a moment, thoughtful. "McDonald. From Cariboo Lake. Would that be 'Cockeye' McDonald? You know, the man Bill Harris was telling you about yesterday—the old prospector who staked the Consolidated property up there years ago and sold out for a hundred thousand?"

Joe's eyes narrowed. "By golly—that'd be him, all right! Sure; Cockeye McDonald. They say he's quite a character."

"He's quite a character if he tried to bribe you to wreck an election," was Beth's flat comment. "I'm glad you turned him down!"

"Yeah. So'm I," agreed Joe. "Only I don't feel so righteous about it as I did. What I mean, we know George Shaver. He'd swipe a beggar's tin cup if he thought he could use it. And maybe this old Cockeye McDonald knows more about the Muskeg River project than most of us do. But still—I agreed to fly those guys over to Trout Lake for George Shaver and I can't turn him down now. Feller's got to draw the line somewhere."

So, when election-day dawned, Joe Fielding was up bright and early.

But the day itself wasn't so bright. A squally wind blew from the southeast, with low-hanging clouds and a dirty drizzle. There was little or no ceiling, but the weather-reports promised a clearing by noon. Noon would only give Joe half a day for the trip to Indian Narrows and the double trip from there to Trout Lake; but Joe figured he could make it and with time to spare.

But he reckoned without the caprices of the old kite. On his first trip to the polls, he ran into a heavy rain-squall. The engine hiccupped, spluttered, and promised to go dead on him. And when the symptoms worsened, Joe shoved the nose of the plane towards a little pot-hole of a lake.

It was well that he did; for when he was a thousand feet above it and a mile or so from it, the engine gave a dying cough and yielded up the ghost.

He hit water, and the momentum of his landing carried him to within fifty yards of shore. One of the drillcrew got out on a pontoon with a paddle and so completed the trip.

They all got out, dragged the ship up onto the pebbly beach so that Joe might

be able to start his diagnosis. When he discovered it, he gave it to them—"Water in the mag."

They looked sympathetic. And dumb. One wanted to know if it was anything that could be fixed. Joe said yes, if he had any tools to work with. And when he resurrected, from the depths of the cabin, a screwdriver, a pair of pliers and an assortment of sorry wrenches, intuition told him that things didn't look good for George Shaver.

Which was the way it turned out. With proper tools and facilities, he would have had a fair job on his hands. But without those proper tools and with only the pebbly shoreline for a bench, he did miserably. He skinned his knuckles, dropped screws and parts among the pebbles and lost precious minutes looking for them; and by the time he had the magneto dissembled, dried-out, assembled and in place again, the hands of his wrist-watch showed exactly seven minutes to six.

Joe could have howled. The poll closed on the dot of six; and from his present position to Trout Lake was at least a fifteen-minute flight. This did not include taxiing for a take-off nor landing at the other end; so with disaster leering at him, all that was left was confession.

"Guess you've had it," he told the drill-crew. "It's going on for six; and the polls will close before we get in the air. So—I guess I might as well fly you back again."

The drill-boys were very nice about it. With doubtful loyalty to George Shaver, they agreed that whoever won the election was no skin off their nose; and the main worry seemed more concerned with getting safely back to camp than the political fortunes of the boss.

JOE got back to camp; and he got back to town. But he was glad that George Shaver was waiting for the election results out in the city rather than within the precincts of Whiterock Lake. For when, at noon of the day following, the results were made known, George Shaver was an also-ran by the narrow margin of eleven.

"Eleven votes," mused Joe. "And there were fourteen votes up at that Indian Narrows camp. Yes, I gotta dodge George for a few days, at least."

As a matter of fact, Joe Fielding felt like dodging everybody. All he had earned by yesterday's trip was the ride, a few skinned knuckles and a lot of work. So when a rap came on the screen door and he found Cockeye McDonald grinning at him, his heart went down with a plunk.

But he heaved up from the dinner-table, shoved over, and said, "Well?"

Cockeye's grin widened. "Busy? Because if you can come down to the office for a moment, I'd like a word with you."

Joe Fielding grudgingly obeyed. Inside, with the door still open, he turned to the old-timer. "Something else?" he suggested.

For answer, Cockeye dropped a roll of money on the desk-top. "Count her," he said. "Make sure she's all there."

Joe looked at the roll; at McDonald. "What's that for?" he asked.

"As per contract," indicated Cockeye. "Five hundred simoleons. And I'm glad," he added, "you showed some sense."

Joe's frown deepened. "Showed some sense?" Then he gave a short, hard laugh. "You've got your wires crossed. I never made a contract with you. Things just worked out that way."

Cockeye gave a knowing cackle. "That's the idea! And nobody won't learn no different from me."

The cackle got under Joe Fielding's skin. "Look!" he said shortly. "I flew up there, see? And I took on a load. But halfway to Trout Lake I ran into rain and mag. trouble. Had to come down. And by the time I got things fixed, the polls were just about closed."

Cockeye's chuckle was one of pure delight. "Attaboy! You keep tellin' 'em that, and nobody'll think anything else!" He clapped Joe on the shoulder and turned for the door.

Joe grabbed him, spun him around. Joe was blazing mad now, and it showed in his eyes.

"This has gone far enough!" he announced. "I did my best to get the crew over to Trout Lake in time to vote. I didn't make it; but don't credit me. With any luck at all, I'd have had George Shaver handing out the cigars right now." He grabbed the roll of bills, tried to shove them into the pocket of Cockeye's shirt.

But the old-timer slapped his hand away.

25

"Keep yer paws off me!" Then, as they stood glaring at each other, a look of slow disgust came into the old man's eyes.

"For Pete's sake! You have a breakdown, a first-class alibi and a chance to grab yourself some easy dough, and you get squeamish about it!" He shook his head. "Of all pinheaded fools— Here! Shove the dough in your jeans! You need it! And by th' holy mackinaw, it's worth five hundred of any man's money to see George Shaver get a kick in the pants!"

For a bare moment Joe hesitated; but only for a moment. Then he grabbed Cockeye by a fistful of shirt, hauled him towards him and held the roll of bills an inch from his nose.

"Listen to me!" he snarled. "I never hired out to you. I don't know you from Adam. And I don't want your rotten money! Now here—" He took the bills and crammed them down the open neck of Cockeye's shirt. "You got 'em again, see? And you're keeping 'em! And if you ever try to buy me again—for five hundred or five million—I'll send you up the river for fifteen years!" He spun the old man around, faced him to the open door, and said "Scram!"

Cockeye scrambled. At least, he stepped outside the building, dug out and pocketed the bills, and tucked in his shirt at the waist. But as he turned to leave, he snugged the old felt hat down over his eyes, spat, and gave a harsh and derisive laugh.

"Buy you, did you say? I wouldn't buy you for thirty cents! No, by golly, not with your old crate thrown in!"

FOR a month after that, it looked as though things had taken a turn for the better. A fair amount of work came Joe's way, and he was blest with comparatively free-of-trouble flying. His wife, who believed in that sort of thing, told him it was honesty bringing its own reward. Blondie, who didn't believe in it at all, laid much of the credit to his own ability to keep 'em flying. He said he'd got the old kite licked, and promised that they were over the hump. But Joe merely hoped, and kept his fingers crossed.

But he admitted they were making a little money. They ate regularly and well, and it looked as though he might be able to pay

for the kite while she was still able to take to the air. Then, like a shadow on a sunny day, Cockeye McDonald crossed his path again.

This time there was no smile on Cockeye's face. The old-timer was all business. With an Indian, he came down to the ramp and said he wanted to be flown into Crawfish Lake.

Joe heard his request with a nod. "Okay," he agreed. "I'll fly you in mebbe next Tuesday."

Cockeye answered, "You'll fly me in right now."

There was a pause, as each sized the other up. Then Joe gave a slight smile, "And what makes you think I'll fly you in there right now?"

"Because there ain't no way out of it," Cockeye shot at him, tartly. To explain his point, he went on. "You got a franchise for flyin' this country; and the franchise calls for a trip into Crawfish Lake every week."

Joe gave a grunt. "I know that. But there's no point flying there if there's nothing doing. Next week, though, I've got a load for Windy River. I pass within a few miles of Crawfish, and I figured on dropping in there then."

Cockeye shrugged, and his eyes hardened. "I ain't interested in your future plans. All I know is you're s'posed to take a trip to Crawfish every week and you ain't been there for a month. So howzabout it? Do we head in there, or don't we?"

Joe began to boil. "Getting technical eh? Going to stand on your rights?"

Cockeye pulled out a wallet and extracted three twenty-dollar bills. "I'm buyin' two fares for Crawfish Lake," he said, shortly. "Do I get 'em, or do I take it up with the Transport Board?"

Joe's eyes narrowed. There were so many things he'd like to do to this waspish little runt. "Wise guy, eh?" he snarled. "Got the drop on me this time and going to pull the trigger!"

"Why not?" Cockeye countered. "The way I bin hearin' things, George Shaver wonders why *he* never thought of runnin' an airline: George didn't make the election, but he's still got plenty friends. And if you was to lose your franchise, George wouldn't lose no time pickin' it up."

Joe said, "Aw, skip it! I'm getting tired of hearing you talk!"

It was disturbing, humiliating. Every time he bumped into Cockeye McDonald, Joe Fielding was left with a bad taste in his mouth. This trip to Crawfish Lake with Cockeye and the Nitchie wouldn't be much of a paying proposition. The fare was the thirty dollars each that Cockeye had offered, but such a fare was generally incidental to a full pay-load. Tuesday, with a pay-load for Windy River, Joe would gladly have dropped off a pair of passengers at Crawfish Lake at the regular price. The sixty bucks would be velvet. But Cockeye couldn't wait for that. By bribery or by blackmail, Cockeye had to have what he wanted—and right at the time he wanted it.

SO with his two passengers and their packs, Joe made the trip and landed at the tiny settlement. There was an Indian-managed Hudson's Bay outpost and a scatter of teepees; and as Cockeye made to leave the plane, he turned to Joe Fielding.

"Tuesday, you say you'll be here again?"

"Wednesday," retorted Joe. "And you want to be ready when I get here. I don't kill time at stop-over."

"Busy little man!" grunted Cockeye. "Well, we won't hold you up."

Joe felt like opening the windows of the plane once Cockeye had gone. He wanted clean air, air that was free. Just why he hated Cockeye so much, Joe didn't know. It wasn't so much the bribe at their first meeting, not so much Cockeye's rat-trap, dictatorial manner. It was something deeper than that. It was the manner Cockeye seemed to have of jeering at him; of treating him like a wet-eared kid who didn't know what it was all about. Mostly it was pique—memories of money offered, of money scorned. Of five hundred dollars that Cockeye would be carrying around with him when it might just as well have been Joe Fielding's. Joe didn't want the money, wouldn't touch it if he could, but he was human enough to hate seeing it go back into Cockeye's pocket again.

"Aw, forget him!" Joe counselled himself. "Both him and his lousy five hundred—!"

Wednesday turned out to be one of the foulest days of the year. Joe de-

cided to tie up at Windy River till the rain quit and the skies cleared off. Then a perverse whim of devilishness took hold of him. He remembered Cockeye McDonald waiting for him at Crawfish Lake.

There wasn't much at Crawfish; and once his visit was concluded, Cockeye would be glad to get out of there again. Well, he'd have his chance. And if he didn't care to accept it, he could sit and twiddle his thumbs in the place for another seven-day wait.

So, bucking a head-wind and rain that lashed at the windshield, Joe managed to follow the points and islands and landed at Crawfish Lake without shearing off his pontoons.

The village was in a bay, so in fairly smooth water he slid up on the sandy beach and waited for what would transpire. In time, as though from curiosity, the door of the Hudson's Bay store opened, and the figure of Cockeye McDonald trudged down through the rain.

He stopped, held his hat against the sweep of the wind and asked why Joe didn't get out.

Joe slid back the window, "Get out? What'd I want to get out for? I'm heading for town."

"In—in weather like this?"

"Why not?" Joe countered. "So get your stuff, and let's go!"

Cockeye hedged. He looked at the low-hanging, leaden clouds and figured it was a mite risky for flyin'.

"Look!" Joe said. "You're the gent that demanded I fly on schedule. Okay; so I'm doing it. Now—d'you travel, or do you wait till next week?"

Cockeye hesitated. Feller shouldn't hafta break his neck to keep to schedule. And if Joe cared to wait over, he'd pay him for the waiting.

Joe felt a little surge of triumph. This was Cockeye's turn to back-water. Joe felt pretty good. He looked at the rivulet running from Cockeye's hatbrim and said he was pulling out as soon as he could get turned around. And Cockeye gave in.

"I get it!" he snarled. "You figure you got the laugh on me! Well, no young punk with a flyin' banana-crate laughs at Cockeye McDonald. I'll be with you just as soon as I can fetch my blankets!"

It took less than five minutes; then with the help of a couple of Indians who followed Cockeye from the store, the plane was nosed towards the open lake.

"Your sidekick?" suggested Joe.

"Lives here," grunted Cockeye. "So you'll only have one neck to break instead o' two. Or two instead o' three."

Joe turned with a grin. "Mebbe we'll be lucky—if the banana-crate don't fall apart."

That was the last word spoken for a long, long time. Joe revved up his engine, and, picking up speed, they roared out of the little bay.

They hit a whitecap. The ship bounced crazily. She hit another, and two more after that. Joe caught her as she bounced; and they were in the air. After that it meant but a steady climb to two hundred feet then holding her there and cutting from point to point down the length of Crawfish Lake.

Joe shot a glance at the old-timer in the chair beside him. Cockeye was leaning forward as far as his safety-belt would allow him, lips a grim line and his eyes squinting ahead. Good enough, thought Joe. The old buzzard asked for it; let him sweat it out.

But from then on he had to give his whole attention to the job in hand. And a full-time job it was. Rain lashed down, and great blasts of wind rocked the ship from stem to stern. Even though he was able to brace himself against the rudder-bars and the wheel, Joe felt his own safety-belt biting deeply. Beside him, in a flicking glance, he saw old Cockeye was faring worse. His jaw was knotted, as he stared at the tree-tops and the slaty-gray water.

Suddenly, the ship seemed to pancake. They were following the course of an unnamed river. Joe thought it was curtains, and he felt the tufts of spruce-trees slapping against the floats. Then, as suddenly, they were tossed up again like paper-ash from a fire.

Old Cockeye let out his breath. His face was chalky. "Better go up, kid," he gulped.

Joe thought so too, and tried it. But at four hundred feet the lake and the shoreline, the river and the muskegs dissolved in streaky clouds. He came down again. Better to take a chance on the water and

the tree-tops than get off-course altogether.

So they rocked along. The rain diminished, increased; and once Joe had to slide back his window and stick his head out to see anything at all. He prayed now, of all times, the old ship wouldn't get temperamental or come up with some of her hidden ailments. For if she did, they'd have it.

But the old bus seemed to welcome the challenge. Every so often a blast of wind smashed her full on the nose. She reeled, grunted, but doggedly righted herself. Struts creaked, a fire-extinguisher on the wall swung like a pendulum, and the wheel jumped in Joe's stiff fingers. Once they almost crashed into the side of a birch-covered hill. Joe hurdled it at the last minute. And for a second time he felt the slap of trees. And when there were no trees to worry over, there was always the wind and the heaving, slate-colored waves.

An hour went by; two. Spruce and birch gave way to poplar. There were the buildings of a sawmill, and a winding bush-road plotting Joe's course into town—

He roared over the settlement, hit the waves of Whiterock Lake, bounced and roiled and settled. Then he taxied into the lee, ticked over slowly, edging towards the ramp. And Blondie Simpson was hurrying down to take charge of things.

Cockeye McDonald sat for a long minute. He seemed to be getting his breath. Then he glanced across at Joe Fielding in the pilot's chair.

"Enjoy yourself?"

"Sure," grinned Joe. "Why not?"

"Nothin'. Only," observed Cockeye, in a tone of gentle chiding, "you went to a lot of trouble to make a monkey outa me."

FIVE days later, Joe Fielding made another trip into Crawfish Lake. This time his passengers were a couple of close-mouthed mining-men who chartered the plane outright. The trip was uneventful, but when he landed at the northern outpost, Joe found three other planes there ahead of him. Two of them, a Fairchild and a Waco, came from Edmonton, while the third, an old Bellanca, had flown in from Winnipeg. When he asked what it all meant, Joe learned he was in the lead of a brand-new gold-rush.

Zowie, thought Joe, this is for me! But

when he wandered back into the bush, he discovered he didn't know what he was hunting for or what gold in the rock looked like. Nor did he get any help from the others. They were too busy scratching for themselves to waste much time on him. But the pilot of the Waco told him something.

"Forget it, chum," the pilot said. "I've seen these gold-rushes before. Half of them should never have started, and the other half peter out. Take a tip from Uncle Josh—run your fares up double and do your staking with the kite."

Joe did. In the next month he flew a steady shuttle-service between Whiterock Lake and Crawfish and spent more time in the air than on the ground. By a miracle, the old crate hung together without so much as losing a bolt. Joe paid up Blondie what he owed him and had just about enough left over to square the finance company. Then, free of worries for the first time since leaving the service, Fate dealt him a joker off the bottom of the deck.

It happened on a charter-flight to the far end of Crawfish Lake. His charterers were a couple of big-time operators from Toronto and a stringy Swede named Olson. Olson seemed to know his way around, for it was under his direction that the choice of landing was made. They cut lines all day, camped in a tent at night, and awoke the next morning to find a touch of frost in the air. Following breakfast, Joe decided to warm up the engine while they struck camp and got their gear together.

He left the engine ticking over and was shoving his pillow into his packsack when he was aware of a dull, sodden roar. Puzzled, he went out of the tent—and ran into calamity head-on. The Junkers was afire.

He stared, gulped. From the engine, flames and oily-black smoke rolled upward; the windows shimmered in the heat. He remembered the extinguisher hanging beside the pilot's chair. He sprang forward, just as a gas-tank let go.

The flaming liquid shot high, fell around him; then the whole cabin was ablaze. All he could do was to stand there and watch his savings and his earnings go up in smoke.

And it didn't take long. There was another explosion, another inky cloud; and in

ten minutes all that was left was a blackened, burned-out hulk.

One of the men spoke to him. "What happened?"

Joe, grim-eyed, shook his head. "Dunno. A short, mebbe. Gas-leak—"

The Swede said, "And how do we get outa here?"

But they got out. A few minutes later a low-flying plane circled the spot. It landed, taxied in. The pilot looked at Joe. "Your own? Tough." He added, "Any insurance?"

Joe said, "You kiddin'?"

But the worst was having to face Beth and Blondie. Joe flew out on the rescue-plane and surprised them at their mid-morning coffee in the house. They stared at him; and he told them.

Beth said nothing. Blondie rolled himself a cigarette. In the silence, Joe shed his coat and dropped into a chair. Blondie finally said, "Tough break, Joe. But if you ask me, you're well out of it."

Joe said, "Yeah? Well out of thirty-five hundred, too!"

"'Tain't the money. What I mean," Blondie went on, "that kite was a hoodoo ever since you bought her. She was wore out and she was due to pile up in the bush some place." He added, "I'd have told you, only it wouldn't have done no good."

Joe sighed. "Should have had more sense, I guess. Feller can't go into this game on a shoestring." He looked at Beth; and she gave him a smile of tender sympathy.

"But it was worth trying, Joe. And you can always try again."

"On what? My reputation?"

But Blondie had an idea, and he offered it.

"Skyways are sellin' one of their Norsemen and puttin' a flyin'-boat on the job. She's in A-1 shape, and a feller could buy her cheap."

"And what," asked Joe, "do I use for money?"

THEN Blondie made his suggestion. "You never knew it before, but I got twenty-five hundred bucks salted away. Some's my re-establishment credit, some's my savings, and twelve hundred of her I won playin' crown-and-anchor on the ship comin' home." When Joe stared at him,

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he colored a bit. "She was yours any time you wanted it—but not to put in no lemon like the old crate. And she's yours if you want it now."

Something hit Joe below the belt. He stared at Blondie, till the mechanic flushed to the roots of his yellow hair. "Did anybody," he asked him, "ever tell you that you're one grand guy?"

"Aw, forget it!" growled Blondie, and wriggled awkwardly. "What I mean, if you dig up, say, another thousand, Skyways'd carry you for the balance."

"And where'll I dig it up?" asked Joe. "Peddle the furniture? I guess not. The lady-friend's entitled to a home."

Joe read the writing on the wall. This was it; he'd had it. So far as his airline-dreams were concerned, he was all washed up. And all broken up, so far as Blondie Simpson was concerned. Blondie and he had been together a long, long time, and now Blondie would have a chance to earn the real wages that Joe had never been able to pay him.



Joe wasn't the worrying sort. At least, he hadn't been in his single days. He'd been broke lots of times, and had always survived. But now he was married; and there was a half-decent break coming to Beth.

Beth hadn't wanted him to go flying at all. Anyway, hadn't wanted him to sink his money into the old Junkers. She had advised against it, tried to dissuade him; and now that he had gone ahead in his own bullheaded way and ended in disaster, she had not one little word of reproach for him. As Blondie went out, Joe went over to where she was gathering up the used dishes. He put an arm around her shoulders, pressed his cheek against hers.

"Say it, kid. It's coming to me."

She reached up, squeezed his fingers. "There's nothing to say, Joe. Except that, like Blondie, I'm glad it's all over. And

twenty years from now we'll laugh at all this."

Then Joe turned quickly, at a discreet cough behind him.

THERE was a man on the other side of the screen door, a character who could have stepped right out of a comic-strip. He was about fifty years of age, all of five feet tall, and built on the lines of a beerkeg. His face was sweaty and scorched by the sun, he wore whipcords and monstrous high boots, a huge red scarf was knotted around his neck, and he carried—of all things—an umbrella.

Joe stared at the apparition and wondered what nut-hatch he'd escaped from. Then the man was smiling and asking if Joe Fielding lived there.

"He does," admitted Joe. "And come right in."

Beth, blank puzzlement on her face, offered a chair, and their visitor sat down. He pulled a scarf from his pocket, twin to the one around his neck, and scrubbed his sweaty brow.

"Hot," he offered. "And going to rain. That's why I brought the umbrella along." He laid the thing across his short, fat thighs and favored Joe with a glance that was suddenly agate-hard. "Want to talk to you, young fella," he announced. "Business."

"Yeah?" Joe gave a grunt. "Well, if it's a flying trip, you're out of luck."

"Not interested in flying. Not any more. Interested in mineral claims." Then he almost barked the word, "Yours!"

Joe frowned at him, shot a glance at Beth, then decided to get into the spirit of things. The guy was a nut, all right, but it wouldn't do any harm to kid him along. So he said, "All right. Shoot!"

"Borden's the name. Henry Borden. Just got back from Crawfish Lake. Flew in there yesterday from Winnipeg. Great country; great possibilities." Then as though he had said too much, Henry Borden suddenly scowled. "But those claims of yours—what'll you take for 'em?"

Joe scowled, too, and wondered what to say next. After a moment, Henry Borden prompted him.

"Well, spit it out! Not tongue-tied, are you?"

Joe didn't like the tone. Moreover, back

in his mind was the worry of the burned-out Junkers; so to cut the matter short, he said, "Ten thousand."

"Ten thousand?" Henry Borden almost screeched. "Ten thousand—for three miserable claims that haven't been test-drilled!" He glared at Joe, said suddenly, "I'll give you five."

Joe said promptly, "You'll give me ten."

"Seven-fifty!"

"Ten."

Henry Borden capitulated. "Okay. Ten. And it's the biggest swindle I've ever run into!" He slid to his feet, grabbed his umbrella and stared at Joe. "Well? What're we waiting for? Let's get over to the Land Office and fix it up!"

Joe turned, stared at Beth. Beth smiled whimsically back at him. "Run along!" she said. "And come straight home with the money."

Joe thought, "This screwy business has gone far enough." But just to find out where the wires were crossed, he walked with Henry Borden along to the rough-log Land Office. As he trotted beside him, Henry Borden said, "Sudden-death Borden, they call me down in Winnipeg. No hedging, no frittering. My motto's, 'Know what you want—and go after it!'"

Inside the office, Frank Struthers, the agent, was alone behind the counter. "Hi, Gents!" he greeted them. "What can I do for you?"

Henry Borden told him promptly. "Fielding's got claims. I'm buying 'em. Turn up your records and see if everything's correct."

Without batting an eye, Frank Struthers, said, "Oke." He lugged out a register that should have had wheels on it, wetted a thumb and riffled the pages. Then he stopped, peered, and said, "Right here."

He turned the volume so that Henry Borden—and Joe—could take a look at it. Joe did; then he stared up harshly at the agent.

"Just what is all this? I don't own any claims on Crawfish Lake!"

"The Eagle'; 'The Owl'; 'The Pelican'," intoned Frank Struthers. "And I always heard your name was Joe Fielding. And before I forget," he added, "I got a letter here for you."

It seemed to be quite handy, for he reached for the thing and passed it across.

Joe didn't recognize the scrawl on the envelope, but he ripped the cover open and read the note inside. It ran:

Dear Joe:

You're a pinheaded young rooster and you got not a lick of sense. But in a wicked world like this it's sure a pleasure to meet a kid as square as you are. These claims look good to me, but when you go to peddle them off to Hank Borden, don't let him gyp you. I wrote and told him you wouldn't sell for less than seven thousand so don't let the old skinflint slip one over on you.

Well, so long. Be seeing you some time. But just try getting me in a plane with you agin.

Cockeye.

There was a postscript.

P. S. You can leave the five bucks I paid for the license with Frank. He will send it to me.

Joe read the letter twice, his heart thumping against his ribs. When he could get his breath, he asked Frank Struthers, "Who—who wrote this? Cockeye McDonald?"

"Yeah," grinned Struthers. "Great old boy, Cockeye. Known him for years. Straight as a string. But you never know what he's going to do next."

Joe glanced again at the note. "He took out a license for me?"

Struthers nodded. "Took one out for himself, too. The three claims he staked, he's holding. Says he's in no hurry for the dough. And I guess he ain't—not with what he's got salted."

"And I owe him five bucks." Joe suddenly saw the humor of it. "Ten thousand dollars worth of claims—and I owe him five!"

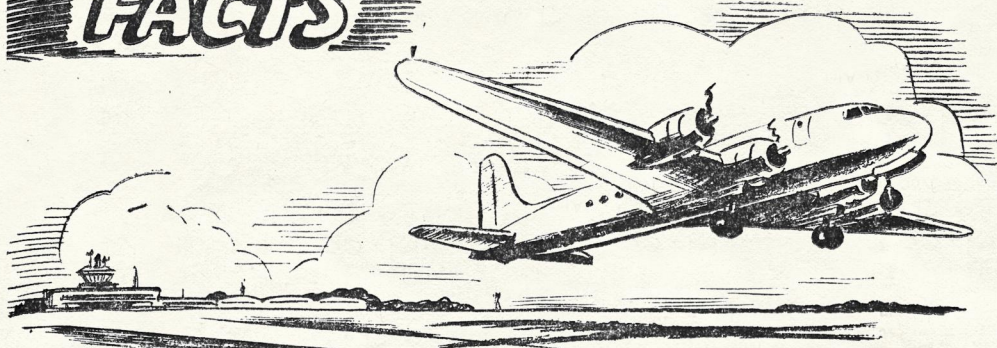
"The ten thousand is yours," Struthers pointed out. "The five is his."

"The name's his too," snapped Henry Borden. "McDonald. William Angus McDonald. Does that," he demanded, "sound like the big-hearted Irish to you?"

"By any name at all," said Joe Fielding softly, "he's too big-hearted for me!"

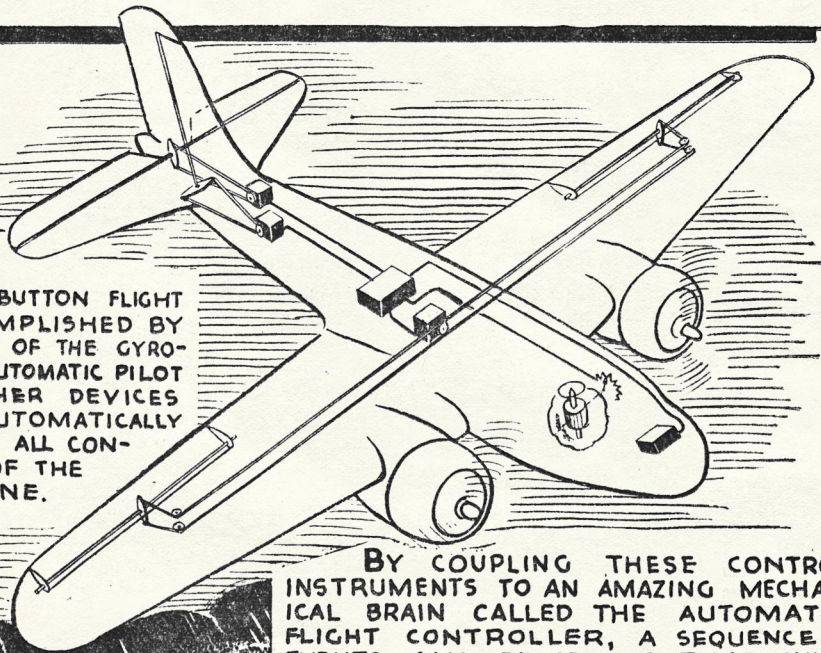
PLANE FACTS

BY Jiminy

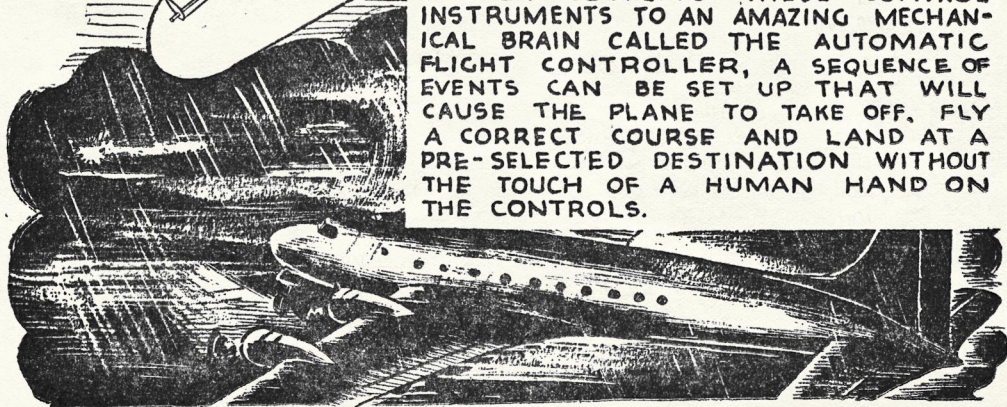


IN THE NOT TOO DISTANT FUTURE WEATHER WILL LOSE ITS POWER TO CRIPPLE FLYING. THE U.S. ARMY HAS COMBINED THE FLIGHT INSTRUMENTS OF THE COUNTRY'S LEADING AERONAUTICAL LABORATORIES TO CREATE A PUSH-BUTTON PLANE—A PLANE THAT FLIES WITHOUT A PILOT.

PUSH-BUTTON FLIGHT IS ACCOMPLISHED BY THE USE OF THE GYROSCOPE AUTOMATIC PILOT AND OTHER DEVICES THAT AUTOMATICALLY OPERATE ALL CONTROLS OF THE AIRPLANE.



BY COUPLING THESE CONTROL INSTRUMENTS TO AN AMAZING MECHANICAL BRAIN CALLED THE AUTOMATIC FLIGHT CONTROLLER, A SEQUENCE OF EVENTS CAN BE SET UP THAT WILL CAUSE THE PLANE TO TAKE OFF, FLY A CORRECT COURSE AND LAND AT A PRE-SELECTED DESTINATION WITHOUT THE TOUCH OF A HUMAN HAND ON THE CONTROLS.



THE MENACE OF SPIRIT RIVER

By W. C. TUTTLE

HASHKNIFE HARTLEY and Sleepy Stevens, two dusty, saddle-weary cowpokes, rode into the little railroad town of Buckhorn at sunset, and stabled their horses at the feed-corral. Buckhorn was at the head of Spirit River Valley, high up in the hills. Neither of them had ever been in Buckhorn before.

Hashknife was very tall, long-muscled and as straight as an arrow. He had a long, lean face, generous nose and a wide, thin-lipped mouth. His hair was of a neutral



*Sheep, Once They Get in,
Have the Same Rights as
Cows . . . And Hashknife
Knew It Only Too Well*



shade, one long, damp lock usually bisecting his forehead. There was nothing unusual about the features of Hashknife's Hartley—except his eyes.

They were a peculiar shade of gray, shading at times to the green-gray of very hard ice, and they seemed capable of seeing below the surface of things. Killers had looked into his eyes and forgot they ever owned a gun. They were not hypnotic, nor did Hashknife have any knowledge of hypnotism. A horse-thief told an Arizona sheriff, "He jist looked at me, and I said, 'Yeah, I stole that horse.' I dunno why I told him—except that I—I thought he knew I did."

Sleepy Stevens, Hashknife's bunkie for years, was just under six feet in height, broad of shoulder, long-armed, and slightly bow-legged. Sleepy was born to laugh and fight. He had a square jaw and blocky features, with grin-wrinkles predominating, and a pair of innocent-looking blue eyes which seemed to look upon the world in amazement. Those eyes, too, had fooled many folks.

In garb, they were alike. Well-worn, tight-fitting overalls, colorless shirts, stringy vests, high-heel boots and battered Stetsons. Even their gun-belts and holsters were hand-made, sans any sort of ornaments, and their wooden-handled Colt .45's were as plain as their garb.

They were not law-men, these two. They were, as Sleepy expressed it, "Cowpunchers of Disaster." Trouble seemed to dog them. Not their own, but the troubles of others. At times they worked for the law, but not often. The law, they long-ago decided, was not always justice.

They ate supper in a little restaurant. No one paid any attention to them. They were merely two more cowpokes in a country, where at least fifty percent of the men wore high-heels and guns. After supper they sauntered around the street, stretching their legs, and stopped at the little postoffice, where Hashknife got a letter.

It was marked "Hold," and had been received a week before. Sleepy glanced at the writing on the plain envelope, snorted



audibly and began manufacturing a cigarette, while Hashknife read the letter.

"I wonder how Bob knew where to write us," said Hashknife.

"He didn't," replied Sleepy. "That's what you might call a circ'lar letter. I'll betcha there's a dozen 'of 'em in different postoffices around the country."

"No, I don't believe it, Sleepy; this is just a personal note."

"Yea-a-a-ah? Personal. From Bob Marsh? Don't make me laugh. Him and his blasted Cattlemen's Association! Well, what's eatin' him now?"

"Nothin'. Just wonderin' what we're doin'. Says to give you his best regards, Sleepy."

"Best regards! What else does he say?"

"Oh, nothin' much. Says that if we ever drop into Spirit Valley, to be sure and see Frosty Winters. He says Frosty will be glad to stake us, or give us jobs. It's real nice of him."

"That's right neighborly of Frosty," agreed Sleepy, "but what's wrong down there?"

"Yo're a pessimist," grinned Hashknife.

"I'm an optimist, which is able to read the handwritin' on the wall, yuh mean. I wouldn't trust Bob Marsh as far as I could drop-kick an anvil. He knows blamed well that we won't work for his association, and he also knows that if you ever poke yore long nose into trouble, yuh won't pull it out, until the trouble is over."

"Frosty Winters sounds like real folks, Sleepy."

"Yeah—that's fine. Prob'ly is. But he's just bait, I tell yuh."

"All right," laughed Hashknife. "We don't have to go down into Spirit Valley. He didn't send us. All he said was—"

"I know what he said—the blasted insinuator."

BUCKHORN had little to offer in the way of entertainment, but Hashknife and Sleepy did not crave entertainment. It was midnight, when a passenger train stopped at Buckhorn, and three people got out of a Pullman. The depot agent helped carry their baggage down to the little hotel, where Hashknife and Sleepy were having a good night cigarette.

The two cowboys looked them over curi-

ously. One man, middle-age, one woman, ditto, and a very beautiful young lady. Both the man and the woman were portly, but the young lady decidedly was not. All of them were well dressed. The hotel clerk said:

"Mr. Van Ess! Why—isn't there anyone here to meet you?"

"There is not," replied Curt Van Ess sharply. "We shall take the morning stage to Spirit River. Two of your best rooms please."

"Yessir."

"And I hope they are clean, young man," added Mrs. Van Ess.

"Yes'm—I hope so. I'll pack yore valises."

"I'll stay down here and smoke a cigar," said Van Ess. "Be up later, my dear."

Curt Van Ess sat down near the two cowboys and lighted an expensive cigar. He had bushy eyebrows and jowls. Judging from his appearance, he also had money. Everything about the Van Ess family reeked of money.

The clerk came back, but there was no conversation. A horse came along the main street, traveling fast, and they heard the rider pull up at a hitch-rack across the street.

"Prob'ly some puncher who is behind in his drinkin'," said Sleepy soberly.

CURT VAN ESS got to his feet, tossed the cigar into a cuspidor and started for the stairs when the sound of a shot echoed against the buildings along the main street. "The effect of that drink must have affected him quick," remarked Sleepy.

"They hadn't ought to shoot on the main street, wakin' folks up thataway," commented the clerk.

Hashknife walked over to the open doorway. Some men were hurrying toward the little railroad depot, only a short distance up the street.

"Looks like it wasn't a celebration, after all, Sleepy," he said.

Curt Van Ess came up to the doorway, too. Men were talking, and they heard one man remark:

"Somebody got him dead-center, I tell yuh. Just short of the depot. It's Tuck Edwards."

"Tuck Edwards?" queried Van Ess. "Why, he is the sheriff!"

"Tuck Edwards?" parroted the clerk, join-

ing them. "I know him. Knowed him for years. Huh! That's bad."
"Let's go take a look," suggested Sleepy.

VAN ESS and the clerk stayed at the hotel. There was a small crowd around the body. Someone had gone to get a doctor. One of the men said, "Doctor—shucks! What he needs is a music teacher."

"Music teacher, Len?" queried another. "Yo're crazy."

"Wait'll you have t'learn on a harp."

The doctor came, pronounced the man dead, and they took him away. Hashknife and Sleepy walked back to the saloon with the rest of the crowd. One of them picked out the sheriff's horse at the hitch-rack. The animal was still streaked with sweat.

"Tuck shore came in a hurry," remarked one of the men. "Must have been chasin' somebody."

"Caught him, too," said another dryly. "I suppose they'll make Pete Zinn sheriff now. Make a good'n, too, Pete will. Smart. Never hear of Pete, ridin' hell-f'r-leather and gettin' himself shot at the end of the trail. Nossir, Pete's too smart."

"I'll buy a drink," offered one of the men. "It allus makes me thirsty, looking at dead men."

Hashknife and Sleepy veered away from the crowd and went to the hotel. Van Ess had gone upstairs, but the clerk was anxious for news of the shooting, which was too meager to be of any use.

"Who is this Van Ess person?" asked Hashknife.

"Millionaire. Got more dollars than there is cactus in Arizona. That's his wife and daughter. Ain't she pretty?"

"Which one?" asked Sleepy innocently.

"The young'n. Ma ain't bad lookin', at that."

"What," asked Hashknife, "is a millionaire doin' in Buckhorn?"

"Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell yuh. He owns the Circle Star spread, down in the valley. He's owned it quite a long time, but he don't come out very often. His daughter was there a year ago, but she got too much interested in a cowpoke down there, and papa took her away. Mama ain't been here before, I don't reckon. Oh, yeah, there's a son, too, Mark Van Ess. He's at the ranch."

"He stopped here about four, five months

ago, and he told me he was goin' to run the spread. He looks dumb enough to be a first-class cowpoke, with a little learnin'. No reflections on cowpunchers, gents. I poked cows for several years, until I got me this here job. I don't look down on the profession, yuh understand. I heard a lady sayin' to another one day, 'I jist adore cowboys—their life is so romantic. We have nothing like that in New York, you know.'

"I said, 'You can easy have a reasonable facsimile. Jist skin both of yore knees, rope-burn yore hands, git callouses so thick that yuh can set on a tack, and then dump a load of manure in yore front yard.'"

"I wonder if she ever did?" said Sleepy soberly.

"I dunno—she never said. She jist looked at me and said, 'The idea' I said, 'Yuh can take it or leave it, Ma'am.'"

"I imagine she left it."

"Left here awful fast," said the clerk dryly.

They went up to their room and undressed. Sleepy said, "I hope yo're satisfied."

Hashknife, pulling off a boot, looked up quickly.

"Satisfied?" he asked curiously.

"Yeah—that sheriff came from Spirit Valley. If yuh happen to drop in there, look up Frosty Winters. You'll like him."

"Killin' sheriffs is a serious business, Sleepy."

"And findin' out who killed him—might be serious, too."

"Well, they probably know who killed him. He must have chased the man to Buckhorn. Anyway, it sounds like he did."

"I hope they do," sighed Sleepy. "If there's anythin' I hate it's a mystery killin'."

"I feel just the same way you do—you liar," said Hashknife soberly. "Yo're half-way to Spirit River Valley right now."

"Wake me up when we get there," grinned Sleepy, and put out the lamp.

THE stage for Spirit River left Buckhorn at 9 o'clock in the morning. Hashknife and Sleepy found the Van Ess family in the little hotel dining-room, eating breakfast next morning. Van Ess nodded at the two cowboys, as they came in. At least, he acted as though he wanted to be friendly. The two women paid no attention. In fact,

Mrs. Van Ess seemed in rather bad humor. The beds were none too soft in that hotel.

They were nearly finished, when a man came in, a rather handsome cowboy, slightly gray at the temples.

"How are you, Randy—and what are you doing here?" remarked Van Ess.

"I didn't know you were here, Mr. Van Ess. I came—" He hesitated for a moment, and then said quietly, "May I speak with you—outside, Mr. Van Ess?"

"Why, yes, Randy. Be back in a moment, my dear."

They heard Miss Van Ess say to her mother, "He's rather handsome, don't you think, Mother?"

Mother apparently didn't think anything of the kind. She glowered and pushed her boiled eggs aside. The girl smiled. She had made several trips to Spirit River, and knew what to expect, as far as beds and cooking was concerned.

Van Ess came back alone, and the expression on his face was like that of a man who had seen a ghost. He hesitated, took a deep breath and came up to their table. Both women looked up at him, as he began talking quietly. Hashknife and Sleepy were unable to hear the conversation, but the expressions on their faces was enough to indicate some very bad news.

Van Ess had to help his wife to her feet, and they thought she was about to faint, but after a few moments she was able to go with them.

"Somethin' hit 'em hard, Sleepy," said Hashknife.

"I hope to tell yuh! Man, the look on the old lady's face! I wonder if it has anythin' to do with the shootin' last night."

Hashknife shook his head, as he finished his coffee.

"We'll lend an ear," he said.

Only the clerk was in the lobby. He said:

"That feller who came in there was Randy Adams, foreman for the Van Ess outfit. He came up here with some men to get the body of the sheriff, and I told him Van Ess was here. It seems that Pete Zinn, the deputy sheriff, was out at the Circle Star last evenin', and they had a poker game.

"Mark Van Ess, the kid, was in the game, and drinkin'. Pete was drinkin', too, accordin' to Adams, and trouble started. Some-

body knocked over the lamp, and a shot was fired. Adams yanked the kid outside and asked him why in the devil he shot Zinn. Adams said the kid got tough, so he shoved him away and went into the house, where the boys was workin' over the deputy.

"When they went out to find the kid, he was gone and so was the deputy's horse. Adams rode to town, but can't find him, so he told the sheriff. Well, as far as we can find out, Van Ess' kid hightailed it to Buckhorn, intendin' to catch a train, they think, and busted the sheriff, when he tried to stop him."

"Whew!" snorted Hashknife. "No wonder the news hit 'em hard."

"That kid must be a ring-tailed wonder," remarked Sleepy.

"To look at him, he ain't. He's twenty years old, kinda pink and white; him bein' pampered a lot, I reckon. Ain't so bright, I don't reckon."

"Drinks, eh?" queried Sleepy.

"All he can hold, they tell me. I heard that his pa sent him down here to shuck his thirst. They do say that he's quit mixed drinks. I dunno—I only hear things. The Van Ess family are upstairs. Randy Adams is getting a livery-rig to take 'em to the ranch. They didn't want to take the stage."

Hashknife and Sleepy went outside, as Randy Adams brought the team and spring-wagon over to the hotel.

"Well, I'm glad it ain't no mystery, Hashknife," said Sleepy.

"That's right. Same man killed both of 'em. Still, yuh can't be sure, until they get the kid and make him confess."

"Well," sighed Sleepy, "I've done my best. Let's go."

SEVEN men stood in front of the little sheriff's office in Spirit River. They had been there quite a while, talking earnestly. Finally five of them walked up the street, leaving two men at the office. After a long period of silence one of the men remarked:

"You and yore braggin'!"

"Lush, I wasn't braggin'. I just said—"

"If you was sheriff, you'd raise hell and put a chunk under it."

Sam Holt, erstwhile livery-stable operator, newly appointed sheriff, shrugged his thin shoulders. Sam was only forty, but looked sixty. Lush Medders, whom Holt

had appointed deputy, was about the same age as Holt, but Lush was short and fat. The county had to have a sheriff—and Sam Holt was available. He was a brother-in-law to Ed Graves, one of the commissioners. Holt had criticized the sheriff openly

Sam Holt had criticized the sheriff openly, and outlined his own views of operating the office, of which, as Ed Graves said, "He knows about as much as a turkey knows about Tuesday."

"But why," asked Lush Medders plainly, "did yuh have to appoint me deputy? Compounding a felony, I'd say."

"I've been payin' yuh forty a month at the stable, Lush, and this job pays yuh a hundred. Yo're smart enough to do it."

"I'm smart enough to realize that workin' in the stable, all I've got to look out for is one kick at a time. You don't know beans about this here office, Sam—and yo're supposed to learn me the business. Ed Graves said so, and the rest of them danged gallinippers nodded."

"Ed said he'd help me."

"Ed ain't never been a sheriff! What'd he know about it. We've got to keep records and all that—on paper."

"They had to have a sheriff. Lush. Nobody knows how, until they've tried it. We'll do all right. We're goin' to have two inquests, I can see that. Doc Smedley can handle that—he's experienced. Oh, we'll handle it all right."

"Oh, shore," agreed Lush sarcastically. "If anythin' happens we can say, 'Hm-m-m-m-m-m-m!' and look as wise as a ground-owl. Be a hummin' sheriff. It covers a lot of ignorance, I'll tell yuh that."

Spirit River was strictly a cow-town. Faded signs showed the Spirit River Gambling House, Buck Still's Place, Ed Graves' General Store, Louis Wong's Restaurant, Spirit River Stage Depot and General Post-office. The main street was narrow and dusty, the wooden sidewalks badly in need of nails. The Cattlemen's Hotel was the biggest building in town, and the most drab of all. Its one redeeming feature was the fact that it was set back from the street and had two big sycamores to shade the entrance. A few chairs and benches made it a loafing place for Spirit River. Hashknife and Sleepy arrived in town ahead of the stage and ahead of the Van Ess family. Men were still standing around, talking of the

recent tragedies. Evidently the two officers had been well liked.

Johnny Wells, a buck-toothed cowboy, took care of their horses at the livery-stable.

"I'm kinda new on this here job, gents; just took it this mornin'," he said. "Don't care a lot for stable work, but I took it because of the chance for promotion."

"Promotion to what?" asked Sleepy.

"Sheriff's office. They just made Sam Holt sheriff, and Lush Medders, deputy. They ran this stable for a long time. You heard of us runnin' out of officers, didn't yuh?"

"Yeah, we heard about it in Buckhorn."

"Shore terrible. I've seen that Van Ess kid around here, but I didn't re'lize he was that salty. But yuh never can tell. I knew a feller who shook up a can of tomatters, before openin' same, and the can exploded and blew off his left ear. Looks and labels don't mean a thing. Should I give them caballos some oats?"

"Yeah, do that," smiled Hashknife.

They saw the Van Ess family drive straight through town, as they went to the hotel. Several men were in the hotel, talking about the shooting. One of them said, "We've got to make a example of that kid. Even if they catch him, with all the Van Ess millions behind him, they'll law over him for years."

"I wouldn't worry about catchin' him," laughed another. "They just appointed Sam Holt as sheriff."

"They did, eh? Well, Sam's all right. He kept a good stable."

They all laughed shortly. Another said, "Give him a fork and a broom and a curry-comb—"

AFTER Hashknife and Sleepy secured a room, they sauntered down to the sheriff's office, where they found Lush Medders, leaning against a side of the doorway, gloomily contemplating life.

"Good mornin', Sheriff," said Sleepy.

"Has somebody killed Sam already?" he asked in amazement.

"Oh, yo're the deputy, eh?"

"My name's Lush Medders—and don't be comical. I was christened Lushwell. Ol' family name. Yeah, I'm the deputy—if anybody is concerned."

Hashknife introduced himself and Sleepy.

Lush shook hands very gravely with them, as he said:

"Come in, make yourselves to home. I dunno a damn thing about the etikette of a sheriff's office; whether yo're supposed to invite folks in or not. Find a chair, boys. I'm awful new on this job. I'm here in body, but m' spirit is across the street, cur-ryin' a horse. I'm awful good with horses."

"Everybody has to learn," said Hashknife.

"Yeah, I know they do. But ain't there a sayin' that says that a little learnin' is dangerous? There is? In that case, I'll soon be Dangerous Lush Medders—'cause I won't learn much."

"I understand," remarked Hashknife, "that both the sheriff and deputy were killed by a tenderfoot."

LUSH nodded soberly. "It's amazin'," he declared. "'Course, the kid was drunk. After he shot Pete Zinn at the Circle Star, he stole the deputy's horse and headed for Buckhorn. I figure he was aimin' to catch a train, but the sheriff must have moved in right behind him—and got shot for his pains."

"Must be a awful blow to his folks," said Sleepy.

"Terrible. The kid had everythin' he wanted—and now look what he done. His pa wanted to make somethin' out of him. The kid was no good in the city, they say; so the old man sent him out here to see if he had brains enough to learn about cows. Yuh see, that Circle C is a big spread. It was originally an old Spanish Grant, and the ranch-buildings are awful old. Kinda pretty, too. Cost a fortune, I reckon.

"Curt Van Ess wants to raise fancy cows and fast horses. It's sure a blow to him. Personally, I don't like him. He'll never be a native. Bosses everybody and kinda looks down on 'em. The kid wasn't that way at all. He looked like any cowpoke, talked like one, too. The daughter's awful pretty. She was down here a while ago, and they say she took quite a shine to Slim Ort, one of the Rockin' K punchers. Slim's a good kid, but he don't shape up to Curt Van Ess' qualifications, I reckon."

Sam Holt, the new sheriff, came in, and Lush Medders introduced him to Hashknife and Sleepy.

"Well, we've got both bodies down at

Doc Smedley's place, Lush," said the sheriff.

"I suppose that's fine said Lush. "Any clues, Sam?"

"Any what?"

"I mean—yo're sure Mark Van Ess done it, huh?"

"Well, we're sure he killed Pete Zinn. Plenty witnesses to that one, and any jury on earth would convict him of killin' Tuck Edwards in Buckhorn."

"Hang him twice, huh?" said the deputy quietly.

"I'm goin' to have plenty to contend with, I can see that," said the sheriff to no one in particular.

"Well, Sam, you said we could cope with anythin' that came up."

"In the way of crime, Lush."

"They seem to think that this Van Ess kid took a train out of Buckhorn," remarked Hashknife.

"Yeah, they do," agreed the sheriff. "He prob'ly did."

"He was supposed to have taken the deputy's horse to Buckhorn."

"Yeah, that's right—he did."

"Did anybody find the horse in Buckhorn, Mr. Holt?"

SAM HOLT looked quizzically at the tall, lean-faced cowboy.

"I don't reckon anybody ever thought of that," he said.

"That's what I've allus said," declared Lush Medders.

"Aw, you said what?" snapped the sheriff.

"That it takes brains to think, Sam."

"How many witnesses saw the kid kill Pete Zinn?" asked Hashknife.

"Four, I think. There was Randy Adams, Ike Sims, Tony Lopez and Baldy McKeon."

"In the dark," added Lush Medders.

"Well, yeah, the light went out," agreed the sheriff. "But even at that, it's a cinch the kid done it. Randy Adams yanked the kid outside, and asked him why he shot Zinn. Randy says the kid got kinda salty, and jerked away from him. Randy went back into the house, and when they looked for the kid, he was gone."

"And so was Zinn's horse," added Lush.

"Are these four men all the crew of the Circle Star?" asked Hashknife.

"No, there's Al Young, but he's ridin' the rim this week."

"Ridin' the rim?" queried Hashknife.

"Watchin' for sheep," grinned Lush.

"Well, we can't sit around and talk all day, Lush," said the sheriff. "You better go to Buckhorn and see if yuh can locate Zinn's horse. If the kid took the train, it's a cinch he didn't take the horse with him. Watch along the road—that horse might drift back home."

"All right," sighed Lush. "If I find the kid—what then?"

Sam Holt glared at his new deputy. "Kiss him, shoot him, or start runnin'. Use yore own judgment."

Lush Medders went out, grinning, and the new sheriff said to Hashknife, "What's the idea of all the questions, my friends?"

Hashknife smiled slowly. "Wantin' to know, I reckon," he replied.

"Why?" The sheriff was persistent.

Hashknife looked at him across the desk, and said quietly, "You won't mind, if I don't answer that, will yuh, Sheriff?"

Sam Holt blinked, turned his head away.

"No," he said slowly, "it's all right. I'm kinda jumpy. Yuh see, it's kinda hard for a feller to start bein' a sheriff—with two murders to start on. I know how to handle cows and horses, or run a stable—but this kinda whips me."

"I know how yuh feel," said Hashknife. "Tell us about the rim-riders, will yuh? Lush said they're watchin' for sheep."

Sam Holt nodded slowly. "Yuh see," he explained, "after the railroad leaves Buckhorn it runs along the upper rim of the valley, over there on the west side. There's one sidin' up there, where trains pass, but no corrals nor anythin'. You know how cow ranges are. The rancher only owns certain amounts of land, and the rest belongs to Uncle Sam.

"As long as the rancher can control it, he's safe—but the sheep, once they get in, have the same rights and it don't take long to ruin the range for cows."

"Well, has anybody made an attempt to get in here with sheep?" asked Hashknife.

Sam Holt didn't look at Hashknife, he looked down at the top of his desk, as he filled his pipe.

"I've told yuh the situation," he said quietly. "How do I know yuh ain't in here

for the sheep interests? You ain't told me one damn thing, Hartley."

"That's right, Sheriff. Well, Sleepy, we might as well drift out and get somethin' to eat. By the way, Sheriff, do all the out-fits have men on the rim?"

Sam Holt shut his lips stubbornly for a moment, but replied, "You might ask around, Hartley—I ain't sure m'self."

"Thank yuh, Sheriff. See yuh later."

LUSH MEDDERS came back late that night, but he had never found Pete Zinn's stolen horse, nor was he able to find anybody who had seen it. Parker Hall, the prosecuting attorney, was in the hotel next morning, talking with several men. Hall was fat and pompous, and the lower register of his voice would carry a mile.

"This whole thing has been bungled, gentlemen!" he said. "There is no doubt that young Mark Van Ess went to Buckhorn to take a train. After Tuck Edwards was killed, no effort was made to prevent him from leaving. Nothing has been done to notify officers along the line to look out for him. No description has been wired to other sheriffs. Why, damme, we—well, we did absolutely nothing."

"Has anything been done since?" asked one of the men.

"I'm afraid not, sir. Mark Van Ess is far away, thumbing his nose at the law. A bad situation. Inexperienced sheriff—well, we must face it, I suppose."

"Face what?" asked the man curiously.

"The fact that we have two dead men on our hands."

"How'd all this happen, Hall?" asked another. "I never did get it straight."

"Well," replied the lawyer, "I—you see, Mark Van Ess and Pete Zinn—well, I'm not quite sure about it myself. I must have a talk with Randy Adams. But no matter, it was done."

Hashknife and Sleepy sat down on the shaded porch of the hotel, and listened to the philosophers and gossips of Spirit River discuss crime. A little, bow-legged old rawhider came off the street and sat down with them. He was not over five feet, five inches tall and would weigh about a hundred pounds. He was grizzled, and his skin was like rawhide. One of the men said, "Hyah, Frosty."

"Ho-o-owdy, Mel," drawled the old-timer. "I hear we're about half out of law and order around here."

"Jist about, Frosty. How's things at the Flyin' W?"

"Same as usual. I hear they appointed Sam Holt."

"Yeah, that's what they done. What's yore opinion?"

"Sam's a good man."

"We need a better man than Sam."

"Yeah, I know—but I wouldn't have it on a platter."

The man looked curiously at the old raw-hider, but did not continue the conversation. The men drifted away, except the one they called Frosty.

He looked keenly at Hashknife and Sleepy, and said quietly, "When'd you fellers git in?"

"Yo're Frosty Winters, eh?" remarked Hashknife.

"Yeah. Been a-lookin' for yuh. Bob Marsh said you'd be sure to show up pretty soon. Wrote me a letter and said what you'd look like. Said to give Sleepy his regards."

"Some day," said Sleepy soberly, "I'll find him with his pants caught in a barbed-wire fence—and what I'll do to him!"

FROSTY chuckled. "You go straight east of here for three miles, and the road to my place comes in from the north. Glad to see yuh out there. Blitz Bentley, my pardner, mixes up a awful good muligan, and I heard him cuttin' onions as I pulled out. We eat any time yuh git there. See yuh later."

"Yo're speakin' of the one I love," said Sleepy soberly.

Frosty grinned and bow-legged his way back to the street. Hashknife yawned and began rolling a cigarette. Sleepy said:

"If yo're down in the country, drop in and see Frosty Winters. He'll stake yuh, or give yuh a job. That's fine. So that Frosty won't make any mistakes in who he favors, Bob Marsh sends him our descriptions. How big a stake do yuh reckon we ort to ask him for, Hashknife?"

Hashknife grinned slowly. "You forgot that he sent you his regards, Sleepy."

Lush Medders came in from the street and sank wearily into a chair. The new job was bearing down on the deputy.

"Yuh didn't find the horse, eh?" asked Sleepy.

"Nope," sighed Lush. "Didn't find nothin'. Van Ess showed up at the office a while ago—him and Randy Adams. When Van Ess starts talkin', nobody else has a chance. He proved seven alibis for his son, and the strongest one was the fact that his name is Van Ess, and no Van Ess has ever been hung."

"He said he was telegraphin' the biggest firm of criminal lawyers in the world, and he'll fight the case to the Supreme Court. I never got a chance to open my mouth for ten minutes. Then I asked him what good the lawyers would be, if we didn't catch the kid? Don't yuh know it, he never thought of that."

"What's the sheriff doin'?" asked Sleepy.

"Oh, he's tryin'," said Lush soberly.

"Tryin' what?"

"Tryin' to resign. He went out to the Circle Star, and Mrs. Van Ess' tears got him down. But the commissioners won't listen to him."

"If they do," said Hashknife seriously, "they'll have to appoint you as sheriff, Lush."

"No!" blurted Lush. "Yuh mean—wait a minute! I'm goin' to find Sam Holt and have a talk with him. I didn't know the damn thing was hereditary."

Lushwell Medders hurried away, genuinely alarmed over the situation.

"I reckon we might as well ride out and see Frosty. Maybe he has somethin' important to tell us," remarked Hashknife.

"Like stakin' us—or givin' us jobs," said Sleepy dryly.

IT WAS not until after a big supper that Frosty started talking about conditions. He admitted that he had told Bob Marsh that he believed there was something wrong in Spirit River Valley.

"For instance?" queried Hashknife.

"Sheep."

"The fear of sheep," corrected Blitz Bentley.

"All right—the fear of sheep. You know how things are with the big sheepmen, Hartley. They've got to have new grass, or they don't exist. Several big outfits north of here are on the verge of spreadin' out again. You know how the law looks on it.

"Cattlespreads go on from year to year, but a sheep range is ruined for anything else in a year.

"Yuh can't fence 'em out, 'cause most of the range is open. If they get in—yuh can't force 'em out. Our only salvation is to keep 'em out. This valley would be a sheepman's paradise."

"Where," asked Hashknife, "can they come in?"

Frosty sighed and relaxed in his chair.

"We can block 'em from the north, south and east. Yuh see, the railroad runs around the west side, high up in the hills. There is one spur track up there, used only by the railroad itself, as a passing place for trains. There's no corrals, no place to unload sheep. Each one of the outfits hires a rim-rider. Their job is to watch the rim. It covers about twenty miles of damn rough country. But," Frosty wiggled a forefinger nervously, "if they could get sheep off a train up there, the blasted thing could lock his legs and slide plumb into the valley."

"You've explained why they *can't* get down here," remarked Hashknife. "so just how *can* they get down here."

"There's two spreads which control land practically back to that track. If either outfit wanted to be crooked—"

"I see yore idea," nodded Hashknife. "What other angle enters into the deal?"

"The Circle Star is one of the spreads, and the other is Jim French's JF. You ain't never met Jim, have yuh?"

"No."

"Four, five years ago Jim French's son, Bob, married a girl named Mary Holliday. I'll admit that she's a mighty pretty girl, but she happened to be the daughter of George Holliday, the sheep man. Yuh, see, the folks of the Spirit River country don't like sheep; so they didn't exactly take to a sheep man's daughter."

"Yuh mean," corrected Bliz, "they made it so damned miserable for Bob and his wife that they moved out. I don't blame 'em."

"Mebbe not," nodded Frosty. "However, Bob went to work for his daddy-in-law, and he sent word that some day he'd come back and sheep out the valley. We heard that less than a year ago Bob became sort of a general manager for the Holliday outfit."

"That still don't mean he's goin' to keep his word," remarked Hashknife.

"No, that's true. But less than a month ago, Bob French was seen in Spirit River."

"What sort of person is Jim French?" asked Hashknife.

"As bitter as the bottom of a sour-dough jug," said Bliz.

"Jim soured when Bob pulled out," said Frosty. "He hated the whole country—and he hated Bob for marryin' into sheep. Mind you, I'm not accusin' anybody, Hashknife—but if sheep come in—"

"And you say that they *could* unload sheep and bring 'em all the way over the JF spread, eh?" asked Hashknife.

Frosty Winters nodded grimly, and added, "I'm keepin' a man up there, watchin' closely. I don't trust Jim French."

"What about the Circle Star?" asked Hashknife.

"Curt Van Ess is a millionaire," said Frosty. "He wants to raise fancy stock. He'd have no point in sellin' us out."

"But Jim French would, eh?"

"I don't say that, Hashknife. But Jim French ain't makin' money on the JF—and another thing worth thinkin' about—he refused to hire a rim-rider. The rest of us each pay one man—but French refused."

Hashknife nodded slowly. "The sheep interests would pay well for the chance, I reckon, Frosty."

"You know they would—especially an outfit like Holliday. He's got plenty money—and he needs new range. Bob Marsh said you two are the only men he knows capable of findin' out things."

Hashknife smiled. "Frosty, under the circumstances, a stranger would be an object of suspicion in this range. I'm afraid that the new sheriff already suspects us."

"Of bein' sheep spies?" asked Bliz.

"I reckon so. He wouldn't talk about sheep."

"Are yuh willin' to tackle the job, Hashknife?" asked Frosty.

"I don't know what can be done, Frosty. The rim-riders are yore best defense. Are yuh sure yore man is to be trusted? You know, the sheep men have money, and they'd pay well."

"Buck Shearer rides for me up there," replied Frosty. "He's as good as I can get. I've knowed Buck a long time."

"What about the other men up there?"

"Well, Al Young rides for the Circle Star, and Tex Turpin for the Rockin' K. Like I told yuh, Jim French won't hire a man to ride the rim."

"Young and Turpin are all right, eh?"

"As far as I know."

"And that ain't far," said Bliz.

"Most every man has his price," said Sleepy.

Hashknife said, "Frosty, yo're the only man in this range who knows anythin' about me and Sleepy. Just don't say anythin' about us bein' friends with Bob Marsh—it might be safer."

"Don't include me in that," said Sleepy.

"I'm *no* friend of Bob Marsh."

"I'll send him yore regards," grinned Frosty.

SAM HOLT, the new sheriff, went out to the Circle Star next day and held a meeting with Randy Adams and his three cowboys, Ike Sims, Tony Lopez and Baldy McKeon. Sam Holt wanted to know exactly what happened at the time Pete Zinn



was killed. Randy was the spokesman for the outfit, and he explained in detail that the three boys and Pete Zinn, the deputy sheriff, were playing poker.

Mark Van Ess had been drinking, got off a bunk and demanded to be dealt into

the game. They were playing for small stakes. Young Van Ess proceeded to lose, and became quarrelsome. He finally accused Pete Zinn of stealing a card.

"Pete slapped him across the face," said Adams, "and Mark fell out of his chair, when he tried to get up. The lamp was on the table, and he upset it, taking a swing at Pete. When the light went out, a shot blazed from where the kid was standin'.

"Everythin' was kinda confused for the moment. Somebody was tryin' to unfasten the door; so I stepped over there. It was Mark Van Ess. I went outside with him, and asked him if he fired that shot. He hit me on the side of the head, but I grabbed him, and stopped him from fightin'. One of the boys yelled that Pete had been shot. I said to Mark, 'You stay here, you blasted fool!' and I went in, where the boys were lightin' matches. I think Pete was dead then.

"I told the boys that Mark shot him, but when we went out to find Mark, he was gone and so was Pete's horse. That's the story. Tony Lopez went to Spirit River to notify the sheriff, who headed for Buckhorn. You know what happened to him, Sam."

Sam Holt nodded.

"It put you up against a tough deal, Sam," said Adams.

"It sure did. Do yuh know if the kid had money with him?"

"He always carried a roll that'd choke a horse."

"He could ride a long ways on a train, with what he carried," remarked Baldy McKeon.

"Well, I reckon that's what he done," said the sheriff.

"Who are those two strange cowpokes, Sam?" asked Adams. "I saw 'em in Buckhorn, and now they're in Spirit River."

"I've been tryin' to figure that out myself, Randy. They ask too blamed many questions to suit me."

"Questions about what?"

"Well, most everythin', I reckon. They asked me if anybody had ever tried to get sheep onto this range. Right there, I decided to quit answerin' questions."

"They'll bear watchin', Sam," said Randy Adams.

"I kinda figured it that way, Randy. Well,

"I'll drift back. How is the Van Ess family standin' the shock?"

Randy Adams shrugged his shoulders. "They don't say much. Curt has tried to get the wife and Marion to go back east, but they won't go."

"Yuh can't blame 'em. The kid was kinda wild, but I didn't figure he'd turn out to be a killer."

"Too much wheeskey," said Tony Lopez.

"That's it, Tony—too much whiskey. We're holdin' the inquest this afternoon, and I want all of yuh in town by two o'clock."

"We'll all be there," said Randy Adams.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy were seated out in front of the hotel that afternoon, when Frosty Winters came along. Frosty seemed a little cautious in his actions. He looked into the hotel lobby and came back, sitting down a few chairs from the two cowboys. Speaking very quietly, he said:

"Buck Shearer came in off the rim this mornin' to get some grub. Last Tuesday afternoon he says a man got off a freight train at the sidin' up above the rim. Buck was quite a ways above the tracks, watchin'. He said the man was wearin' store-clothes and packin' some sort of a valise. He disappeared in the brush.

"It took Buck quite a while to get down from where he was, and the train pulled on, but he can't find the man. Later he finds some fresh horse-tracks on a trail into the valley. On his way back to his shack he meets Tex Turpin, who rides for the Rockin' K, headin' down for grub, and he tells Tex about it. Tex says he'll spread the word as soon as he gets down here. A while ago I saw Miles Kent, owner of the Rockin' K, and he ain't seen Tex."

"Tuesday," said Hashknife. "That night Pete Zinn and Tuck Edwards were killed, Frosty."

"Yea-a-ah," drawled Frosty quietly. "Kent and one of his men are headin' for the rim right now, tryin' to locate Tex Turpin."

"Good idea," said Hashknife.

Frosty got up and bow-legged his way back to the street.

Jim French came in that day. It was the

first time Hashknife and Sleepy had ever seen the owner of the JK. French was a tall, raw-boned, hard-faced cattleman. He had high cheek-bones, narrow eyes, and a wide, tight-lipped mouth. He wore his gun slung low, and in a short holster.

He didn't mix with the other men, but kept away from them, and did not drink. Hashknife could agree with Frosty Winters that Jim French was bitter, but Hashknife could not quite believe that a man like French, so typical of cows and horses, would sell out to the despised sheep outfits.

French stood at the back of the audience at the inquests, his hat low over his eyes, poker-faced, listening closely to the evidence. Curt Van Ess was there seated on a front row, listening to the evidence against his son. In fact, it was all against him; so much so, in fact, that the six-man jury did not even retire to consider the evidence.

Hashknife and Sleepy saw Curt Van Ess stumble out of that room, his shoulders bowed. He seemed to have aged twenty years in a few days. Lush Medders whispered, "He blames himself for everythin' that the kid done."

THEY listened to the opinions of the crowd, finally drifting down to the sheriff's office. The Circle Star buckboard was at a hitch-rack near the office, and in it were Mrs. Van Ess, her daughter and Curt Van Ess, while Frosty Winters leaned against a front wheel, talking with them. He called to Hashknife and Sleepy, asking them to come over there. As he was introducing them, they noticed that both women had been crying.

"Hashknife, you can shoot me if yuh feel like it, but I had to tell Van Ess about you and Sleepy. Dang it, I—I—well, somethin' has got to be done about this," said Frosty.

Hashknife drew a deep breath and looked up at them.

"Yuh mean—about the boy?" he asked quietly.

"You heard all the evidence against him, Hashknife."

Hashknife nodded.

"He's my son, you know," said Mrs. Van Ess.

"Yeah, that's right. Yuh see, Ma'am, I didn't know him."

"I remember you," said Marion. "You were in the hotel the night we came to Buckhorn."

"That's right, Miss Van Ess. You shore rode into trouble."

They nodded sadly.

"Didn't anybody know yuh was comin', eh?" asked Hashknife.

"No, we didn't tell anybody," said Van Ess. "It was just a sudden notion on our part. We—er—just wanted to see how Mark was getting along. You see, I—we wanted to sort of have him take charge of the Circle Star, after he learned the business."

"Randy Adams is teaching him," added Mrs. Van Ess.

HASHKNIFE nodded. He wanted to tell her that the cattle business is a life-long study, but she had enough on her mind. Van Ess proposed hopefully:

"Mr. Winters said—well, that you might be able to—do something."

"Suppose," suggested Hashknife, "that we look at it this way. Yore son has been suspected, and the evidence is all against him. But his side of the story ain't been told, and until he shows up and tells his story."

"If he is innocent," said Van Ess, "why did he run away?"

"You, too?" queried Hashknife quietly.

Mrs. Van Ess burst into tears, and Van Ess swore softly.

"Damn it, I didn't mean it that way!" he exclaimed. "We have talked it over so many times, I am confused over everything."

"I know how yuh feel," said Hashknife, "but the best thing to do is to calm down and stop figurin' this and that. After all, until the boy is located, *you just don't know a thing about it.* The fact that six men, who only heard one side of the deal, said he was guilty enough to face a Superior Court, don't mean a thing. After all, you folks don't believe he done it."

"I know he didn't!" declared Marion sharply.

"That's swell," smiled Hashknife, "I'd hate to believe it myself—and I don't even know him."

Van Ess scowled grimly. "I'll hire the best firm of criminal lawyers on earth," he declared. "I'll fight this case—"

"Curtis!" exclaimed Mrs. Van Ess quietly. "Mr. Hartley said that we should stop figuring this and that. I believe he is right."

"It is easy enough for an outsider to say that, my dear."

"Hashknife ain't no outsider!" snapped Frosty. "He's—well, I—I reckon I jist kinda busted m' rope on that one."

"You did, Frosty," agreed Hashknife.

Curt Van Ess looked straight at Hashknife as he said, "Money is no object, Hartley. I want you to know that. Can you find my son?"

Hashknife looked thoughtfully at Van Ess for several moments.

"My friend," he said, "I am just a driftin' cowpuncher, and a stranger in this part of the country. Remember, I have never even seen yore son. All I know is the evidence that he went to Buckhorn, intendin' to leave the country. Do you still want an answer to yore foolish question?"

"I'm sorry," said Van Ess. "I'm so damned upset—so anxious to do something."

"I am sure that Mr. Hartley can help us," said Marion.

"Here comes Randy," said Mrs. Van Ess. "Thank you, Mr. Hartley."

HASHKNIFE, Sleepy and Frosty moved back on the sidewalk, as the ranch foreman came to drive the team home. Randy Adams merely nodded to them, as he got into the seat and turned the team around.

Frosty said, "I reckon you'd like to kick me in the pants, but I can't stand for tears. Damn it, them two women was cryin', and—well, I said, 'Here comes a man who can help yuh.' I don't know why I said it."

"You'd be the only one who *would* know, Frosty."

"Yeah, I know. But, listen, now; Bob Marsh said—"

"And you wonder why his best regards don't mean anythin' to me," interrupted Sleepy.

"Yeah," agreed Frosty meekly. "I'm shore sorry."

"Forget it," smiled Hashknife. "Men were born to make mistakes."

"Yuh think they were, Hashknife?"

"Well, they always have put sawdust around cuspidors."

Meanwhile Randy Adams was remarking to Curt Van Ess, "Who were those two cowboys with Frosty Winters?"

"I don't remember," replied Van Ess. "I did not get the names."

"The tall one," said Marion, "is Hashknife Hartley, and the other one is Sleepy Stevens."

"Lookin' for jobs?" asked Adams.

"No," said Van Ess shortly.

"That tall one," said Marion, "has the most wonderful eyes, and when he smiles—" Marion left the rest to their imagination. Her mother said, "Marion!"

Properly chastened, Marion said, "He makes one feel that everything is all right."

"Well, it is not!" declared Mrs. Van Ess. "Far from it."

"My advice," said Randy Adams, braking the buckboard for a sharp pitch through a dry-wash, "would be for you folks to go back home and be comfortable. I realize that things at the ranch are not—well, for folks like you. You could come back here, if anything develops, of course."

"No one," reminded Mrs. Van Ess, "has asked advice, Randy."

"Perhaps he is right," sighed Van Ess heavily. "We cannot do any good here. If Mark went back—oh, well, there is no use trying to solve it, I suppose."

"I shall stay right here," declared Mrs. Van Ess. "I have a feeling that my boy will come back."

"And I shall stay with you," said Marion. "Let Dad go back to his musty offices; I love it right here."

"I believe I was right," sighed Mrs. Van Ess.

"About what, Mother?"

"About seeing that Slim Ort at the ranch yesterday."

Curtis Van Ess turned in his seat and looked at Marion.

"You saw that young whippersnapper yesterday?" he asked.

"Curtis!" warned Mrs. Van Ess. "This is no time nor place for recriminations."

"Sorry," he said wearily, and turned

around. Randy Adams smiled shortly, as he drove in at the Circle Star.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy went into the sheriff's office with Lush Medders, who was quite elated over the success of their first inquest, even if they had no prisoner to answer for the two murders.

"There ain't no question who we've got to find," he said.

"Like the Frenchman's flea-powder," smiled Hashknife.

"I didn't hear about that, Hashknife."

"First," said Hashknife soberly, "you catch the little flea."

"Oh, yeah. Well, that might be quite a chore."

"It's a big world to search," remarked Sleepy.

A man stopped in the doorway, and they turned to see Jim French.

"Hyah, Jim," greeted Lush. "C'mon in. You ain't met Hartley and Stevens, have yuh? Boys, this is Jim French."

Jim French didn't make any move to shake hands. He looked at both of them, but spoke directly to Hashknife:

"What sheep outfit do you rep for, Hartley?"

Hashknife's eyes narrowed a little, as he said, "What made yuh ask that question, French?"

"'Cause I ain't the kind who goes around hintin'. Maybe the rest of 'em ain't got nerve enough to come out and ask yuh."

"I admire yore nerve," said Hashknife coldly, "but I don't like the question. Do we look like sheepmen, French?"

"Yo're askin' me now—and you ain't answered my question."

Their eyes met—and held—but it was French who shifted his gaze.

"Do we look like sheepmen, French?" Hashknife asked again.

"No, I—well, yuh can't tell by lookin' at a man. Everybody is talkin'—"

"Yeah, and they're talkin' about you, too, Jim," said Lush.

"I know it. Just because my boy married a girl—and loved her enough to take her out of here. Let 'em talk."

"He said he'd come back and sheep us out, Jim. You can't blame folks."

"Yeah, he said it," nodded French. "But haven't all of us said the wrong thing, when

we got mad—or drunk? I don't reckon I ever said the right thing, even when I wasn't mad—nor drunk."

Lush wanted to change the subject. He said, "Jim, what did yuh think of the inquest?"

"All right, I reckon. I felt kinda sorry for Van Ess."

Two riders whirled up to the hitch-rack in front of the office. They were Miles Kent and one of his riders from the Rocking K, dusty and sweating.

"Find the sheriff, Lush—quick!" Kent said. "We found Tex Turpin on a trail on the rim. He's been dead a couple days."

"I'll find Sam!" blurted Lush, and went running up the street.

Jim French leaned against the doorway of the office, looking grimly up the street. Men were beginning to drift down there to see what had happened. "Tex was a good boy," said French to no one in particular.

Miles Kent paid no attention. Jim French turned away and walked up the street, as more men came down. Lush found the sheriff, and then went to notify Doctor Smedley, the coroner.

"We'll ride with 'em, Sleepy," suggested Hashknife.

"If they don't chase us back, Hashknife. I don't like the way they're talkin'."

But Sam Holt had no objections to them going along. They took an extra horse and pack-saddle. Doc Smedley joined them, and they started back for the rim.

"Buck Shearer told Frosty," said Miles Kent, "that Tex started off the rim last Tuesday afternoon, headin' for the ranch to get grub. He didn't ever get there; so me and Alex went out to see what happened. He's about halfway from his shack to where the rim breaks off."

IT WAS a long ride over to the edge of the rim. There was a wide expanse of dry-wash, which seemed to follow the rim, and was over a hundred yards wide in places, cut deep.

"This is Spirit River, Hartley," said Sam Holt. "It ain't had a drop of water in it for months, but yuh ought to see it, when the rains come."

"It's sure hell on wheels," declared Kent, as they climbed up the opposite bank. "We

better string out here, that trail's very narrow."

They found Tex about a mile beyond the dry-wash. He had been shot through the body with a high-power bullet, and the doctor declared that "Poor Tex never knew what hit him."

Hashknife looked the place over, came back and looked at the body, as they made ready to load it on the pack-saddle.

"Kinda funny about that," he said.

"What do yuh mean?" asked the sheriff. The doctor looked up, too.

Hashknife pointed down at the body, as he said quietly:

"This ground around here is all soft, sandy stuff. Do yuh notice that the knees of his overalls have been busted out and his knees skinned. One wrist and one elbow is skinned, too."

THE rest of the men looked closely. The sheriff said, "Yeah, that's true, but—what do yuh mean, Hartley?"

"I mean that this boy wasn't shot here. I'd say that he was shot on a hard road, where he fell off and skidded. Maybe his horse was goin' fast, when the shot was fired."

The sheriff and doctor hunched back on their heels.

"It could have happened that way—but where?" said Kent.

Hashknife shrugged. Kent added, "Me and Alex searched for his horse, but we didn't find it."

The sheriff got to his feet, kicked his heel into the sandy soil beside the body and nodded.

"If he fell that hard on this stuff, it'd leave marks," Hashknife added.

"Well," sighed the sheriff, "I don't know as that helps us any. Let's load him up and get back before dark."

There was little conversation on the way back to Spirit River. Alex McKee said, "Tex never hurt anybody."

They left the body with Doctor Smedley and went back to the main street. Three dead men now—all of them murdered.

"They can't blame Mark Van Ess for this'n," said Lush Medders.

"I've got to send another man to the rim," said Miles Kent. "It ain't a job I'd like to order a man to do."

"I'll take it over, Miles," said Alex McKee.

"You'd take it, Alex?"

"Tex was my bunkie," replied Alex slowly. "I'll rustle some grub and get right up there," and he walked back up the street to his horse.

"I think I'd better call a meetin' of the cattlemen, Sam," said Kent. "This looks like we're close to a showdown."

Kent walked away from the office. Sam Holt sighed and reached for his pipe.

"Yuh know, it's hard to understand," he said slowly. "Just a few days ago, Tuck Edwards, Pete Zinn and Tex Turpin was all alive. They didn't think any more about dyin' than we do now. Now they're gone—all three of 'em. Yuh just can't figure on anythin'."

"It's fate, destiny, or whatever yuh want to call it," said Hashknife. "Did yuh ever read Oman Khayaam, Holt?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Never heard of him, Hartley."

"He's kinda hard to understand. Somebody gave me a little book several years ago, written by that fellow. I remember one verse that said, 'Tis all a checker-board of nights and days, where Destiny with men for pieces plays; Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays. And one by one back in the Closet lays.'"

Sam Holt puffed slowly on his old pipe. "It don't make sense," he said.

"I reckon it's life," said Hashknife. "Can you make any sense out of life? Why does one baby die at six months, another lives to be a hundred years old? Why would two brothers, raised alike, one to become a preacher, the other an outlaw? Does that make sense? A man is hung for murder, on circumstantial evidence, but later is found to be innocent. A rifle is accidentally fired, and a man asleep under a tree, a half-mile away, is killed. Why did that bullet, with all the rest of the world to fall into safely, hit that man? Destiny played with those men, Holt—yuh can't figure any other angle. That finger of Destiny pointed at their number."

Sam Holt thought it over carefully, sucking at his unlighted pipe. Finally he said:

"Do you mean to say that we can't help what we are, nor what we do, Hartley?"

"Nor how or when we die."

"I never looked at it thataway. What about a feller committin' suicide? He has somethin' to say of how and when, don't he?"

"No. Maybe he thinks he does—but that is how and when it was written in the Big Book."

"It's kinda confusin'," smiled the sheriff. "Accordin' to that idea, Mark Van Ess *had* to kill them two men, and somebody *had* to kill Tex Turpin. There wasn't no way out of it. And just the same we take them killers out and—oh, I see—they *had* to hang."

"It makes yuh look at things a little different," said Hashknife.

"It kinda scares yuh," said Lush Medders. "Destiny yanked us out of a livery-stable, Sam—and I wonder why. Maybe our number is comin' up, and—I dunno."

Sam Holt laughed shortly and tossed his pipe aside.

"Hartley," he said, "I don't know who yuh are, nor what yuh are, but if yo're just a driftin' cowpoke—I'm the King of Siam."

"Sam," said Lush Medders chidingly, "that's the second time in a few days that you've claimed a throne."

FROSTY WINTERS came to Spirit River next morning and found Hashknife and Sleepy at the feed-corral.

"I'm ridin' back on the rim, and I wondered if you two would like to go with me," he said.

They would. After they left town Frosty explained.

"We had a little meetin' last night—me and Kent, Jim French and Randy Adams. Randy represented the Circle Star. We talked over the killin' of Tex Turpin, and the fact that Buck Shearer saw a stranger get off that freight train that same day. Or we think it was prob'ly the same day Tex was shot. We didn't get to any agreement of what to do next. Me and Kent feel that things are gettin' to a showdown."

"What about Adams and French?" asked Hashknife.

"Adams, of course, ain't the owner. He'll do anythin' we say. As far as Jim French is concerned, all he said was, 'I'll go along with anythin' yuh decide.' He's a queer rooster, French is."

"Do you trust him?" asked Sleepy.

"No, I don't. When I think about sheep gettin' in here, I don't trust anybody."

"Is Holliday the biggest sheep outfit?" asked Hashknife.

"No, I believe the Ajax outfit is the biggest. Yuh don't hear much about them, but they're plenty big. I kinda got worried about Buck Shearer—up there alone—after what happened to Tex."

Buck's little shack was hidden away in a jumble of rocks and brush, but everything was in order; so they went on to the railroad, where they found Buck himself and Alex McKee, sitting on a pile of old lumber on the lower side of the siding-track, their horses near them. Buck was explaining the situation to Alex McKee. They grinned at the three riders, and Buck announced, "Everythin' is under control, Frosty."

"I'm glad of that," said Frosty. "How are you, Alex?"

"All right. This is kinda new to me, Mr. Winters."

"What are they doin' with that lumber up here?" asked Frosty.

"I asked a section crew about it," replied Buck, "and they said they thought the company was goin' to build a tool-house here."

Hashknife looked at the lumber thoughtfully. There were at least fifty planks, two inches thick, twelve inches wide and about twelve feet long. In another pile were five-foot length of one-by-six boards. It was all used lumber, some of it still full of nails.

"We thought we'd ride up here and see if everythin' is all right," explained Frosty. "Have yuh seen Al Young lately?"

"Saw him yesterday," replied Buck. "Waved at him. He's all right—or was at that time. Any news of the Van Ess kid?"

"Not a thing. We'll ride over and see Al Young."

"Come again, when yuh can stay longer," said Buck. "Don't worry about us up here, Frosty—we sleep with a gun in our hand—now; and one of us will watch every train through here in daylight."

"Yeah," added Alex, "and my shack is near enough so I can hear every train that stops at this sidin'. I'll watch 'em."

"Good boys!" grunted Frosty, and they reined back off the fill of the siding.

Frosty led the way to the little shack, where Al Young stayed, and they found

him at home. Young was a lanky, loose-jointed cowpoke, about thirty years of age, hatchet-faced, small-eyed. He looked upon Hashknife and Sleepy with suspicion, until he recognized Frosty Winters, when he grinned widely and shook hands with him. They dismounted and Frosty introduced Hashknife and Sleepy. The cabin was very small, crudely furnished. Evidently Young had just finished a meal, and hadn't washed his tin dishes yet. He said, "I ain't no danged housekeeper—yuh can see that."

YOUNG didn't know that Tex Turpin had been killed, and the news rather startled him.

"I ain't seen Tex for several days," he admitted, "but I didn't think nothin' of that. We don't do any visitin' up here. I seen Buck Shearer yesterday and waved at him. Who took Tex's place?"

"Alex McKee."

"Oh, he did, eh? Good man, too, Frosty."

"That," remarked Frosty, "don't seem to have a bit of influence on a thirty-thirty bullet."

"I'm scared it don't," agreed Young. "Anythin' new on young Van Ess? They ain't got him, have they?"

Frosty shook his head. "No, and they won't—I don't believe."

"We don't get much news up here," said Young. "I drop down to the ranch about every ten days and stock up. Any idea who might have gunned Tex down?"

"No ideas, Al. They're jittery in the valley—figurin' it's the sheep crowd. A lot depends on you three boys up here."

"Yeah, I reckon that's true. Kinda makes yuh wonder—shootin' one of us thataway. Tex was all right. Things like that make yuh kinda trigger nervous."

"You three fellers better check up on each other every day, Al. They say Tex must have been dead several days—layin' right beside the main trail into the valley."

"My gosh! And us only a mile or so away! It don't seem possible. I don't understand why some of us didn't hear the shot. Yuh know how a rifle shot echoes along these cliffs."

"He wasn't killed up here," said Hashknife.

"He wasn't? What do yuh mean?"

"Somebody shot him down in the valley, and packed him up here."

"Are yuh sure of that, Hartley?"

"No, but it's my guess. That poor devil was shot off his horse on a hard road. His knees were skinned and so was his arms. He hit hard."

"Why do yuh reckon he was shot?"

"Tex Turpin," replied Hashknife, "knew somethin'."

"I wish I knew what he knew," said Frosty, "but maybe we'll never know. Well, boys, I reckon we'll drift back. Keep yore eyes and ears open, Al."

"I shore will, Frosty. Come up again—I shore like company."

They went out to their horses, mounted and rode back down the crooked trail to the rim. Several times Sleepy looked sideways at Hashknife, who was sitting straight in his saddle, staring at the bobbing ears of his horse—or was he?

Frosty waved an arm toward the north, where there was a suspicion of a cloud—an unusual thing in that country.

"It won't be long before we'll have some rain," he remarked.

"Yore rheumatiz botherin' 'yuh?" asked Sleepy, grinning.

"No, I never had anythin' of the kind, Sleepy. See that cloud? It ain't big, but it'll grow. Mebbe in three, four days—wham! And when it rains down here—it pours. That old river bed will boil."

"This country could use rain," said Sleepy.

"It shore could. Man, I ain't seen a rain-drop for so long—"

"It could have been," said Hashknife quietly. Frosty turned his head and looked at the long-faced cowpoke.

"Could have been what?" he asked.

"Oh!" grunted Hashknife, and smiled. "I reckon I was talkin' in my sleep, Frosty. You were speakin' about rain?"

"Don't mind him, Frosty," said Sleepy. "He gets spells like that. I do my sleepin' at night."

SAM HOLT was a very discouraged sheriff. He had no idea which way to turn, and he was no good at bluffing his way along. The commissioners had talked with him, offering vague suggestions, but none of them worth anything. Lush Medders wasn't any help. Lush came in and

placed the mail on the desk. There were two telegrams in sealed envelopes.

The sheriff glanced at the envelopes. One was for him, but the other was addressed to H. Hartley, care of the Sheriff's Office. He opened his own telegram and read it slowly. Then he read it over again. He looked at the envelope carefully. There was no mistake. The telegram inside his envelope was addressed to H. Hartley, and read:

THE SHEEP DEAL IS OFF. BOTH
OF YOU COME BACK.

AJAX.



"Ajax!" exclaimed the sheriff. Lush Medders jumped a foot. It was unusual for Sam Holt to explode like that.

"Ca'm down, Sammy," advised Lush soberly. "You went off like a forty-five ca'tridge in a hot stove."

"Look at this, will yuh?" asked the sheriff grimly. "No—wait a minute! You'll have to have it explained. Here's two telegrams. One is for me and the other is for that long-gear'd Hartley. Do yuh foller me, Lush?"

"Steppin' on yore heels, Sam."

"All right. I opened mine, and here's what it says:

"The sheep deal is off. Both of you come back, and it's signed Ajax."

"You ain't been a-dealin' with the Ajax outfit, have yuh, Sam?"

"Listen, Lush," said the sheriff grimly, "the dad-blamed telegraph operator got the envelopes mixed. I wasn't supposed to see this one. Wait!"

HE OPENED the other. It was more or less of a routine wire, sent out by a Wyoming sheriff, advising officers that a certain outlaw had escaped from his jail, and giving a brief description. Then he carefully sealed the one addressed to Hashknife, and laid it aside.

"What's the verdict, Sam?" asked Lush.

"The verdict? You saw what that telegram said, didn't yuh?"

"You mean that Hartley and Stevens are workin' for the Ajax sheep outfit?"

"That kinda proves it, don't it?"

"Yeah, it shore does."

Lush walked over to the doorway, spat dryly and looked over at the feed-corral. Then he turned back.

"Hartley and Stevens jist rode in at the feed corral," he said.

"All right," said the sheriff. "They'll prob'ly drop in here on their way to the hotel. Act like nothin' happened, but if Hartley reads that telegram, watch his face."

The two cowboys came across the street and looked into the office.

"There's a telegram for yuh, Hashknife," called Lush.

"A telegram for me? Well, thank yuh, Lush."

They came in. Hashknife glanced at the sealed telegram, slowly opened it and read the contents. If it was any surprise to him, he did not show it.

Sleepy paid no attention to it, only said, "We rode back on the rim with Frosty Winters."

"How's everythin'?" asked Lush, but with no enthusiasm.

"Fine. Visited with all three rim-riders, and they're fine."

Hashknife put the telegram in his pocket and rolled a cigarette, his long, muscular fingers as steady as a clock.

"Well, I feel like takin' on a little nourishment," said Sleepy.

"So do I," said Hashknife. "See yuh later, gents."

After they were gone, Lush Medders said, "Well, Sam, he didn't turn a hair. He must be guilty."

"I suspected that all the time. Let me handle this—the men have to be told."

"Why not give 'em a chance to get out of here, Sam? Ain't we had enough killin's?"

"Too damn many—but this is different. I want to find out if that lousy Ajax outfit are to blame for Tex Turpin's murder."

Hashknife and Sleepy went up to their room, where Hashknife handed the crumpled telegram to Sleepy. Sleepy swore quietly and sat down.

"What does this mean?" he asked.

"I've got to do a little thinkin', pardner. That envelope had been opened and sealed again. The mucilage wasn't dry yet."

"Yuh mean—the sheriff read that telegram, Hashknife?"

The lean cowboy nodded, his eyes hard, as he studied the wire again. It was sent from Saguero Wells yesterday. The telegrams had to come from Buckhorn by stage. Finally he said:

"Somebody got smart. Maybe they knew the sheriff would be curious, and open it. Sleepy, we better go awful easy until we can prove we ain't spyin' for them sheep. I don't know just what to do about it. Yuh see—want to take a long ride—to Buckhorn?"

"It might reduce the size of my goose-pimples," said Sleepy.

THE telegraph operator at the Buckhorn station had closed up the office. He batched upstairs over the office, and had an extra instrument up there. He had to come outside the office, in order to reach the stairway to his living quarters, and ran into Hashknife and Sleepy, waiting for him. His first thought was that a train robbery was contemplated, but the two men were not masked.

"We kinda thought we'd go home with yuh and have a talk," said Hashknife quietly. "Go ahead."

"I—I don't know what—" faltered the man.

"Oh, we'll fix all that up, when we get upstairs," assured Sleepy. "You just lead the way."

"But I don't see why I should—"

"Go ahead—we'll explain all that upstairs."

"You ain't trying to force me to—"

"Oh, no-o-o-o!" exclaimed Hashknife. "Don't worry—we won't try to force yuh—unless yuh make us do it."

The man went slowly up the stairs and opened the door to his one large room, where he lived and did his cooking. On the table was a telegraph instrument, the sounder clicking spasmodically. He had left a lighted lamp on the table. Now he faced them, rather defiantly, as Hashknife took the telegram from his pocket.

"This is yore writin'," said Hashknife, "and we wanted to ask yuh a few simple questions about the telegram. The man paled a little, but shut his lips tightly. Hashknife continued:

"We wanted to ask yuh if a record was kept of this telegram."

"Record?" asked the man. He licked his lips and waited.

"Yeah—on a flimsy," said Hashknife. "I know yuh have to make a record on every telegram received. Did yuh record this one?"

The man swallowed painfully, but did not say.

"The company wouldn't like it—unless yuh did, yuh know," remarked Hashknife.

"What right have you got to question me?" demanded the agent. "I know my rights! You can't break in on me and—"

"Was it recorded?" asked Hashknife. "Yes or no?"

"That is company business," declared the man stubbornly. "You have no right to force me to tell things like that."

"We'll all go down and examine the record book," said Hashknife. "I'll find out for myself."

"You can't do that! The law—"

"The law will back me up," interrupted Hashknife. "It is unlawful to fake a telegram—a telegram that might mean a man's life—maybe more than one."

"I—I didn't know—" faltered the man. "All right—it isn't recorded. I—I thought it was just a joke telegram—honest."

"I think you lie," said Hashknife coldly.

"Here! You've got pen and ink. Set down at that table and write what I tell yuh."

"Write what?"

"Set down. If you want to get out of this with a whole skin, you'll do as I say."

The man sat down and picked up the pen. On the table were a number of telegraph blanks. Hashknife said slowly:

"There is no record of the following telegram ever being received at the Buckhorn office. Now copy the telegram, and sign yore name."

The man followed the instructions completely, and signed his name—R. W. Young, agent.

Hashknife blotted the paper and put it in his pocket. The agent sat there, staring into space. Hashknife said, "Pardner, if I was you, I wouldn't be here much longer."

Then they turned and went out of the room, closing the door behind them.

The agent sat there for quite a while after Hashknife and Sleepy had gone. He seemed undecided what to do, but finally looked at his watch, went down the stairs and around to the front of the depot, where he lighted the red, flag-stop signal.

IT WAS early in the morning when Hashknife and Sleepy rode their tired horses into Spirit River. They stabled their own mounts and went to the hotel. In the lobby were Sam Holt, Jim French and Miles Kent. The three men looked them over curiously. Hashknife said, "You gents are up kinda late, ain't yuh?"

"We held a meetin' tonight," said Kent, "and decided that we didn't want you two in this part of the country. I reckon you know what we mean; so we won't argue about it. Yore hotel room is locked, yore war-sacks over by the desk. *Vamoso pronto.*"

Hashknife smiled slowly. "Kinda sudden, ain't yuh, gentlemen?"

"We're just a little late—we figure."

"I see," said Hashknife. He didn't seem disturbed. "Who made this decision, if yuh don't mind tellin' us?"

"There were French, Adams and me," said Kent. "The sheriff was at the meetin', but took no hand in the decisions."

"What happened to Frosty Winters?" asked Sleepy.

"We didn't bother to notify him," said

Kent. "Anyway, it'd been three to one, even if he voted for you. Get movin'."

Hashknife and Sleepy turned to the desk, picked up their war-sacks and walked out. The three men followed them to the doorway, and watched them cross toward the feed corral, where they saddled their horses and rode away in the darkness.

"Why didn't yuh tell 'em what happened at Buckhorn?" asked Sleepy.

"Yuh see," replied Hashknife, "I don't know yet who sent that telegram. We'll go out to Frosty's place and borrow a bed."

"That's fine," agreed Sleepy. "I was scared for a minute that we was leavin' Spirit River."

"Not as long as there's unfinished business."

They swung off onto the road to Frosty Winters' spread. It was moonlight along the old road, as they rode knee-to-knee, through a narrow canyon about a mile from the ranch. At one spot the road narrowed, with rocks piled in almost against the road.

"I hope Frosty won't be sore about us wakin' him up at this time in the mornin'," said Sleepy.

Hashknife started to reply, but at that moment his horse shied sharply, and something, hissing through the air, struck him over the left ear. It was a slashing blow, the surprise and shock combining to fairly knock him out of his saddle. He dimly heard Sleepy yell a warning of some kind, and then he crashed down in some brush, which broke his fall.

Badly dazed, but acting through instinct, he crawled swiftly back, and rolled into the brush, just before a horse and rider lunged over him. He dimly heard a man yelling, "We've got one of 'em, but where's the other?"

Another voice yelled, "Get that other horse! Maybe he's still on it!"

Hashknife rolled a bit deeper into the brush, pawing weakly for his gun, but found the holster empty. He couldn't see anything that was going on. Another rider swung off the road, and the hoofs of that horse did not miss him more than a foot or two. He heard a man swearing bitterly over the failure of their plot. Evidently one of them found Hashknife's horse, because a man said, "Leave the damn thing here—we don't want it!"

Then he heard men searching the brush on foot, but they finally gave up in disgust.

"All right—let's pull out, before it gets too light," one voice said.

They went back down the road toward Spirit River, but Hashknife was too deep in the brush now to see them.

After they were gone Hashknife took stock of himself. Over his left ear was an egg-sized lump, and there was a sizeable cut in the scalp, which was bleeding. Otherwise he was all right, except for a few minor cuts and bruises. After a long, painstaking search, he found his six-shooter. His horse was a short distance down the road toward the Flying W. After a cautious stalk of the animal, Hashknife decided that no one had been left to trap him; so he mounted and rode on.

It was fairly clear to him now that the bushwhackers had used ropes, and that it was a heavy, iron hondo, which hit him over the ear. There had been no shooting. They had captured Sleepy—that was clear to Hashknife, as he rode in at the Flying W. He hammered on the front door with the butt of his gun, and Frosty, clad in ill-fitting, woollen underwear, came to the door, gun in hand. Behind him was Bliz Bentley, similarly clad and armed, holding the lamp.

"Horns on the moon, feller!" Frosty said. "What happened? Come in! Where's Sleepy? Don't answer. Bliz, get that bottle of pain-killer!"

Hashknife sank down in a chair and mopped his head with a handkerchief. Bliz brought the bottle and Frosty slopped some of it into a glass.

"Git two more glasses, Bliz," he ordered. "I need it almost as bad as he does. Give that stuff time to penetrate, Hashknife. I'll git some hot-water and polish yuh up a little."

The two old-timers sat there in their underclothes, glass in hand, by the light of a smoky oil-lamp, and listened to Hashknife tell what happened, from the receipt of the telegram to the attack on the road. Frosty bristled like an old badger.

"So they didn't need me at their damned meetin', huh? Ordered yuh out of the country, huh? Why in the devil didn't yuh show them that writin' the agent gave yuh?"

"Frosty," replied Hashknife, "I didn't know who wrote that telegram. Yuh can't

talk too much—until yuh know. I blamed the sheriff for openin' the telegram, but that agent said he put 'em in the wrong envelopes."

"Why didn't yuh make that coyote tell who done it?"

"Frosty, that man would have either shut up—or lied. No, I got what I went for. But they've got Sleepy."

No one said anything for a while, but finally Hashknife mused, "If they'd wanted to murder us, they wouldn't have used ropes, they'd have used shotguns and buckshot."

"And they hopped yuh right in Gunsight Pass, eh?"

"It was that narrow spot, Frosty."

"That was it. Have another snort of cougar oil, and I'll fix up yore head, feller. You've got to sleep a while—and after that we'll make up some war-path medicine."

SLEEPY STEVENS awoke in total darkness. He had no idea where he was, nor how he got there. He remembered being yanked out of his saddle, but everything went black, when he hit the ground. He was unable to move his arms and legs, but discovered that they were tied. Except for a saline taste in his mouth and a dull ache all over his body, he was apparently unhurt. At least, no bones were broken. But he had never been in any place quite as dark as this one.

Then he heard a sort of booming sound, and was conscious of a glow of light, as though someone had lighted a lamp some distance away. Turning his head toward the source of the light he began to realize that he was in a cave or a mine of some sort.

There were voices, too, but muffled and indistinct. Sleepy wondered what became of Hashknife. If they captured him, they were keeping him in another place. Then he heard a voice exclaim:

"Where the devil did you come from?"

"Off that last freight," replied another voice, panting.

Ensued some conversation, pitched too low for Sleepy to hear, but he heard the word "telegram" and "confession." The man said loudly, "and I'm not going back there either."

"The hell, you ain't! Yo're gettin' well

paid to handle the job in Buckhorn, and yo're goin' back there. Yo're crazy."

"I'm hangin' onto my health," declared the man warmly.

"Yo're takin' that next train back to Buckhorn—or it won't be healthy. We've got one of them cowpokes, tied up back here; and the tall one won't be able to get on the rim."

THE conversation died out, as though the two men walked out of the place. Sleepy drew a deep breath of satisfaction. These men had failed to capture Hashknife. He tried to work his ropes loose, but found that he had been very well tied. He heard footsteps and a man came in to him, carrying a candle. Sleepy sagged sideways, and shut his eyes. The man came in close, looked him over and went away, satisfied that his prisoner was still unconscious.

Hashknife slept late next morning. Frosty and Bliz kept an eye on the road to Spirit River, but no one came out there. Bliz cooked breakfast for him, while Frosty kept watch. Hashknife's injuries were doing fine, but he was still muscle-sore. Frosty said, "I'm shore goin' to tell Jim French, Miles Kent and Randy Adams where to head in at."

"It's all right," said Hashknife. "They only know what they saw with their own eyes. I don't blame 'em."

"You don't never seem to blame anybody," said Frosty. "If I was in yore place, I'd yell and cuss and start trouble. Yo're a funny cuss, Hashknife."

"I don't feel exactly funny."

"I don't mean it that way. You don't ever seem to be mad at them coyotes."

"I am, Frosty—but I realize that they can't help bein' what they are."

"Yeah, I know how you look at things, but to me a skunk is a skunk, even if he can't help smellin' bad."

"I don't cotton to them theories," declared Bliz. "You can't tell me that a horse-thief can't help stealin' horses. Or that a feller who shoots another feller—had to do it. It was all wrote out for him? If that was true, why hang men for murder? It don't stop men from murderin' other men."

"It never has," smiled Hashknife. "I don't believe in it."

"Well, it sure stops 'em from murderin' more men," said Frosty.

"It confuses me," admitted Bliz. "But what's to be done about Sleepy? We've got to find that grim-faced hombre."

"That," said Hashknife, "is a one-man job, Bliz—and I'm takin' it over. Come dark, I'll pull out."

Frosty nodded thoughtfully. He said, "Bliz, you keep an eye on the road; I'm goin' to town and listen around a little."

Frosty was back before suppertime, but with little news.

"They're all talkin' about you and Sleepy pullin' out of the country," he said, "and they're pretty sure that the sheep danger is all over. I didn't see Adams, Kent nor French, but I sure told Sam Holt a few things. The Van Ess family was in town, but Curt Van Ess ain't interested in sheep."

"Yuh know, I don't believe Mrs. Van Ess has stopped cryin' since I introduced her to you the other day. She's bogged down somethin' awful. She says to me, 'He's my own son.' I says, 'Ma'am, nobody on earth would know that better than you.' Curt says to me, when she can't hear, 'I never expect to see him again. He's gone, and he won't come back.' How'd yuh like that?"

Hashknife had no comments. After a while he remarked to Frosty, "That telegram was a smart move, Frosty. It's thrown everybody off their guard. If I don't show up by this time tomorrow night, tell the men what you know, and head for the rim. If yuh don't there'll be woolies blattin' all over Spirit River Valley."

"Do you mean that?" asked Frosty.

"I almost know it, Frosty. How it'll be done, I'm not sure."

"Do we dare wait that long?"

"Take that chance—but be ready to ride."

IT WAS well after dark, when Hashknife rode away from the Flying W, but this time he kept away from the road. He was taking no chances on an ambush this time. He had been twice to the rim, and knew the trail well, but was afraid of it. Frosty told him of an old trail, further north, hardly used any more, but which would be easy to find.

It would have been in daylight or moonlight, but there was no moon tonight. A

cool breeze whipped down through the valley, and from far to the north came faint flashes of lightning. Hashknife finally located the old trail, and went up toward the blackness of the rim.

When he rested his horse at the top of the rim, the flashes were brighter, and he could hear the muttering of thunder. Except for that, it was very quiet up there. Frosty had told him that the old trail led very close to Buck Shearer's shack, but he had some difficulty in finding the place. Buck was not there; so he rode on, heading into the darkness. He heard the whistle of a locomotive, and far above him he saw the lights of a passenger train heading for Buckhorn. A few sprinkles of rain fell, and he got off to put on his slicker. He had to let the horse pick its own way, and the animal came out at the south end of the siding.

There was a light down the siding. Hashknife left his horse and went cautiously down there. Two or three men were working by the light of a lantern, handling heavy planks and hammering. Hashknife went back to his horse. It was raining quite hard now. Near him was the switch-target; barely visible a few feet away.

Right now it was plainly evident that the sheep were coming—and tonight. Those planks were to be used as unloading strips, with the one-by-sixes nailed across to enable the animals to get footing. So much was clear to him.

"Tool-shanty!" he snorted aloud, as he swung into the saddle. "And they dumped the lumber *below* the grade."

He found the trail again and went on a search for the shack of Alex McKee. This required almost an hour, but Alex McKee was not at home. Hashknife got back into his saddle, sadder but wiser.

"They got them two rim-riders," he told the horse. "They ain't takin' any chances on a slip-up. Now, we'll see if we can find Mr. Young's abode."

He was obliged to go back down toward the rim this time. Wind and rain swept through the brush, but he was able to locate the trail to Al Young's shack. Just as he drew in close he saw a very faint light through the patched-up window on the side of the shack.

Leaving his horse he went cautiously up

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to the front of the shack, and called, "Al! Al! Are yuh home?"

He was close to the door, as it opened a few inches, and he said quickly, "Let me in, Al."

THE door opened wide and he stepped inside. A lamp was burning on the crude table, and facing him was a man he had never seen before. The man's back was to the light, and before Hashknife could size up the situation, this man swung a gun from behind himself, and, with the muzzle only a foot from Hashknife, he pulled the trigger. Came only the loud pop of a cartridge primer.

Hashknife's right hand had flashed back to his gun, but his left fist hit the man, knocking him backwards and sideways. His hip hit the table, and he went completely off balance, dropping his gun. Giving him a violent shove away, Hashknife swept up the weapon. The man caught his balance and sat down on the bunk.

Hashknife drew a deep breath, as he studied the man, who sat there, his lips shut tightly. He looked as though he might break into tears at any time.

"If you had a shave and yore face washed, you might look like young Van Ess," remarked Hashknife.

The young man did not answer. Hashknife opened the gun and took out a cartridge. With a twist of his muscular hands he pulled the bullet out of the case. Then he laid the gun on the table.

"I suppose," he said calmly, "they told yuh to shoot anybody yuh met, hopin' you'd shoot that pop-cartridge and get killed for yore pains. What do yuh think of it, Kid?"

"Are you an officer?" asked the young man weakly.

"I am not—I'm yore friend."

"Yeah, I suppose you are," he replied sarcastically.

"Take it easy, son," advised Hashknife. "Hidin' up here from the law, eh. Bad man from Bitter-River. Kid, I saw yore mother and father the other day. They still believe in yuh."

The tears came now. Mark Van Ess wasn't a bad man. He choked over his words, "I—I didn't—mean to—to do it."

"Do you admit it?"

"I don't know what I did. They say that

all the officers are after me for murder. What can I do? I was too drunk to remember what happened. Don't you believe me?"

Hashknife ignored the question. "They say," he remarked, "that you killed Pete Zinn at the ranch, stole his horse and went to Buckhorn and shot the sheriff."

Mark Van Ess stared at Hashknife. "They—that's a lie!" he blurted. "I never. You've got to believe me! Who said I—why, I never went to Buckhorn. Even if I was drunk—I'd know that."

"All right, son—I believe yuh. What about shootin' Zinn?"

"I don't know," said the kid miserably. "I don't know."

"Well, we'll just say that yuh didn't. Brace up."

"I've been here—hiding; hiding in a cave. I had to come here to eat. Al Young fed me. He didn't want the officers to get me. He was good to me."

"Who gave yuh that useless gun, Kid?"

"Why—uh—well, Al did."

"Uh-huh. He was wonderful to yuh."

"He said my only chance was to lay low up here, until it—well, sort of blew over—but to shoot my way loose, if they found me. He said it was better than being hung. Who are you?"

"I'm tryin' to be yore friend, Kid. If you—sh-h-h-h!"

Hashknife stepped quickly over beside the door, gun in hand, as the door opened and Tony Lopez, one of the Circle Star cowboys came in. Hashknife's gun-muzzle bored into Tony's side, and as he raised his arms quickly, Hashknife took his gun away.

Tony breathed, "*Madre de Dios!*"

"Set down, Cholo," said Hashknife sharply.

Tony sat down and glared at Mark Van Ess.

"So, you dobblecross me, eh, Keed?" he remarked. He shifted his blood-shot eyes and looked at the tall, sinister-looking cowboy.

"'Ow you got 'ere?" he asked.

"Where's my pardner?" asked Hashknife, ignoring the question.

"*No hablar Inglis,*" he replied.

"Don't speak English, eh? You'll talk Chinese, before I finish with you, my friend. Where's my pardner?"

"*No entender.*"

"Why, he speaks English as well as anybody," said Mark.

TONY leaned back, his hands braced behind him on the crumpled blankets. Hashknife had lowered his gun, dangling it straight down in his right hand, as he listened. A flash of lightning illuminated the shack, and a crash of thunder was like the explosion of a cannon.

At that moment Tony Lopez twisted on the bed and flung an old pillow straight into Hashknife's face. As quick as the leap of a cat, Tony went off that bed, swept Mark's gun off the table, and whirled on Hashknife. Twice the hammer snapped on empty cartridges, as Tony tried to back away, his eyes wide.

Hashknife's left fist caught the Mexican on the jaw. It wasn't a knockout punch, but Tony dropped the useless gun, and threw both hands up to his face. But they were little protection. Hashknife drove the clutching fingers into Tony's own face, as he smashed them with short, slashing blows. The Mexican made no attempt to fight back. He was bleeding badly, one eye fast swelling shut, when the tall cowboy stepped back and let Tony sag onto the bed.

"Where's my pardner?" asked Hashknife. "Talk fast."

"*Por piedad!*" whimpered Tony.

"There wasn't any mercy in yore souls, when you roped my pardner last night when you roped him off his horse, and I'm not showin' any mercy tonight. Stop whimperin', you coyote! Where is my pardner?"

"I don' know," whimpered Tony. "I jus' come from rancho. I see nobody, talk weeth nobody. I don' know notheeng."

"That last statement, I believe," said Hashknife.

There was an old rope, hanging from a nail on the wall, and Hashknife tied Tony, hand and foot, while Mark Van Ess stood there, trying to puzzle out what this was all about. Hashknife flung Tony face down on the bed, and shoved Tony's gun into the waist-band of his own overalls.

"Are you going away?" asked Mark fearfully. "I—I don't want to stay here—with him."

Hashknife looked straight at the frightened young man, who had gone through

enough to frighten anybody. Then he drew out the Mexican's gun and handed it to him, butt-first.

"I reckon I need you," he said slowly. "You know where that cave is located. I don't reckon anythin' can happen that'll scare you any worse than yo're scared now, Kid. Hold up yore chin, and c'mon with me. Whatever happens, it'll be better than hangin'."

"I'm with you," husked the young man, "whatever happens."

"And it prob'ly will," said Hashknife grimly.

MARK VAN ESS took Tony's horse, and led the way toward the cave. It was raining so hard that they had difficulty in forcing the horses to face it. Hashknife could never have found such a place alone. They crawled over brush and around rocks, after leaving their horses, the lightning being their only illumination, but Mark found it.

The place was as dark as a tomb, but Hashknife lighted matches and found an old oil-lamp, which gave them a chance to see what the interior looked like. He said, "Is this all of the cave?"

"Hashknife!" yelled Sleepy's voice, booming in the confines of a little side cavern.

Hashknife called back to him, and began working his way over the rubble.

He found Sleepy and swiftly cut away the ropes which bound him. As Sleepy got to his hands and knees they heard a voice snarl:

"What the hell are you doin' here, Kid? Didn't they tell yuh to—put down that gun, you fool! All right, you'll—"

The cave thundered from the report of a forty-five, and a man yelped painfully. Hashknife ran toward the light, with Sleepy limping after him. Mark Van Ess stood there, a smoking gun in his right hand, staring down at a man on the floor. Hashknife stopped beside the kid, who looked at him and said huskily:

"I—I shot him! It's Ike Sims! He was going to shoot me."

Sleepy picked up Sims' gun, cocked, and held it in his hand.

"It's all right, Mark," assured Hashknife. "You had to do it."

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"But—but he's one of our own men," whispered the frightened boy.

"Was," corrected Hashknife.

"I don't understand," said Mark helplessly.

Hashknife turned to Sleepy. "Are yuh all right, pardner?"

"Finer 'n frawg-hair," replied Sleepy. "Where is this place?"

"On the rim."

"Oh, yeah—I thought so. Where'd yuh find the kid?"

"Over in Al Young's shack. They're bringin' the sheep in tonight, and they've got McKee and Shearer. At least, they ain't at their shacks. There's men at the sidin', makin' up planks to unload the sheep."

"Well, you've shore been around," marveled Sleepy. "Anybody helpin' you, Hashknife?"

"You and the kid—now. Maybe we've got three horses now—Sims must have rode something over here."

"And also donated a good gun," grinned Sleepy. "Take a look at it, will yuh?"

"Sleepy, that's yore own gun!"

"It sure is. They took it last night. What do we do next?"

Hashknife beamed Ike Sims. He was still alive, but would not be able to travel under his own power.

"You'll keep, feller," he said quietly, and they walked out into the blinding rain.

RAIN was sweeping the main street of Spirit River, wind whistling past the old false-fronts of the buildings. Inside the sheriff's office stood Frosty Winters, Miles Kent, Jim French, Sam Holt and Lush Medders. Water off their boots formed pools on the old floor. Frosty, French and Kent wore black slickers, the water glistening on their big hats.

"I tell yuh—somethin' is happenin'!" said Frosty. "And I'm bettin' that all ain't well on the rim."

"Why didn't yuh tell us earlier?" asked Kent. "It's almost midnight now. We didn't know the truth about that telegram, and we didn't know about Stevens bein' captured. Why didn't they tell us at the hotel this mornin'?"

"'Cause Hartley didn't know who sent that telegram."

"Does he know now?" asked French.

"If he don't," replied Frosty, "nobody else does, except the man who sent it. He said it was a decoy—to make us satisfied that the sheep wasn't comin'."

Miles Kent swore quietly. Frosty said, "I ain't askin' help, boys—I'll go alone."

"I'll go with yuh," said Sam Holt. "It's the least I can do."

"All right," nodded French, and Kent said, "Count me in."

"We'll go to the Circle Star," said Frosty. "It ain't far out of our way. Might as well pick up extra help."

Lush Medders insisted on going along, and the five men, swathed in slickers, headed for the Circle Star. The rain and the wind prevented any conversation. There was a light in the main room of the ranch-house. As they dismounted Frosty remarked, "I hear the kid's ma keeps a light burnin' in that winder."

"Take more'n a light to git him back," said French.

CURTIS VAN ESS, clad in startling pajamas, answered their knock on the front door. He stared at the swathed figures, not recognizing them, until Sam Holt said:

"Van Ess, is Randy Adams home?"

"Oh, it is you, Mr. Holt! No, none of the boys are at home. They are in Spirit River, I suppose. Won't you come in? What a terrible night to be riding! Come in, please."

"No," said Frosty. "Much obliged, Van Ess—we'll be ridin' on."

"But I don't understand, gentlemen," he protested.

"You ort to be with us—we don't either," said Lush.

They went back to their horses and mounted. Curtis Van Ess still stood in the doorway, rain spattering in on the knees of his pajamas. Mrs. Van Ess and Marion came out of their room, swathed in robes against the chill.

"What happened, Dad?" asked Marion. "Who on earth were those men?"

"They—they are—well, I recognized Mr. Holt, Mr. Winters and the man they call Lush. I really didn't see the other faces."

"I wonder if it is anything about Mark?" asked Mrs. Van Ess anxiously. "Good Heavens, riding on a night like this!"

"Dad, you may as well shut the door," said Marion.

"They merely asked for Randy Adams and the boys," he said, and closed the door.

THE whole world was a black swirl of wind and water, as Hashknife, Sleepy and Mark climbed onto horses and headed up the hill. There was no chance to discuss what to do next; they merely let Hashknife lead the way. Sleepy and Mark had no slickers, and in a few moments they were drenched.

Hashknife's destination was the railroad siding, and they came up to the far end of the switch. They could not see anything in that darkness and downpour. An occasional flash of lightning off across the range gave them some idea of where they were.

A faint pencil of light cut through the rain, as the train came around a curve, and they could feel the jar of the approach. It came around the last curve, and the headlight picked them up beside the switch. The wind tore away the blasts of the whistle and flung them back along the crags.

The huge engine ground to a stop, the pilot almost against the three men and a man swung down, stumbling, groping his way toward the switch. Rain hissed against the big engine, and escaping steam almost obliterated it. The brakeman groped for the switch-lock, as Hashknife moved in against him. In the dim lights of his lantern, he looked at the tall cowboy, who yelled in his ear:

"Take that train on to Buckhorn! We can't unload it! Take it to Buckhorn and wait for orders!"

The brakeman nodded, water running down his face, and hurried back along the train. The three men grouped together, wondering what the conductor would do. The locomotive whistle blasted four times, and in a few moments the big drivers again bit into the wet rails, as the engineer applied sand, and the train began to rattle across the switch-plates.

How many cars of sheep were in that train, none of them knew. Two men seemed to come out of nowhere, running. Above the clank and rattle of the train, they heard someone yelling:

"Back up! Back up! You've missed the

switch! You blasted fools, you've missed the switch!"

They were not twenty feet from Hashknife, Sleepy and Mark. In spite of the danger, Sleepy couldn't help his next act. He cupped his hands around his mouth and bleated like a sheep, "Ba-a-ah!"

"Look out!" yelled one of the two men, and guns blazed in the dark-impotent-sounding pops in all that noise.

The caboose rattled past, dim lights in the windows, a man peering out. Hashknife heard a bullet hit the switch-target. Perhaps one of those men thought it was a human figure. The shooting was over and a man was stumbling in the darkness. One other was down.

He was Baldy McKeon. Hashknife had a bullet through one sleeve of his slicker. Sleepy panted as they went to their horses, "That other *pelicano* was hit, Hashknife!"

They mounted in the dark and went down the slope, Hashknife in the lead again, and he took them straight to the Young shack. It was dark in there now, but they lighted the lamp. Tony Lopez was not there, but Buck Shearer and Alex McKee were—all tied up and roped to the bunk-posts. They stared wide-eyed at the three men, who quickly cut them loose.

"McKeon brought us here," said Buck. "Said he didn't want us to drown. What the hell's goin' on, Hashknife? Did the sheep—"

"They're headin' for Buckhorn," said Hashknife. "We—look out!"

A MAN banged into the door, sagged back and flung it open. It was Randy Adams, his face as white as wood-ashes in the lamplight. He was badly hurt and had lost his gun. He stumbled and fell against the table, but Hashknife saved the lamp.

"Out—cold!" blurted Buck Shearer. "What next?"

"The—the Van Ess kid!" gasped Alex McKee. "Where—"

"He's a man now," said Hashknife.

"Horse comin'!" announced Sleepy. "Listen!"

From outside came a voice, "This is Al! I'm comin' in!"

Al Young came in, stopped short, pawing for his gun, but lifted his hands slowly. Too many guns were trained on him. He

went limp, and almost fell. He was so confused that he blurted:

"I didn't think they could make it—across that damned river; so I hunted a dry spot—and they got across. I—what's goin' on, anyway? Randy, you—my God!"

"You'll feel worse than that, when yuh get it all straight," said Sleepy. "Set down, Young."

"You mean—the men from the valley?" asked Hashknife.

Al Young nodded miserably. Sleepy had taken his gun.

"I saw 'em—mebbe five, six of 'em. That rain ruined us," he said.

Buck Shearer flung the door open, and suddenly the little shack was full of men. Sam Holt, Lush Medders, Frosty Winters, Miles Kent and Jim French, staring around at the tableau.

"There's Van Ess' kid!" said Lush.

Sam Holt flung the water off his sombrero and said, "What's been goin' on up here, Hartley?"

"Well," replied Hashknife, "I sent the sheep train on to Buckhorn—and that's the Ajax problem now. Baldy McKeon is layin' up there by the sidin', Ike Sims is down in a cave, ready for the coroner, here's Randy Adams and Al Young. I tried to hammer some sense into Tony Lopez, and I don't know where he went."

"They were really goin' to unload sheep?" asked French.

Hashknife nodded. Buck Shearer said, "They bushed me and Alex, and they told me what they was goin' to do."

Randy Adams was badly hurt, but conscious. He swore bitterly.

"How about doin' a little talkin', Adams," suggested Hashknife.

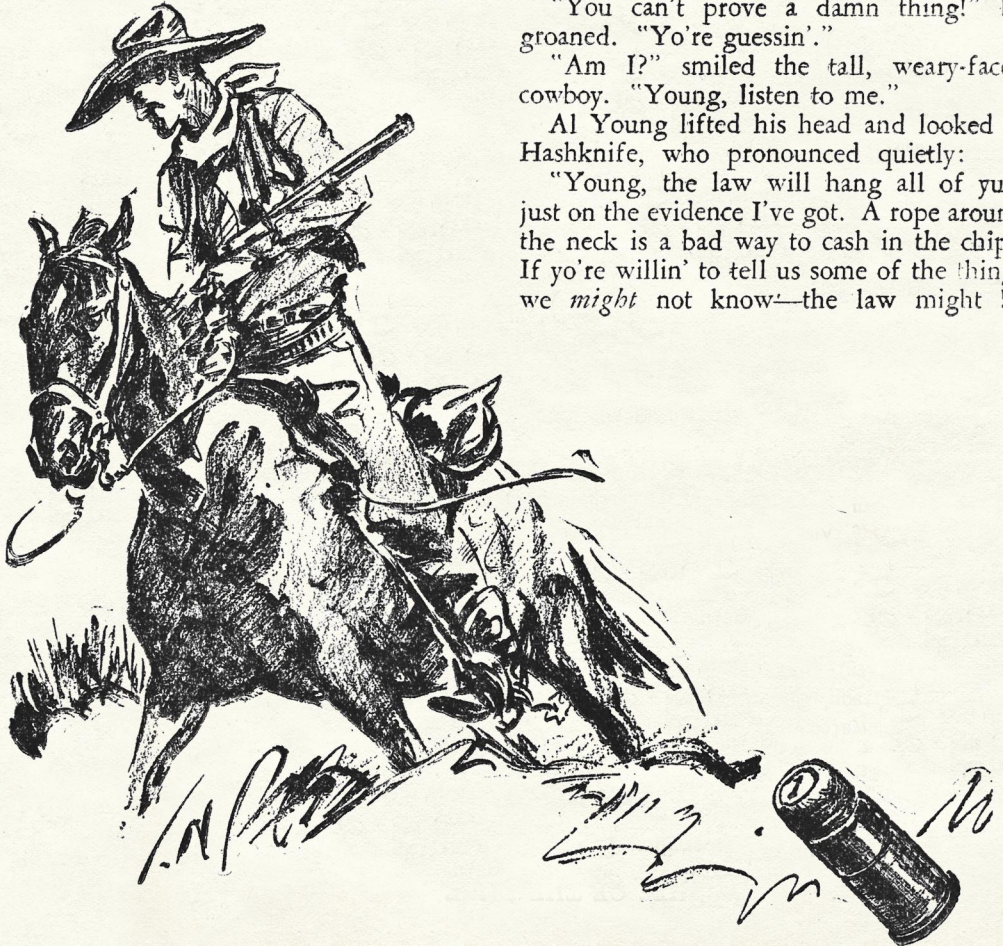
Adams told him, in no uncertain terms, just where to go.

"You can't prove a damn thing!" he groaned. "Yo're guessin'."

"Am I?" smiled the tall, weary-faced cowboy. "Young, listen to me."

Al Young lifted his head and looked at Hashknife, who pronounced quietly:

"Young, the law will hang all of yuh, just on the evidence I've got. A rope around the neck is a bad way to cash in the chips. If yo're willin' to tell us some of the things we *might* not know—the law might be



lenient. For instance, I know that yore gang shot Pete Zinn and Tuck Edwards and Turpin, but I want to know just who fired the shots. I know you fellers sold out to Ajax, and were goin' to help sheep out the valley. You can't dodge any of it, my friend—so why not help yourself?"

"Keep still, you fool!" snarled the suffering Adams.

"I don't want to hang," whimpered Young. "I didn't kill anybody. Adams was here, when Turpin came to warn me about that sheep man and Adams shot him. He landed on the rocks out there in front of the shack, and we put him down along the trail. You thought he was shot down in the valley."

"Until I saw the ground in front of the shack," said Hashknife. "Go ahead."

"Well, that sheep man came to the ranch, and Pete Zinn saw him. Pete knew him, too. Adams knew he was in for trouble and he shot Zinn. The kid was too drunk to know what was goin' on; so Adams made him believe he shot Zinn, and that he'd hang for it. We got the kid back here on the rim, hidin' out from the law. Adams took Pete's horse and headed for Buckhorn, after we notified the sheriff what happened. Randy was just goin' to leave Pete's horse in Buckhorn, and come back—but he ran into the sheriff and had to down him. It was a mess. Then the Van Ess family showed up, and that made it worse than ever. Mebbe we'd have pulled the job all right, if you two hadn't showed up—I dunno. All I was to get was a thousand dollars—and look what I got."

"Want to add anythin' to that, Adams?" asked Hashknife.

"Young lies," groaned Adams. "Get me to a doctor—I'll fight this case."

"Wait a minute!" blurted Mark Van Ess. "I—I didn't kill anybody! I'm free to—oh, yes, I did, too—I shot Ike Sims."

"You'll get a medal for that, son," said Hashknife.

Lush called from the doorway, "The storm's breakin', men!"

"We can get back across," said Jim French. "The channel broke wide this time—that's how we got over." He came over and held his hand out to Hashknife.

"I ain't able to say what I'd like to," he

said. "You know the story about my kid. He's with a sheep outfit, and folks around here thought his outfit was plannin' to sheep us out. He did come here to the valley, secretly, to tell me that somebody here was dealin' with Ajax. He took a big chance—comin' to tell me those things."

"Why in the devil didn't he write yuh, Jim?" asked Frosty.

"Well," said Jim French grimly, "I reckon I'll have to tell yuh, why he didn't—I can't read."

NO ONE said anything, until Miles Kent announced, "That ain't nothin' to be ashamed of, Jim. What we've got to be ashamed of is tryin' to run Hartley and Stevens out of the valley."

"You did," declared Forsty, "but they never got any further than the rim."

It was daylight, when they sent their horses across that quarter-mile-wide stretch of mud and dirty water, but the sun was shining. They wouldn't need rim-riders any more.

All of them, except Hashknife and Sleepy, headed for the Circle Star. Hashknife said, "You won't need us to tell Van Ess the story—and we're pretty wet and hungry; so we'll head for town."

"I don't blame yuh," whispered Frosty. "I can't stand tears either. See yuh in Spirit River."

"Tell Van Ess he can turn the spread over to his kid, who grew up last night, Frosty," said Hashknife.

"I'll tell him."

As they rode back toward Spirit River, traveling knee-to-knee along a muddy road, Sleepy said:

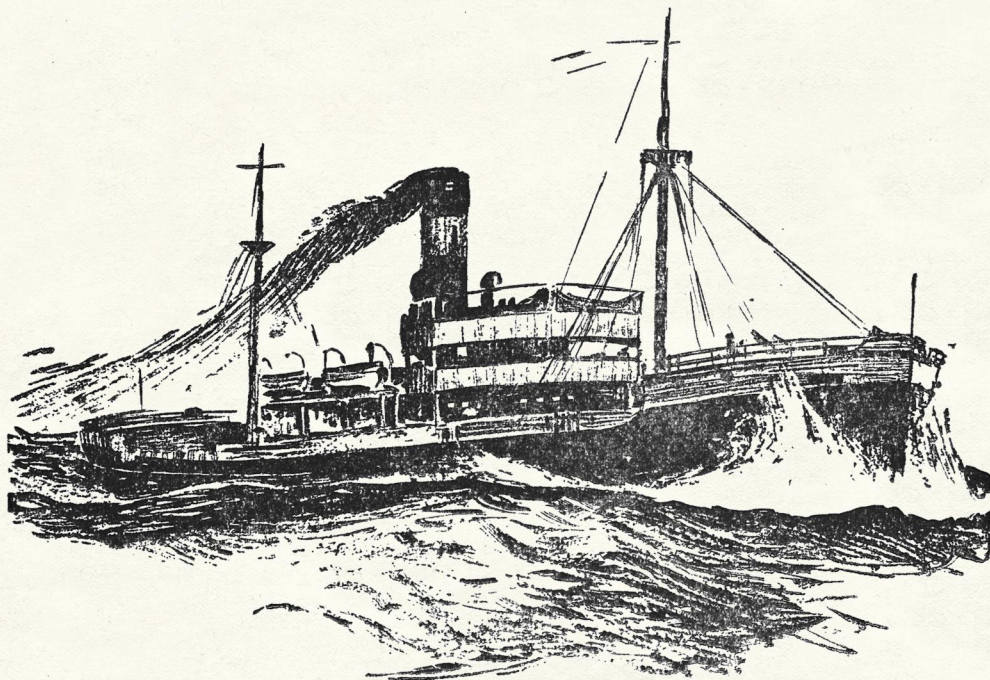
"Them tall hills, out toward the east look mighty invitin', pardner. Yuh never can tell what's on the other side."

"I noticed 'em the other day," replied Hashknife quietly. "We'll eat and dry off, pay our bill, and go ridin' again. Yuh remember, we got run off before we could pay our bill at the hotel."

"Suits me. I've got a good notion to send Bob Marsh a telegram."

"What'll you tell him?" asked Hashknife curiously.

"Tell him where to go—and send him my regards," grinned Sleepy.



THE SHIP COMES FIRST

By B. E. COOK

CAPTAIN RAMSEY'S ears tingled. He moved to the after dodger to see who would make such a statement.

"That's what I said," the bosun repeated—"take orders from a jailbird."

The sailor splicing with him plunged his fist fiercely between strands, but he held his tongue.

"That guy almost killed a man. Square-head like you. Lost his license and served time for it; lucky he didn't kill 'im"—watching Svenson sharply—"and the only reason he could give was his helmsman didn't obey his orders."

"What orders?" Svenson asked under his breath.

"The helmsman said it was 'left helm'; Beal said it was 'right'. Damned hothead, we don't want 'im on here."

"Nah."

"Tough if you gotta steer for that guy. What?"

Svenson's neck turned scarlet, then white. He did not look up.

Captain Ramsey above them sensed somebody behind him. He turned and the old mate said, "You heard? That's how the crew feels. I tell you 'tisn't right, the owners dumping Beal onto us. It won't get by."

The captain respected Dreer's views. He led the way into the pilothouse to say, "First of all, I believe it will. I surely hope so. Secondly, don't crab the owners; I asked for Beal, I've known him since boyhood. He came up in my ships to Third in this one, got master's papers in the war. Convoys. No better young skipper ever took over."

"Except for that temper," Dreer insisted.

"Temper once," Ramsey admitted, "but he's paid for that and no man should go on paying the rest of his life for one slip-up." He paced a few moments and reasoned, "In prison all this time, back where he rated six years back! Beal a confirmed criminal? Do you want to make him one?" He waggled

his finger at his mate and declared, "Now's the time to give the man a new start!"

"I see, yes, but why in this vessel where he's known and—and hated?"

"Got to live it down somewhere. May as well start right here and take the worst at the outset, Dreer."

"Well, I'll do my part. When?"

"Tomorrow."

LOCKED in his cabin, the skipper faced the situation he had created. It was to be a long trip, a long time beyond the possible chance to replace Beal or any disaffected members of his crew. Confound that bosun, he was grinding his own axe; he had expected to go Third himself and now he evidently hoped to force a situation where he'd get it yet. He wasn't the man for it.

What had prison life done to Beal's temper? Could he still be provoked to violence by men under him? Once Captain Ramsey had called at the prison, but Beal revealed nothing, no effects of his bitter experience and no interest in personal favors. Hadn't the skipper offered him this chance to go Third as soon as he was released? Beal had hounded shipping offices instead. Finally he'd had to accept, had to face acquaintances in his old ship.

It was not easy for Captain Ramsey when Cory Beal stood in his doorway at stiff attention like the Naval Reserve officer he once had been. "Sit down, man. Relax. We'll talk plain here in private, then let the past lay."

The tall, young figure sat rigid and the face flushed, but the dark eyes remained cold and determined. "Yes, sir," the lips said.

Ramsey laid a hand on the nearest shoulder—"Not that way, Cory," he urged, hoping to break the tension, "we're starting new. From here. 'Twon't be easy, I realize that; you'll have to take a lot aboard here. But you're focusing on the wrong object to accomplish anything."

"I don't get it," Beal said combatively.

"I mean, the ship comes first. Always remember that. Ah, people forget soon if a man does his stint well." He sighed in his failure to unbend the man and said softly, "Cory Beal, you've always been rather close to my heart."

That, at least, brought Beal to his feet, but in a hard, acid voice he said, "I understand, sir. I'm to subordinate my situation to concern for this ship—meaning, no temper. Do I sign on now?"

Ramsey had failed to humanize him. He pointed to the crew list and said, "You know, of course, you don't have to sign on this vessel?"

Beal signed.

In one final effort, Ramsey remembered Beal's young brother aboard the schoolship and said, "We're bound for Piraeus with no return cargo in sight. May be abroad a year. Haven't you a phone call to make?"

Beal's eyes softened for one fleeting moment, but he shook his head.

THE new Third surveyed the food, then his fellow officers. None met his eyes, none spoke, none passed him food. The skipper wondered how he could assimilate meat and potatoes in so frigid an atmosphere, how he could sit there, but Beal did not flinch. He knew the bitterest fight of his life had begun.

His next jolt came in the dark pilot-house when he turned to at eight. Looking up from the log, he recognized the profile of the helmsman taking over in the dull, yellow light of the binnacle. Instantly the windows, the delicate patches of half light, the whole place went round and round him. His temples pounded the old tattoo and rattling condemnation leaped to his tongue. Only by supreme effort did he clamp shut his mouth and he fought within himself as he'd never fought outside.

The captain's voice emerged from some darker space beyond the helm, giving the orders for the watch, and Beal managed to repeat them hoarsely from parched throat. Then Ramsey and Dreer both blotted out the binnacle's glow and went below.

When at length the pilothouse steadied again for him, Beal realized what the skipper had done; by leaving him thus, he had demonstrated his faith. And Beal went outside to pace in cooler air where Svenson would be out of sight, where he could remind himself: "the ship comes first."

As though he hadn't had enough for one day, the First returned to the bridge, remarked on the ship's trim, checked on course and log entries and stood watch where he

constantly placed himself between Beal and Svenson. This old man who'd spent his life at sea without getting his master's papers, thought Beal, presuming to monitor one who had skippered a ship in the awful convoys past North Cape!

Next day, the skipper said to Dreer before Beal, "Somebody's ridiculous here. It's the Third's watch." Dreer missed the point, and when he reappeared for Beal's night watch, the latter solved the situation for himself. The *Coddington* rolled handsomely on a long, oily swell and from out on the fo'castle head Beal heard lines creeping around under the feet of his lookout. Turning to his nemesis of the moment, he said, "Mister, are you in the habit of leaving your for'd lines loose like that on the fo'castle head where my lookout has to look and listen? Hear them— I'll manage up here by myself."

The oldtime ring of authority and blunt criticism impelled the meticulous old man down to correct the error and he didn't return. But the helmsman hunched his shoulders and braced himself expectantly. Had the Beal temper begun a wholesale burst of revenge? Sparks came up, looking for the captain and broke the tension with a message on yellow paper in company code.

He went below and woke the captain who soon came above with Dreer, saying, "Yes. Evidently her crew abandoned her out there in thick weather."

"I wonder why in hell they didn't sink her if there was any doubt. Ah, I've heard a lot o' stories about that *Massilon*."

"Tough proposition, I guess," Ramsey agreed. "Who had her?"

"Dunno. Has a new master almost every trip. Last I heard, she forfeited a cargo because none would go in her—and no crew. How do we know 'tis her?"

"We don't know for sure. The hulk was sighted in a hole in the fog but at some distance and she was reported."

"Well, cap'n, she may be under by the time we get that far."

"Damned if I don't hope so. I don't want to tow that thing back with this full cargo for Piraeus in; it is urgent."

Cory Beal's ears felt suddenly big and his heart quickened as a big idea lifted him off his heels. He forgot the ship. Fire blazed inside him and it was the old, un-

relenting flame of ambition, the urge to command!

THE *Massilon* lolled on a long swell in the offing. Water sloshed in and out of a jagged hole at her waterline abaft the collision bulkhead. Her fo'castle head was a twisted mess with the winch uptilted and the rails in ruin. But she floated and she appeared in the tricky haze to be possible of salvage.

Captain Ramsey cursed her fervently from stem to stern. He considered the sky concealed by thickening haze, the barometer which had started downward too fast, and the problem of selecting a boarding party. And the wireless message also; it indicated that his owners had dealings with the *Massilon's* latest operators. It therefore became his duty to take that devilish thing west.

"Mister Dreer," he said, "rig to tow—and no men of mine'll work on that bow so make your plans carefully and hurry up."

For several minutes he had ignored Cory Beal hovering at his elbow; now he must deal with him. "I know," he said curtly. "You imagine you could sail her to port. You nor nobody else can if I know the *Massilon*." He almost said, "And we'll have no fireworks about it."

"But if I did salvage her, cap'n, so help me I'm made! It's my chance to ram this down somebody's throat," Beal urged in bitter defiance.

Ramsay growled, "I warned you to put the ship first. Forget sailing her; nobody's assigned you over there. You? Why you'd probably lose your life and take along nine others to bottom."

"Cap'n, you say the ship first; well, that one represents more than half a million just as she lies, and if her engine room is not flooded, by cripes, I can get her in."

Ramsay resented every word of it. He despised the hulk for interrupting his trip. He smelled foul weather coming from the north-east and the haze was making up thick. But more than these, he resented the stern fact that Cory Beal was the best man available to send over and the only one he felt he could spare.

He turned his back on Beal to stare at the hulk and think: if I send Cory, he'll attempt to operate her at any cost; he'll drive the men just as he did in the war and maybe

land in jail all over again. He might conceivably bring a mutiny on his hands and that certainly would be his finale in steam.

The hard fact was that Beal had yet to show he could handle men properly in these post-war times.

Turning quickly, Ramsey said, "The matter with you is, you've yet to master yourself."

Beal's temper fluttered his eyelids. "Oh, hell, cap'n," he retorted impatiently. "There is my one chance in a thousand and you lecture me!"

"I know the Chief will send Kirby, his second assistant, and while he's a top-notch mechanic, he can't work men. Grand pair you'd make!"

"I could manage that, sir," Beal argued grimly.

In the end, Ramsey saw no alternative. "Careful, then. Collect your men, row over and make the lines fast—"

"Tow her? Hell!" Beal exclaimed, but he hurried away before his temper could spoil it or the skipper could emphasize the order.

THE tow headed south of west into the night and storm. Svenson stood his resentful watch at the lines, on the *Coddington's* stern with orders to phone the bridge if anything went wrong with the lines. At every bell he made a report that indicated all was well.

He lied. The driving rain and darkness concealed his deceit as distance from the bridge to aft did his sullen, angry, revengeful mood. For Svenson despised two men tonight and both were aboard that following ship; he dreaded the return to the States where certain union officials would surely get to him for money he had appropriated. And on this too long evening's watch alone, his fears mounted because of something more imminent; the *Massilon* at unforeseen moments ran up on her lines and every time she did so, she had a way of receding into the night before he could make up his mind to report her.

Midnight came, time for somebody to relieve him; so he had presumed all evening, forgetting that the *Coddington* was shorthanded. When no relief came, fear coupled with an exaggerated sense of abuse and neglect. Thoroughly aroused, he bent

over the taffrail in the rain, saw the lines dip almost straight down, looked away and there loomed the *Massilon's* ugly, disfigured bow on top of a high following sea. And it kept coming at him! Awestruck, he stared at the monster bowing over the sea, coming, growing huge—suddenly he cursed and yelled at it, trembling as he hadn't trembled since that fogbound day in convoy.

By then, Svenson was beside himself. He ran to an axe over a fire hose, tugged it free and lurched to the nearest rail. The other time, in the war, he had steeled a ship left instead of right; now he swung an axe with all the pentup force of his madness. Hemp strands parted. He ran across to the other side and repeated the performance; now he was rid of Beal and bosun and the monster and the job here aft and the danger of returning to the States.

NINE men steadied their weight to the pitch and dive of the *Massilon's* engine room in the stern. They had three flashlights among them. Driving rain swept the skylight in a tattoo that punctuated the smash of seas and the howl of wind outside. They were an angry skeleton crew.

Acting captain Beal saw the rage in their faces as the flashlight beams moved from one to another. He swept their features deliberately, then, and set all hands right at the outset. "You're not aboard here merely to stand by a tow," he declared grimly. "You're to get way on her. Turn to." Then he told them off to work.

The oiler cursed boldly, picked a man and led off to right what was wrong with the steering gear. Kirby, the engineer, hove tools up toward the auxiliary engine's parts lying around somewhere near the places they'd been left in when a complete overhaul of that vital equipment had ceased abruptly. "Hell," he muttered, "we're to be towed in." Raising his voice, he tried a ring to a piston and blurted, "Mate, what's the big rush here?"

Beal directed the remaining five hands to serve him. After a pause, he replied, "You, an engineer, ask that?"

From his safe distance above, Kirby retorted, "And you of the deck department run my business down here?"

Beal moved closer; this could become serious at the outset—the only two licenses

25
 aboard at odds before their crew. He aimed his torch full in Kirby's pale blue eyes and said for all to hear above the noises of the storm, "Man, I shall take this vessel to port myself. You're here to get steam before the lines part and she goes down. The *Coddington* never would find us again in this weather and she couldn't hook onto us if she did."

That speech silenced Kirby; it awed the others for the moment. It made Beal the opening he wanted. Thence on, he drove those men like an old-time bucko mate. They located sprung connections and put them in working order, they replaced pipes bent out of line by the shock, they reassembled the auxiliary unit as far as its boiler. In the reeling, reverberating darkness, like mice in a huge drum, they labored. But they eventually awoke to the mate's real motives; they were being driven, not only by the necessity he'd stated, but by a tyrant whose one purpose was to impress some one who'd perhaps reinstate him to the respectability he'd had before going to jail. Beal had brought the wholesale antipathy in the *Coddington* along with him.

By and by Kirby howled against the wild noises, "Where the hell's your bosun?"

"On watch for'd. Why?" Beal replied, heaving on a wrench along the main steam line.

"I want that oiler here, not on the steering job."

"You've three men getting in one another's way as it is. Hurry that cockeyed auxiliary for lights before these torches fade out."

A mutter ran the rounds and there was more sharp talk, but Beal yielded not an inch. They took to calling him jailbird and tyrant but they worked; and Cory Beal's wonder grew that the *Massilon* should have been abandoned. The layout looked suspicious.

Somebody shouted, "Eight bells—midnight!" but Beal shouted back, "No letup till we get lights and fires under boilers or know the reason why. You two moochers, climb the boilers and check all connections while that torch lasts. When the batteries run down, you'll work in the dark."

That brought a show of rebellion that convinced even Beal. He might have to throw some weight around yet. But Kirby

started the auxiliary engine, threw in the gears nearest him and lights burst upon drawn faces, belligerent smutty chins and curled fists. They, on their part, recognized a fighter in the pose and mien of him who had led them aboard this madhouse

THEY all quit to stare around, get their bearings and ease up. One pointed out fuel grinders, another the big engine through an exit, a third to the oiler closing a leak in the oil line to the helm. As for Beal, he eyed them all, sizing them up; then sent one for canned rations. For he faced a human wall of resentment despite the ship's precarious situation. They still saw no need for all this work and hurry in a towed hulk; they hadn't come to slave under this, the despised new officer of the *Coddington*. As one muttered, "He knows what we're thinkin' and he can't beat up this gang the way he done that sailor."

The sailor soon returned from the galley with his arms too full. He called, "Come an' get it! Help a guy." The five scrambled out of the boiler room in time to see the man and his cans come tumbling down the iron stairway. They, too, felt the sudden motion of the ship. In mere seconds she was in the trough of the sea, rolling at a fearsome angle.

They wove their various ways to the man; he was only bruised. They chased cans into crankpits and everywhere, then sat down and hacked them open, but all hands stared around at the new, more violent motion of the ship and it tempered their appetites.

For a brand new situation confronted the skeleton crew. Beal nodded to Kirby while all eyes became fixed on the pair responsible for their lives. Beal waited until she took another terrific roll and shouted, "That settles it. The lines are gone. We're on our own. Every time she rolls beam to this sea, you men know what's threatening us all. It's get up steam or else."

For the first time in his life, Kirby got tough with men under him. And they understood. For the first time since he'd boarded the *Massilon*, Cory Beal could leave them to risk a run forward over the long main deck to a bridge exit. Go he certainly would because that vile-tongued bosun had not reported the lines parted.

He went on deck in a rage. Svenson had

got away with a court case, but for this offense no court would listen to complaint of what he proposed to do to that rascal in the pilothouse. Gross neglect! So Beal reasoned and cursed his weaving way out to the break of the poop. There the prospect appalled him as a long, dark wall reared its head in the night and crashed the length of the deck. Every rivet, plate and frame trembled under the assault. He tried to detect serious damage if any within his range of vision, but another big one burst over the ship before the other one drained away—and she creaked and shivered precisely as before. "You're a tough critter, they said," he muttered, "but there must be a limit."

He considered preparing a drogue. The idea had haunted him, but now as before, he would not bring men from below. He would not let up in his demand for steam, not yet. And as for that cursed bosun—he took the first hint of a chance onto the catwalk. Toward the far end of it, he tripped over a stretch of hawser washed there by seas. The next flood swept it away and he barely got to a door, gripped onto one of its dogs when his feet were swept from under him while his mind checked: her lines have washed away. The door slammed to the vessel's motion, wedging him tight.

HE STUMBLED in and on up the midship stairway, squenching water and venting his ire in the dizzy, booming dark. He came abreast of the master's cabin door aswing, latched it and moved on. He had to pause up the narrow pilot-house well to get his wind and accustom his eyes. The ship spread foam to leeward and in its reflected light against the farther windows, he outlined head and shoulders and prepared his castigation of the bosun.

The first shout died in his throat—that wasn't the bosun! His glance darted around in search—he lunged across where the chonometer would be and a bulb suspended above it. The *Massilon* upended suddenly, hove him to the locker and doubled him over it. The swinging bulb slapped his wet face. He caught the thing.

In its unexpected light the figure at the window faced around. There they braced and stood, Beal registering chagrin and

amazement, the stranger boring him with a gray-eyed stare, his lips set tight and a large master's cap on his head. Never had Beal seen so arresting a resemblance; here stood a little human replica of Abraham Lincoln. Only the overhanging brows made a difference.

But the likeness to Lincoln was not what held Beal speechless before him; this was the *Massilon's* captain. All the drive and selfish purpose Cory Beal had devoted to the salvage of the vessel would serve, not himself, not his ambition to "ram it down somebody's throat," but this silent, sad-faced, sawed-off, defeated looking version of the great Liberator. "You're the cap'n of this ship?" he asked rhetorically to open the tight mouth. The shaggy brows lifted a moment, slowly fell; the mouth didn't open.

"What the merry hell's the matter?" Beal harangued him. Hearing bosun yawning on the settee behind him, he wheeled. "I ordered you to report anything that happened here for'd. You fathead, I'll—"

Bosun waved a hand with his usual gall and interrupted with, "That's the skipper, mate. He came up here like a ghost and ordered me to lay down and shut up."

"You lend a hand aft and say nothing about the skipper being aboard or I'll whale the living tar out of you. Get going!"

In the strange silence ensuing, Beal recalled the cabin door unlatched; in his hurry to start the work below aft, he hadn't been interested in quarters forward. "This vessel was reported adrift and abandoned," he shouted above the uproar outside.

"She was," came from the thin lips. The curtained eyes seemed to narrow.

"And is," Beal reminded him. "Why did your crew shove off without leaving you one boat or raft?"

The little fellow just looked at him, unmoved save for a crafty grin. Quickly the grin faded, the old sadness resumed and he turned aside again murmuring, "Where . . . where have I seen . . . where?"

All of which irritated the man whose one great objective in boarding the *Massilon* had been thwarted by discovery of this diminutive character. "What blew that hole in her side for'd?" he demanded.

The question was ignored. Back to, the man's cap looked three sizes too large and

his whole figure seemed to radiate pessimism. Or was it stubbornness? To needle him into talking, into revealing his attitude toward the salvage of the ship he had evidently lost until yesterday, Beal exploded: "Very well, keep your peewee mouth shut and go on minding your secret business. I shall get this vessel into condition to make port and sail her there!"

He wheeled around so fast that his large cap almost flew off his head. His mouth opened wide and out came a high pitched, nasal, squeaky voice crying, "I am master of my ship!"

"I happen to be master of what crew she has. You either set yours going or they abandoned you to go down in her. If you or the ship either should survive this mess you're in, it'll be to our credit, not yours. Damn you, we went to the trouble of taking you in tow and you hid somewhere. Our lines parted, setting us adrift again and you ordered my man up here to shut his mouth instead of notifying us aft. Now you squeal you're master here. You're only my passenger!"

THE little face twitched nervously. The gray brows rose high. One hand reached a shaky finger toward the settee. "Go sit down, you firebrand," he ordered hoarsely. "I'll speak my mind . . . So you think you're abused. Who are you anyway, boarding my ship without looking me up?"

Beal told him angrily.

"Of course. I should have recognized your temper. Don't try to tell me you've a master's papers again!"

Beal rose off the settee cursing him.

"Sit down. Now listen, young man. So you think you're abused. I had the *Hindustani* to Calcutta and Bombay. We made one trip farther on to Hong Kong. My Indian crew staged a knifing party with coolies that made things hot. I lost her and came home at my own expense and hunted for months for another ship. I got the *Krooman* to Table Bay. My mate was a gringo Pavao; he grounded her on the west African coast below Cape Frio and lost her and three men and a cargo of automobiles and machinery. I got the blame for that too. And I paid. Couldn't get so much as a coal barge. Two shots of bad luck broke me."

Beal was not interested in the recital of another man's woes; he had too many of his own and this apparition was ruining his one chance to erase them. He shouted, "What's all this to do with salvaging the *Massilon*?"

"Everything," came a strident shout. "No reputable cap'n would take this vessel to sea, no mate, no crew. But I'd been on the beach too long to quibble so I agreed to find her a mate that'd put a crew aboard and get the other officers before the cargo was lifted back out of her." He set his cap back into place and wiped his brow, then the melancholy voice came again. "I tried. The consignors took their cargo and she was towed to anchor. They gave me hell and called me a liar, a disgrace to my profession. Err phew!"

"I located that Pavao—The Ape, they called him. We got a tough Chief, mates we couldn't question; Pavao had a crew spirited aboard drunk—for a price like the olden days. I put to sea in the night and the fourth day out the Chief thrashed an oiler within an inch of his life. Horrible. It lined up the crew on sides. Pavao reported mutiny talk, trouble due at mess the next morning. I ordered steward to feed only one watch at a time while the others off watch would be under guard." The cap came off, revealing a shiny dome that ran with sweat.

Beal began another protest, but a huge sea laid the *Massilon* so far over that he figured two to one she'd lie there on her beam ends. Tough critter, she inched her dogged way back up and the skipper persisted in his story as though the serious interruption were nothing new to him.

"It hit us at three-ten a.m. I logged it a mine. Before I could give an order, the crew was scrambling for the boats and rafts, fighting for the places they wanted. Pavao and the Chief ran for'd here to report they couldn't stop them and damn her, she wasn't worth killing anybody for, and talk like that. In the end, I stood here alone and be damned if I'd leave in boats snarling full of cutthroats!"

Beal rose and swayed with the ship toward him to ask, "What did you expect to do?"

"Me do? With the glass falling like hell?" He turned his back, saying solemnly,

"I'd lost two commands. This would be my last. Rather go down in her than be swamped in a boatful of murderers."

Beal stood there in a quandary. Pity was due and he had none. This failure was interfering with his grand plan to make himself a new reputation. This little, high-voiced piece of melancholy had kept out of sight while his vessel was taken in tow, while she was under temporary repairs—now what was to be done with him?

He whistled down to the engine room for a report from Kirby. Getting no return whistle, he decided to go aft and see things for himself and on his way down the narrow stair well he heard the high voice yap at him, "I shall sail my ship in!"

KIRBY was saying, "They could have repaired all this. It looks fishy to me."

Then the bosun had held his tongue, thought Beal. "What's the matter now?" he asked evasively, relieved that the engineer didn't know about the captain.

"I got it from the oiler; they plan to get away in our lifeboat as soon as the sea goes down enough."

Beal had read the glass while the skipper raved and it was rising for better weather. He looked all around from man to man at their respective jobs as though selecting the leader, the one to wallop before the others as a deterrent move.

"It's that bosun's idea, I figure," Kirby said, "but for gawdsake use your head, not your fists. You brought it on with your bucko tactics down here; this is the payoff."

"I'll lick that blasted bosun within an inch—"

"You can't lick 'em all. Beal, you're crazy the way you treat men. You're not in a war now. Cut out the jail stuff, you've got to use your brains. This is serious as hell, leaving you and me alone on this hulk!"

The reference to prison intensified Beal's temper. "Shut up. Get steam, get that engine turning before she rolls over or breaks up," he thundered and left.

The wind on the poop cooled his hot head, the rain dampened his temper. But something more than the weather held him out there to watch the ship's struggle and think—three men had called the turn. Cap-

tain Ramsey had done it tactfully by reminding him that the ship, not himself, must be his chief concern. The little fellow in the pilothouse had shouted squeakily that he, Beal, thought he was abused. Now Kirby, a mild man driven to blunt talk, had made bold to refer to the "way you treat men" and to cry, "you've got to use your brains." All three couldn't be wrong.

Rarely does a man so determined as Beal face all the facts, add them up and treat the results objectively; only the best of them seem to attain that lonely height. Cory Beal did. The first hint of another day was stealing on his gray, windblown, violent world out there in the storm when he admitted that only by giving in could he accomplish anything in this venture which had seemed to offer so much for self-aggrandizement. Only the ship's rightful captain could claim the loyalty of the men whom he, Beal, had antagonized; and only the captain had the legal right to command the *Massilon*, sail her in and get the credit.

But it was bitter medicine to take. It still was when the bosun appeared. "Kirby says he'll try the engine right away," he reported sullenly.

SENSING more than this in his manner, Beal said, "Why did you come to say so instead of a sailor or fireman? Report below again."

"Not me."

"I ordered you to go back—"

"Aw, he ordered me out. I'm a bosun. Who the hell is that grease monkey, ordering me?"

Beal had the solution. "Very well, you hurry for'd and take the wheel to steer."

Glistening with rain, the bosun folded his stout arms over his barrel of a chest, set his feet and retorted, "I ain't no sailor either!"

At last, thought Beal, at long last this loud-mouthed rascal's asking for it! He walked up close to him and said in deceptively gentle tones, "You are only one man in a skeleton crew, in a ship yet to be salvaged and directly under my orders—"

"But you're not my skipper now. That little guy topside—"

Thought Beal, I could lick him as he's never known a licking in his brazen life.

On the other hand, I can't afford to; we'll require the able-bodied services of every man aboard. Bosun was still raving, venting his lopsided notions of justice, when Beal adeptly whirled him round back to, took two firm grips on belt and neck and rushed him out over the catwalk so everlastingly fast that the man never did quite face around or get a hold on the wire rails. He rushed him headlong at an iron door. That tamed him somewhat. The sight of a huge sea coming at them prompted bosun to open the door to escape it and Beal shot him over the coaming and inside like a five-inch shell.

Bosun went sprawling over the iron plates and fetched up headfirst against the base of the midship stairway. Slowly and stiffly he got his feet under him with the realization that Svenson really had met up with something terrific when this man had given him the works aboard that convoyed vessel in the war.

"Are you ready to steer this ship?" Beal demanded of him swaying there uncertainly. "Or shall I log you for refusing duty aboard a ship in distress?"

Bosun went above.

Minutes later, Cory Beal rose out of the pilothouse well. Bosun stood at the helm, but that peculiar little skipper gave him more of a surprise than he had given the bosun. Back and forth across the pilothouse, in spite of the ship's motion, the man paced and wailed. "I knew 'twas too good to be true," he moaned. "There had to be a catch in all this. My ship, mine, and a jailbird takes her from me—just when I could have made my record good—three ships lost to me. Three I didn't bring back myself . . ."

Evidently he hadn't noticed Beal, only the helmsman whose stance at the wheel meant she'd soon be under weigh. From

far back in memory, Beal recalled what he'd read about Abe Lincoln on election days, how he'd pace and bemoan his defeat before the votes were counted. Suddenly he broke out laughing.

The pacing ceased abruptly. The over-large cap slewed aside. The curtain of gray brows hoisted high and a pair of eyes stared, then narrowed, and the pursed mouth opened for another high-pitched tirade—"Hold it, cap'n," Beal laughed. "Ho-o-old everything. You shall have an engine, a screw turning up and soon. You shall take your ship to port."

Before the man could collect himself for words, the *Massillon* assumed a new motion, scarcely perceptible at first, then slow and steady and regular. Kirby had started the engine. She was under weigh!

"Cap'n Freer's my name," the skipper shouted impulsively. "Log this and go to sleep on that there settee 'fore you collapse!"

LAST October, at the peak of the heat wave, a seaman leaped ashore to change a breast line from one bollard to another. Perspiring freely, he snorted at a stranger who leaned to the building a few feet distant without offering to help him.

"You on this one?" the onlooker asked almost offensively but not quite.

"Hell, no"—sarcastically—"doin' this to keep warm. You a sailor?"

"Who's y'r skipper?" the shifty-eyed one inquired, scratching his blond head.

"Who wants to know?"

"Name's Beal. Yah?"

"Yeah. What's yours? And what's it to you?"

Svenson started shuffling away up the wharf.

"You'd better," the sailor prompted him. "You ain't got no ship, you mug!"



The line-up in the next issue is simply terrific.

FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

W. M. RAINE • JAMES B. HENDRYX • STEUART M. EMERY

H. BEDFORD-JONES • SHOOTER'S CORNER

THE POINTING FINGERS

By PHILIP KETCHUM

HE HAD been asleep and suddenly he was awake, wide awake. What had aroused him he did not know but there was a sharp tension in his body, a tension which held him almost breathless. He was

listening for something, listening for the dimly remembered sound which had reached through the heavy wall of his slumber. His eyes probed the shadows of the room but couldn't distinguish anything. He had the feeling that someone else was here, a feel-



*Fingers Pointed, Evidence Was
Discovered, the Police Were
Sure—Yet Don Alcott Knew
Himself to Be Wholly Innocent
of the Murder*

ing so strong that it brought a cold, clammy perspiration to his body. He reached for the light switch on the lamp near his bed and clicked it on and saw the man seated in the big, easy chair, almost within touch of his arm.

As long as he lived, Don Alcott would never forget the shock it gave him to wake up and find Roth seated in that chair. As long as he lived he would never wake up

suddenly in the night without remembering Roth and the cold, hard look in his eyes and the scowl on his thick, ugly face.

Don sat up in the bed. He remembered distinctly having locked the door to his room after he had come in and he stared toward the door, now. It was closed. Whether it was locked or not he didn't know. But it had been locked. He was sure of that.

"You woke up too soon, Alcott," Roth was saying. "You woke up too soon. I thought you might talk in your sleep. I'd

"The truth, Alcott."

"I told him the truth."

"You lied. You killed her, Alcott. You killed her and someday I'll prove it."

"I didn't kill her."

The detective leaned forward. "You killed her, Alcott. You put your hands around her beautiful white neck like this." Roth was demonstrating. He had lifted his hands and was holding them close together, the fingers curved, closing. "You killed her, Alcott. I know it and you know it and someday the whole world will know it. I'll



like to hear what you might say in your sleep."

Don's eyes jerked back to the detective. "How did you get in here?" he demanded. "That door was locked."

"Locked doors never bother me, Alcott," Roth replied. "If I can't handle the lock I come through the wall."

Don bit his lips. He still had an almost panicky feeling. "What do you want?"

never give up if I have to follow you the rest of my life. I'd even go to hell to drag you back. You can't get away from me."

Don Alcott reached for the package of cigarettes on the bedstand. He took one and lit it. His fingers weren't any too steady but to some extent he was recovering from the shock of waking up and finding Roth in his room.

"It was like this," Roth said slowly. "You

came back from the war. You had had a hell of a tough time in the South Pacific. You had dreamed a lot about coming back. You had dreamed of a woman like Myrna. You had dreamed of the way she would smile at you and of the sound of her voice and the touch of her hand. You came back and found her and the world was a swell place and Myrna was all you had ever dreamed about. Then you woke up, Alcott. You discovered that Myrna was ugly, that she was a cheap, little tramp, and you almost went nuts. You brooded for a month. You didn't see her for a month. That's all true, isn't it?"

Don Alcott shrugged his shoulders. He didn't trust himself to make any other answer. What Roth had said was so close to the truth that it hurt.

"You brooded for a month," Roth continued, "and then one night you waited for Myrna at her car, down the street from the Cobra Club where she worked. At about two-thirty you met her, talked to her for a minute, got in the car with her and drove off. The doorman at the club saw you."

"He saw a tall, thin man. He didn't see me," Alcott interrupted. "I wasn't there."

"But you were. It was you he saw. You went home with her. You were still bitter. You hated her and you killed her, Alcott, and then you were frightened. Terribly frightened. You knew you would be suspected and you wanted to throw us off your trail. You pulled one of the dumbest stunts imaginable. You took all her money and jewelry. You wanted to make it seem that robbery was the motive. You wanted to fool us, but you didn't. You see, we know you killed her, Alcott. We'll prove it. I'll prove it. By the way, where is that jewelry?"

Don Alcott managed a grin. "I ate it, Roth. I put it between slices of bread and ate it."

ED ROTH came slowly to his feet. He was a big man. He had heavy, powerful shoulders and long arms. He looked almost fat. His face was round and he had a ruddy color and the scowl on it was habitual, never went away. He had stiff, dark hair, carelessly parted on the side.

"They'll put a rope around your neck,

Alcott," he said slowly. "They won't tighten it too much. The rope will just lie there a necktie with the knot in back, behind your ear. Then suddenly the floor will drop out from under your feet and the rope will grab hold. It will grab quickly, and tight, and you won't breathe any more. That's the way it will work. Think about it for a while. Dream about it."

"Tonight?" Don asked dryly.

"Yes, tonight."

"Suppose you get out of here and give me a chance."

The detective shrugged. He turned and moved toward the hall door and when he reached it he stopped and looked back. "I'll be around, Alcott," he promised. "Wherever you go I'll be some place near. I'll be there when they hang you."

He opened the door as he said that and stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him.

Don Alcott sucked in a long, slow breath. He threw back the bed covers, swung his feet to the floor and stood up. He crossed to the door. The key was in the lock. He turned it, made sure the door was fastened, and then stared thoughtfully at his reflection in the panel mirror. He was tall, thin, and there were too many lines in his face for a man still in the early twenties. Some of the tan he had brought back from the islands still colored his skin but much of it was gone, faded. His eyes were dark and he had dark hair, rumpled now from contact with the pillow. He smoothed it back and sat there while he finished his cigarette.

He didn't have anything to worry about, he told himself. He didn't have anything to worry about at all. He hadn't lied to Roth. He wasn't the man who had killed Myrna Jordon, though there had been a time when he might have killed her. What Myrna had done to him hadn't been easy to face. He didn't like to remember it even now. The hurt was too recent. It had been too deep. This evening, when Stan Bloomfield, Andrew Parry and Bill Grant had dropped in to see him and the talk had turned to Myrna, and it had been difficult, even with these three men he knew, to talk about her naturally. It had been difficult even though they had been included with him in the police investigation.

Bill Grant had saved things. Bill Grant, with his seemingly irrepressible humor, had insisted that they found the Four M Club, "The Men Who Might Have Murdered Myrna, Club." Bill Grant, in all probability, had been less bothered by the police investigation than any of them. He seemed to have a way of riding out his troubles which Don couldn't help but envy. Parry, on the other hand, seemed to have suffered at the hands of the police. Parry was a psychiatrist. He was a quiet, silent, thoughtful man, a man hard to know. It was even difficult to think of him being involved with a girl like Myrna. He was too adult, too mature. He wasn't at all like Stan Bloomfield, whose emotions seemed all on the surface.

Don mashed out his cigarette and reached to turn off the light but with his hand on the switch, he stopped, his body suddenly rigid. On the floor, half under the bed-stand and almost hidden by the window draperies which touched the floor, was something which glistened. Don stooped over and picked it up and even as he lifted it he knew that it was Myrna's sunburst clasp. He had seen it at her throat, many a time. Once, with fumbling fingers, and while she had laughed at him, he had adjusted it for her.

For a long time Don Alcott stood there at the bed, turning the clasp over and over in his hand.

II

EXCERPT FROM DETECTIVE ROTH'S NOTEBOOK

"IT IS more than a month since Myrna Jordan was murdered and the man who killed her is still at large. The chief is raising hell. We have questioned close to a hundred men, but as I see it there is only one logical suspect, Don Alcott. He was in love with her until just before she was killed. Their affair ended in a bitter quarrel. He admits this. Alcott is about twenty-seven. He served in the South Pacific during the war but without notable distinction. He's sentimental about women, love, honor, and stuff like that. He's an attorney, but has just started practising. His parents are dead. He has no close relatives. He is well

beeled. He is clever, but I think he can be broken down and I am going to work on him. I am not going to give him a minute's peace from now on."

III

THEY were back again tonight and they were here this time because he had insisted on it. Parry hadn't wanted to come. Parry had said he had a medical meeting to attend, but Don had agreed that he could get away early. Stan Bloomfield hadn't wanted to come either, but he was here. Bill Grant hadn't argued at all.

They were seated around the room now just as on the evening before, but there wasn't so much levity. Even Bill Grant did not seem quite equal to the occasion. He had his second drink in his hand. He had tried a joke but it hadn't gone over very well and his eyes kept straying to the top of the coffee table where Myrna's sunburst clasp was lying.

Bill Grant had recognized it when he came in. So had Parry and so had Stan Bloomfield. They knew, now, where it had been found. They knew why Don had asked them to come over.

"You think one of us left it here," Parry said briefly. "Is that it?"

"It didn't get here by itself," Don answered.

He looked straight at Parry as he said that. Andrew Parry was older than the rest of them. He was tall, thin, a little stooped. He had gray eyes, almost no hair, a bony face. He was a psychiatrist. A story in the newspaper had said that he met Myrna Jordan when she came to his office to consult him about a friend. He was standing straighter than usual, right now. He hadn't touched his drink.

"Perhaps it is normal that you would suspect us," he said slowly. "I can speak for myself. I didn't leave it here."

Stan Bloomfield was shaking his head. "I didn't either."

"You can count me out, too," Bill Grant declared.

Don Alcott reached out and picked up the clasp. He held it in his hand for a moment and then laid it back on the coffee table and looked up at the others. He looked up at Parry, whose lips were pressed

together in a thin, tight line. He looked at Bill Grant, whose usually cheerful expression was gone. He looked at Stan Bloomfield, who was scowling. He knew Bill Grant pretty well, but his acquaintance with Parry and Bloomfield was comparatively recent. He couldn't think that Bill Grant had killed Myrna. He couldn't think that Parry had. He wondered about Bloomfield, who was a contractor, a man in the middle thirties, unmarried and reputedly a heavy drinker.

"Look here, Don," Bill Grant said suddenly. "Someone else could have left that clasp here. It didn't have to be one of us."

"Who, Bill?" Don asked promptly.

"Maybe someone who wants to see you hang for the murder."

"Detective Roth."

"Yes, even Roth. Maybe he did it to prod you, to bait you into doing something reckless."

This possibility had occurred to Don and he had checked it in the only way he could. Myrna, according to all reports, had worn this sunburst clasp on the night she had been murdered. It hadn't been on her body when she was found. It had been listed by the police as one of the pieces of jewelry presumably stolen by the murderer. This morning, even at the risk of making more trouble for himself, he had called at the police station and talked to the chief of detectives. None of Myrna's jewelry, he had been told, had yet been recovered.

"If it wasn't Roth," Bill continued, "it could still have been someone else. Hotel rooms aren't so hard to get into when a man's away all day. A decent tip to the floor maid is a pretty sure pass-key."

That was a possibility, too. Don poured a drink. He got up and crossed to the window and started down into the street. Roth would be on watch down there, Roth or someone else. He had been followed all day, followed every place he went. It had been a short, thin man in the morning and Roth himself in the afternoon. Roth had taken over at about two o'clock and had stuck close to him until he came here.

"I wasn't worried up until right now," he said slowly, turning back to face the others. "I wasn't worried because I didn't kill her. I didn't have what they call an iron-clad alibi, but I still wasn't worried, for

I was innocent and I knew the police could get no definite proof which could implicate me. I don't feel that way any more. I'm just as innocent but I'm frightened. That frightens me." He pointed to the clasp. "Someone's starting to push me around and I don't like it."

"It's not me, Don," Bill insisted.

PARRY was shaking his head and so was Bloomfield. There was a narrow, thoughtful look in Bloomfield's eyes.

"I'm sorry about this, Alcott," Parry was saying. "I'm sorry you found the clasp after we were here. I don't know who killed Myrna; I don't think it was you, for you're not the type. If I knew how to help you, I would. If there's anything you think I can do I wish you would call on me. I'd like to stay here longer and talk this over more thoroughly, but I have to leave. I have a meeting to make."

"And I have to leave, too," Bloomfield stated. "Maybe before I go you'd like to look around and see if anything new has hopped into the room."

There was definite antagonism in Bloomfield's tone and in what he had said. Don stiffened. He fought back the sudden anger which had flamed up in his body.

"I didn't kill her either," Bloomfield added. "And like Doc Parry, I don't know who did. But I'll tell you this, Alcott. If it was you, I hope they get you and I hope you hang."

Parry's hand was on Bloomfield's arm and Parry was shaking his head and was urging Bloomfield toward the door. Don made no answer. He watched the two men leave and after they had gone he turned to pour another drink.

"What came over him?" Bill Grant demanded. "You know, Don, that man could be vicious."

Don shrugged his shoulders. He stared at Bill Grant. The good-humored look was back on Grant's round, chubby face. Bill Grant was tall, broad-shouldered and had long, powerful arms. A few years before he had been a nationally known football star. He had turned down a dozen professional offers. He didn't need the money, he explained, and if he played pro football he would have to go in training. Bill Grant didn't like training, unless it included

women, late hours, rich food and all he could drink. He dabbled in real estate. He had an office but was seldom there.

"Whom do you really think left that clasp here?" Bill asked. "Parry or Bloomfield?"

"Or Bill Grant."

Bill shook his head. "It wasn't me. I didn't kill her, Don. Sure, I played around with her, but I didn't kill her. She didn't mean that much to me."

"Just what did Myrna mean to you, Bill?"

"She was just another woman. She had her place at the top for a while, but not long. A certain blonde came over the horizon."

"Who killed her, Bill?"

"Some man who wouldn't take her teasing, who wanted to get serious. Or maybe just someone who was after her jewels and whom she surprised when she came home. How should I know?"

Don nodded his head. This was Bill Grant, all right. He had been crazy about Myrna for a while, but had made the usual, quick recovery. And her death really didn't matter to him. Hardly anything mattered to Bill. If he had any deep emotions at all, they never showed.

"What you need is a night out," Bill said suddenly. "I know just the place for us. Get your hat and coat and come along."

"Not tonight, Bill."

"Sure. You need it. Come on. These are classy girls."

Don wasn't interested in classy girls. He insisted that he wasn't and he got up and walked with Bill to the door and afterwards came back and picked up the sunburst clasp which Myrna had nearly always worn. The stones in it glistened brightly. He dropped it in his pocket and sat down on the edge of the bed.

How had it come here? Who had left it tucked under the window drapes? And what would be next? There was the important question. What would be next?

A light knock on the door startled him and he came to his feet and moved that way. He was still scowling when he opened the door and the scowl stayed on his face. He didn't know the girl who had knocked. She was tall, slender, dark-haired and there was an almost unnatural glint in her eye. She had on a brown tailored suit and a ridiculously small hat. She was young and might

have looked attractive if she had smiled, but she wasn't smiling.

"Are you Mr. Alcott?" she asked. "Mr. Don Alcott?"

Her voice was low, hardly above a whisper, and there was a tight, strained note in it. Don nodded his head. He wondered how this fitted in, where it fitted in. Something in the girl's attitude sent a sharp warning coursing through his body.

"Can I come in for a moment?" the girl asked. "It's—it's important."

DON backed into the room and the girl followed him. She closed the door and leaned against it for a moment and then straightened up. She started fumbling with the clasp on her purse.

"Won't you be seated," Don suggested. "Take that chair over there, Miss—Miss—"

"Patterson," said the girl. "Jane Patterson."

The name didn't mean anything to Don Alcott but the girl seemed to think it would. She was watching him closely. She had wide, dark eyes, a narrow oval face. Don could catch the faint scent of her perfume.

"Patterson," said the girl again. "I'm Myrna's sister. She was Myrna Patterson before she got married. Her name was never Jordan."

Don caught his breath. He had never guessed that Myrna had a sister. Myrna had never mentioned a sister, had never mentioned any relatives. He stared at the girl wide-eyed. She had her purse open now and her hand was in it. Her body was tense.

"You killed her," she said suddenly. "You killed her and I'm—"

She was drawing her hand from her purse. Lamplight glistened on the barrel of a gun. Don threw himself forward. He caught the girl's hand, caught the gun and twisted it from her. His lunge threw the girl back against the wall and she seemed to hang there for a moment and then she slid to the floor and huddled over like a child, covering her face with her hands. Sobs shook her body.

Don Alcott moved back to the center of the room. He was short of breath. His body was cold from the perspiration which covered it. He stared at the gun he had taken from the girl. It was a snub-nosed .32 automatic, dark, ugly and heavy with its possible

load of death. Don dropped the gun into his pocket. He lit a cigarette and stared at the girl and shivered when he realized how close a call this had been. If the girl had been only a moment quicker in drawing the gun from her purse, he was the one who would be lying on the floor. And he wouldn't be just crying.

Don sat down on the edge of the bed and waited. The girl's sobs came gradually under her control and after a time she looked up. "Go ahead," she said bitterly. "Call the police. Get it over with."

"Why call the police?" Don asked quietly.

The girl bit her lips. "That's right. You wouldn't want to call the police. You killed her."

"But I didn't."

The girl was sitting up now. She was leaning against the wall. Her face was pale around the rouge on her cheeks and her hat was tilted at a funny angle. She reached for her purse which was lying nearby and got it and then stood up and leaned back against the wall, close to the commode. She was still sniffing a little.

Don watched her. She was about twenty, he decided, or maybe younger. He wondered, suddenly, if she was really Myrna's sister. Myrna's hair had been almost golden in color. This girl's hair was dark. She had none of Myrna's facial characteristics. Her mouth was smaller, her eyes were set farther apart.

"What are you going to do?" she asked in a husky voice.

"Ask you questions," Don replied. "Tell me, why did you think I had killed Myrna?"

"He told me you had. The detective."

"Roth?"

"I think that's his name."

"Did he give you the gun? Did he send you here to use it?"

"He gave me the gun to protect myself. I—it was my idea to—to use it."

The girl had laid her purse on the commode. She was twisting her hands together. Her eyes were wide, dark.

"But he sent you here," Don insisted.

"He said they had almost all the information they needed. He wanted me to help him."

"How?"

"He wanted me to find out where the

jewelry was, the jewelry you took the night you killed my sister."

"And how were you to find out?" Don asked dryly.

"I was—that is, he left that up to me."

"So you just decided to shoot me and have it done with, huh?"

Jane Patterson bit her lips. "I—can I go now? Can I go? I've told you everything I can."

"Where do you live?"

"In the Cordovan Apartments, on Broad Street."

"Can you prove it?"

"My name's in the telephone book."

Don reached for the telephone book and looked up the girl's name. When he glanced back she had edged halfway to the door.

"Can I go now?" she asked again.

Don got to his feet. He said, "Jane, I didn't kill your sister. Roth is trying awfully hard to prove that I did, but he'll never make it. You can go if you'll do one thing for me."

"What?"

"Find Roth. He's downstairs in the lobby or maybe across the street, watching. Tell him I want to see him."

"If—he's not there?"

"Then let it go."

The girl moved quickly to the door. She opened it and looked back toward Don Alcott. She seemed about to say something but apparently she changed her mind. She stepped out into the hall and closed the door.

DON took a quick turn around the room. He might have seemed very calm to the girl as he had questioned her, but he wasn't calm. He wasn't calm at all. He had taken about as much as he could take. Myrna's clasp was in his pocket. It had been planted in his room by someone who wanted to see him hang for Myrna's death. A gun was next to it, a gun which he had taken from a girl who had been convinced he had killed her sister. He was being crowded too close, pushed too hard.

There was a knock on the door and Don swung that way. He turned the knob and pulled the door open. Detective Roth stood in the hall. The usual, dark scowl was on his face. His eyes were cold and steady. His hands were in his pockets and he was standing with his legs spread apart. He almost

filled the doorway. He looked solid, formidable.

"Ready to talk, Alcott," he asked bluntly. "Is that it?"

Don moistened his lips. "Come on in, Roth," he answered. "I've got something for you."

The detective started forward and as he came through the doorway, Don swung his fist straight at the man's face. He turned with the blow to get the full force of his body behind it. He put into it all the anger and frustration and bitterness and fear which had been tearing him to pieces. He had never hit anyone harder. He felt the shock of the blow run up his arm to his shoulder and he saw Roth staggering into the hall, saw him lose his balance and go down.

Don stood in the doorway rubbing a hand over his fist. He stared at Roth as Roth lifted himself up on his elbows. The detective was dazed but was fully conscious. His eyes were riveted on Don's face and there was a blazing hatred in them.

"That's what I had for you," Don said grimly. "It's for sending the girl up here. I think this is yours, too."

He took the .32 automatic from his pocket and tossed it at Roth's feet and then stepping back, he closed the door, and for the first time since he had found Myrna's clasp, a wide grin came to his face. This had been worth a lot to him. He might have to pay for it later but right now he needed the lift it had given him.

There were no sounds from the hall. Don paced back and forth across the room. He stopped at the commode and took a cigarette from the box on the corner and as he put the lid back his eyes widened and he caught his breath. An old Yale-type key was lying in the pin tray on the commode, lying there in a clutter of collar buttons, shirt studs, cuff links, tie-clasps and pins. There was a tag fastened to it. Don had never seen the key before. It didn't belong there. It wasn't his. He reached out and picked it up. The number "1912" was machine stamped on the key. The tag read, in hand lettering: "Safety Deposit Box. Central Savings Bank."

For perhaps a full minute Don Alcott stood there, holding the key in his hand, staring at it, his thoughts racing madly. The tag, he knew, didn't belong on the key. Tags such as this one didn't come with keys to a

safety deposit box. This tag had been fastened to the key as a means of identifying it and the lettering on the tag looked remarkably like his own. Don ran a finger around his collar to loosen it. He knew, now, where the rest of Myrna's jewelry would be found. It would be found in a safety deposit box in the Central Savings Bank, taken probably in his own name. Here was evidence which would hang him. The rope was getting tighter.

How had the key come here? They had all been here again early this evening. Parry, Grant and Bloomfield. They had moved freely around the room. Any one of them could have left the key on the commode. Or for that matter, Jane Patterson could have left it here. He didn't know that she was Myrna's sister, hadn't checked it. She had stood near the commode. She had placed her purse here for a moment.

Don shook his head. He couldn't solve that now. Even if reasoning would do it, he didn't have the time. Unless he missed his guess, whoever had left the key here would tip off the police to make a search of his room and of his person. The trap was set and baited and ready to be sprung. He had to move fast.

At the desk against the far wall Don Alcott folded the key and Myrna's clasp in several thicknesses of paper. He had to break off the back of the clasp to make it flat enough to slip into an envelope. He addressed the envelope to "Frederick J. E. Kassel, General Delivery, City." He marked it, "Hold until called for." So far as he knew, there wasn't any Frederick J. E. Kassel. He hoped at least, that if there was one, he wouldn't show up at the general delivery window at the post office.

Don put two stamps on the letter and then added a third, just to be sure he had enough for the letter's weight. He headed for the door and opened it. Roth was gone. No one was in sight. He walked down to the mail chute and pushed the envelope through the letter slot. The envelope was barely thin enough to make it.

There was nothing to do now but wait and he didn't have long to wait. A knock sounded on the door within fifteen minutes and when he opened it, two detectives were standing in the hall. One of them showed Don his badge.

"We're from Headquarters," he said bluntly. "The chief wants to see you. Get your hat and coat and come along."

IV

FROM A STATEMENT MADE TO THE POLICE
BY JOSEPH H. TREADWELL

"**I** AM the doorman at the Cobra Club. I've worked there since it opened. I was on the door the night Myrna Jordan was killed. She came out about two-thirty. She was alone and she was laughing. She seemed happy. She stopped a minute and looked up at the sky.

"Joe," she said, 'isn't it a wonderful night, a perfectly wonderful night.'

"I said it was just about like any other night to me, cold and dark and long.

"Myrna laughed and shook her head. She said, 'Joe, you're priceless. Will you do something for me?'

"I said I would.

"Myrna said, 'There's a man calling for me tonight, Joe. He was going to meet me outside but he's not here. I should never have agreed to see him again, but in a weak moment, I did. When he shows up and asks for me will you tell him I went home early. Tell him I wasn't feeling well, had a headache. Don't be afraid of him.'

"I said, 'Who is he, Myrna?'

Myrna shook her head. She didn't tell me. She said, 'Maybe he won't come. Joe, do you know what I'm going to do?'

"I said I didn't.

"She said, 'Joe, I'm going to get in my car and drive up into the hills with the windows open. I'm going to park some place on a mountain top if I can reach one and I'm going to watch the sun come up. Did you ever see the sun come up?'

"I said the sun always came up too early to suit me. I told Myrna not to drive too fast through the hills. I said that if she was sensible she would go home and go to bed.

"She shook her head. She was laughing when she started down the street.

"I watched her. She was thin and tall but she didn't look thin in her fur coat. She was walking in her toes, almost skipping. Her car was about half a block from the door of the club. Just as she reached it, the man joined her. He must have known her car

and must have been waiting in the shadows of one of the doorways near it. I couldn't see him clearly. I don't know who he was. He seemed tall and thin but all of Myrna's men were tall and thin. I took a couple steps down the street, meaning to bust in if there was any trouble but there didn't seem to be any. Myrna unlocked the car door and the man helped her in. Then he went around and got in on the other side. The car drove away.

"As long as I live I'll be sorry I didn't run down the street."

V

DON ALCOTT huddled in his chair in a plain, unadorned room at Police Headquarters. He wanted a cigarette but he knew that if he asked for one, it would be denied. He wanted a drink but he knew that until this questioning was over he wouldn't get one.

They had been at him for hours, working in relays. This wasn't the traditional third degree but it was close to it. They hadn't touched him. They hadn't used a rubber hose or their fists. All they had hurled at him was questions, the same questions over and over, sometimes shouted at him in a hurry, sometimes whispered.

On the night Myrna had been killed, Don Alcott had gone to a party at Bill Grant's. There had been quite a crowd at the party. There always was quite a crowd at Bill Grant's parties. This one, like others, had started late and had lasted until almost morning. All sorts of people had been there, actors, writers, businessmen, showgirls, representatives from almost every profession. Bill Grant got around. He knew people.

Don hadn't stayed late. Shortly after one he had left and had returned to his hotel apartment and to bed. The night clerk hadn't been at the desk when he came in. He couldn't prove that he had come home and was asleep in bed when Myrna was killed. No matter how much he talked he couldn't prove it. He had walked home and it wasn't far. He couldn't say much about the walk. He had passed a few people but he recalled them only vaguely.

The questions these men were throwing at him fell into three groups. They were asking definite questions about what he did

the night Myrna was killed, definite questions with regard to his relationship to Myrna and speculative questions about the murder itself. They jumped from one topic to another. They kept drumming questions at him endlessly and they had a neat trick of often misunderstanding his answers or placing the wrong construction on what he said.

Ed Roth directed all this. Roth's nose was swollen and his upper lip was puffed and cut and his eyes still burned with an almost violent hatred. Several times Don had been sure the man was going to strike him but Roth always seemed able, at the last moment, to hold himself in check.

The end of all this came quite suddenly. McTavish, who was chief of detectives, showed up in the doorway and called Roth outside.

A few moments later Roth returned and sent the other detectives away and stood facing Don Alcott. His scowl seemed deeper than usual. Don was to learn, some time later, that McTavish had criticized Roth quite severely for bringing him in without something definite enough to hold him on. At the time, however, he didn't know that, and from Roth's attitude, couldn't guess it.

"It's the old cat and mouse game, Alcott," Roth said slowly. "Did you ever watch a cat with a mouse? It's interesting. The mouse struggles and the cat lets it get away, but not far. Before the mouse has escaped the cat pounces again. Maybe a dozen times the cat will let the mouse make its break for freedom but the mouse never gets away. You don't have a chance, Alcott. Not a chance in the world."

Don leaned back and stared at the man. "How does your mouth feel, Roth?" he asked dryly.

Roth lifted a hand and touched the cut on his lips. "That's something else I'll take care of when the time comes," he promised. "I've not forgotten it. Do you want to run a while, now?"

"Not from you, Roth."

Roth turned and opened the door. "You're free to go, Alcott," he said bluntly. "You can start running. You can run as fast as you want to, but when you look over your shoulder I'll be there, just behind you. The shadow's getting closer. The shadow of the hangman."

Don stood up. He stretched his arms

above his head. He was stiff, tired. He didn't feel like it but he managed a grin. He said, "Thanks, Roth. Thanks for everything."

IT WAS ten in the morning. The sun was high and hot. There were crowds of people on the street. Don took a taxi on the corner and directed the driver to take him north on Lincoln Boulevard. There were a good many cars heading this way and he didn't know whether or not he was being followed. He had the taxi turn west on Crescent. Several cars which had been behind him turned west. "Turn north again at the next corner," Don said to the driver. A black coupé followed them when they turned. "Back to Lincoln Boulevard," Don ordered.

The black coupé followed them to Lincoln Boulevard. It stayed close behind them, now. It parked half a block away when the taxi stopped in front of the San Carlos, a tall apartment building.

Don paid the driver, adding a generous tip. "Wait for me five minutes," he suggested. "If I'm not back by then, take another fare."

He entered the apartment house, walked down to the semi-basement and left by the tradesmen's entrance. Across the alley was a garage. He walked through it to the next street and on the corner caught a bus. He transferred twice getting back to town and he saw a good many black coupés on the way but not the one which had followed the taxi.

There was a crowd in the post office and there were lines in front of the general delivery windows. Don stood back near one of the windows and had a cigarette. There were others standing around. Some were reading letters. A man with gimlet eyes seemed to be studying a newspaper but kept glancing up at the people who passed. Don had a tight, uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach. He had heard of people being arrested when they called for mail, people for whom the police had been searching. He finished his cigarette and dropped it on the floor and stepped on it. The gimlet-eyed man looked at him, then looked away.

Don lit another cigarette. He got into the line at the third window. It moved slowly, very slowly, but finally Don stood at the

window beyond which a thin-faced man scowled at him.

"Kassel," Don said. "Frederick J. E. Kassel."

The man pulled a wad of letters from one of the pigeon holes behind him. One of the first letters he touched was the one Don had mailed the night before. The mail clerk laid it aside and went through all the rest. He put the other letters back and started on those in the next pigeon hole. Don wanted to shout to him that there weren't any more. He wanted to take that one letter and get away from here. He stood rigid, waiting. He could feel eyes on his back. He was sure that when he looked around Roth would be there, as he had promised.

The mail clerk finally gave up his search for more letters. He turned back and picked up the one Don had been waiting for and slid it under the grille. He said, "Only this one, Mr. Kassel."

Don took the letter and turned away. His eyes swept from one side of the lobby to the other. He didn't see Roth anywhere but the man with the gimlet eyes was looking straight at him. Don headed for the door. With every step he took he expected to feel an arresting hand on his shoulder, but nothing like that happened. He stepped outside into the early afternoon sunshine and moved up the street.

THE Central Savings Bank was on the corner of Spring and Fourteenth. Don Alcott had a coke in a drug store a block away and considered his next move. He had calmed down a good deal since his escape from the men who had been following him and his momentary panic at the post office. He didn't think he had to worry about Roth *unless* the man who had left the key in his room had tipped off the detective as to the location of the safety deposit box.

This was a distinct possibility and it worried him, but the risk was one he had to face. Don finished his coke and paid for it. He stopped at the candy counter and bought a three-pound box of chocolates and had it wrapped for mailing, and in front of the drug store he bought a newspaper. With these under his arm, he headed for the bank.

No one stopped him as he entered it. He walked down the narrow marble stairway to the vault rooms and stopped at a counter

where two girls worked. There was a slip on the counter to be filled out. Don wrote down his name. In the space for his box number he put down the number on the key which had been left in his room. "1912." He handed the slip of paper to one of the girls and waited to see what would happen.

The girl took the paper. She looked through the file of cards on the table in front of her, found one and pulled it. She looked at the card and then looked at the slip, comparing signatures. The expression on her face didn't change. Without looking up at Don she stamped his slip and handed it back. "Go right in, Mr. Alcott," she said flatly.

Don mopped his hand over his face. He turned and approached the steel grilled door which opened into the vaults. A guard at the entrance viewed his slip of paper and motioned him on. An old man in a room lined with locked boxes of graduated sizes took his key and fitted it into a lock under the number, 1912. He put his master key into another slot and with both keys, opened a thick, steel door. He pulled out a long, black metal box.

"Would you like to take it to one of the rooms, Mr. Alcott?" he suggested.

Don nodded. His throat was dry and though it was cool in here he was perspiring.

The old man took him to the outer part of the vault and opened the door to a narrow, private enclosure with a glass shelf table and a single chair. A pair of scissors was chained to the wall for the convenient clipping of coupons, but there would be no coupons in this box.

Don made sure that the door was closed. He sat down in the chair and opened the hinged lid of the box. Inside was a white, silk scarf and as he drew it out, Don knew that he had guessed correctly. Here, inside of one of Myrna's scarves, was the jewelry which had been stolen the night she was killed. Don took only a brief look at it but he recognized a necklace and several rings.

Five minutes later, Don returned the box to its place in the vault but Myrna's jewels weren't in it now. The box was crammed with chocolates and Myrna's jewels with the sunburst clasp added were in the candy box, wrapped up and addressed for mailing. Part of the newspaper was in the box, too, to keep the jewelry from rattling. The box

was addressed to Frederick J. E. Kassel, General Delivery, City. It was marked, just as the letter had been marked, "Hold until called for." And Don wasn't at all sure that he would ever call for it.

Outside of the vault Don stopped for a moment at the counter. He gave his name to one of the girls and asked her to look up the date on which he had rented the box. The girl referred to the cards in the file. She looked surprised. "It was just two days ago, Mr. Alcott. How could you have forgotten?"

"Was it?" Don asked. "I thought it was last week."

"The date here," insisted the girl, "indicates that the box was rented two days ago."

Don shook his head. "I don't remember it. Do you?"

"No, I don't, but it says here that the box was rented two days ago."

There were several people waiting with slips. Some were eyeing Don curiously. Don decided to let this angle of the investigation go. He turned and walked up the stairs and through the front door of the bank. There was a small mail box on the corner with a wide opening once used to accept packages. The box was now marked, FOR LETTERS ONLY, but the packages dropped in it were always picked up.



There was a crowd on the corner around the box. Some of the people were waiting for a change in the traffic light, some were waiting for a bus, some were probably just

waiting. Don didn't see anyone he knew. He headed straight for the mailbox, pulled down the opening, hoped that his package was stamped heavily enough, and mailed it. Then he glanced around, startled at the sound of his name. Andrew Parry was standing almost at his shoulder. He was standing so close that he might have been able to read the name and address on the package as it was mailed.

"How's it going, Alcott?" Parry asked. "Any more trouble?"

Don swallowed the lump which had jumped into his throat. He nodded his head. He was wondering by what chance Parry was on this particular corner at this particular time. He was wondering if Parry's presence here was accidental.

"Which way are you going?" Don asked.

"Back to the office," Parry replied. "Why not come along? I have a free afternoon. I was going to do a little reading but I would just as soon talk."

Don looked thoughtfully at the stooped figure of the psychiatrist. He would never have guessed that glorious, golden-haired Myrna could have been interested in a man like Parry, or that Parry would waste a moment on a showgirl. He wondered what the exact relationship between Parry and the girl had been. He wondered if Parry could have killed her, if the emotional pitch of the man could have driven him to such an act.

"How about it?" Parry was saying. "Like to come along? It's only a block to my office. I have comfortable chairs, a bottle of good whiskey, and we'll be all alone. A little talk wouldn't hurt you, Alcott. It's bad to keep too many things bottled up."

"Especially the whiskey?" Don asked.

The ghost of a smile showed on the psychiatrist's face. He said, "Yes, especially the whiskey. Come along."

VI

FROM A STATEMENT MADE TO THE POLICE
BY BETTY STARR

"I WORKED with Myrna from the time the Cobra Club opened. I've known her longer than that. I roomed with her once. We were always close friends. The night she was killed I was in the dressing room of the Cobra Club, lying down. I

didn't feel well. The last floor show was over. Most of the girls had changed and gone. Myrna was still there. She came over to me and asked what was wrong and I told her I was just tired. She looked wonderful that night. She was sort of—well, sort of radiant, if you know what I mean.

"I said, 'Who is he, Myrna? Tell me about him.'

"Myrna laughed. 'Is it as plain as that?' she asked.

"I said it was. I said, 'Give, kid. Momma wants to know all about him. Who is he?'

"She shook her head. She said, 'Betty, you'd never guess. If I told you, you would say I was crazy. Maybe I am. Sometimes I have a feeling it will never work out, that it can't possibly work out. I'm really a little frightened.'

"I said she didn't look frightened.

"Myrna said, 'Betty, you've known me a long time. Have I ever told you that I was in love? Actually in love?'

"I said, 'Never, and don't tell me that now.'

"Myrna said, 'But I am, Betty. It's got me at last. I do crazy things. I get a funny feeling in my stomach.'

"I told Myrna that the funny feeling might be ulcers but she only laughed at me. Then she looked at her watch and her face got serious. It was almost two-thirty.

"'There's one fly in the ointment,' she said under her breath. 'You swat flies, don't you, Betty? You swat flies, but this one's pretty big, official.'

"I didn't pick that up. I was wondering who the man was. I was trying to guess. I said, 'Myrna, is it Don Alcott?'

"Myrna bit her lips. She said, 'Betty, I wish I had never met Don Alcott. After what I did to him I wouldn't blame him if he killed me. He might, too. There was murder in his eyes the last time I saw him.'

"'He's back in town,' I told her.

"'I know he is,' Myrna said. 'He telephoned me. I've got to see him. I'm afraid to, but there's no way to duck it.'

"She looked at her watch again. She said, 'Betty, I've got to run. He'll be waiting for me.'

"She went out the door and that was the last time I saw her. She didn't say exactly who would be waiting for her. Maybe she meant the man she was in love with. Maybe

she meant Don Alcott. Maybe she meant the big fly, the one she was going to swat. Maybe Don Alcott was the big fly. I don't know. She just said, 'He'll be waiting for me,' and went out the door."

VII

THE chairs in Andrew Parry's office were as comfortable as he had boasted. The whiskey was good. The room was high above the traffic noises and was air conditioned, and Parry was very informal about all this. He didn't act professional. He leaned back in a chair near the one Don had taken, crossed his legs and during the early part of their session, did most of the talking. He told a couple of amusing case stories putting the medical part in terms easily understood.

There was a certain charm to the man which Don had never before realized. He had a caustic sense of humor and a real liking for his job. He had served in a medical unit during the war. He wasn't married. He lived in a big home which had belonged to his parents, now dead, and which he seemed to be maintaining purely for the benefit of two old family servants. He played golf twice a week. He went fishing when he could get away. He didn't read only medical journals.

"Of course we both want to talk about Myrna, don't we," he said after a time. "Or at least I want to talk about her, if you don't mind."

Don shook his head. "I don't mind. Go ahead."

They were both silent for a while. Parry stared at the ceiling and after a time he shook his head.

"I want to talk about her," he said slowly. "But it's not easy to start. You have bitter memories of her. My memories aren't bitter. I think I knew her better than you. She was a strange girl with a very conflicting personality. She was both lovely and ugly. She was heartless, but no one I ever knew could be more kind."

Don scowled at the man. "Were you in love with her?"

"Yes."

"And Myrna?"

Parry shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. She was fond of me. The night before she was killed I had a feeling that she

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 was close to loving me, but I may have been wrong. I'm going to miss her a great deal, Alcott. More than you. Probably more than anyone who knew her. Years from now when you have forgotten her name I'll still remember her. That sounds very adolescent, doesn't it?"

Don finished the whiskey in the glass he was holding. He said, "Parry, who killed her?"

"I don't know. You feel that you are being pushed around by the police, don't you?"

"By the police—and someone else. The murderer."

"Maybe in a way, I'm responsible."

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose we put it like this. Probably, because of your bitterness toward Myrna and because of the testimony of the girl, Betty Starr, you were one of the most obvious suspects, perhaps the most obvious. I might have saved you that. In the statement I made I could have said something about Bill Grant and something about Stan Bloomfield which might have spread or changed the police emphasis."

Don sat straighter in his chair. "What could you have said?"

"First of all," Parry insisted, "let's get this in the record. The statements I didn't make are no proof of murder. I considered, very carefully, whether to include them or not. I decided, for a time at least, to keep the information to myself. I didn't see that it would help in the investigation. It is wholly concerned with motive."

Parry stopped talking. He lit a cigarette and looked over at Don Alcott. There was a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Go ahead," Don said sharply.

"I told you," said Parry, "that I was out at Myrna's the night before she was killed. I met her outside the club and took her home and stayed for about an hour and a half. That interested the police a great deal, not only because I saw Myrna the night before she was killed but because I also met her outside the club, just as some man did the following night. You've been to Myrna's, haven't you?"

Don nodded.

"I sat in the big chair near the window," Parry continued. "Myrna sprawled on the floor. She often did that. We talked about

many things, none, I suppose, that were very important. We got to talking about our responsibilities in the world, our responsibilities to others, and Myrna brought up the name of Stan Bloomfield. She said, '*Andrew, I want to know what to do. I want some advice. Stan Bloomfield is in love with my sister. He's attractive. He can be charming. He makes good money, but he's no good. He's mean, selfish, cruel. He could never be faithful to any woman. He will break her heart. I talked to him. I told him to keep away from her and he laughed at me. And then I remembered some letters he had written me when he thought he was in love with me. They were silly, boastful letters. I told him that if he didn't stay away from Jane I would show her the letters. I had to say that.*'"

"I asked Myrna what had happened.

"She said, '*Nothing has happened, yet. I don't have the letters, Andrew. I didn't save them. Stan Bloomfield demanded that I return them to him. He even threatened me. He said I would be mighty sorry if I didn't hand them back. That was last night. Andrew, what shall I do?*'"

Don Alcott reached for the whiskey. He poured another drink. "There were no letters to return," he said slowly. "Bloomfield wouldn't have believed her. He might have choked her too hard in trying to force her to tell him where they were."

"I've only pointed up a possible motive, Alcott," Parry insisted. "What I've told you doesn't prove anything."

"What about Bill Grant?"

"Bill Grant had given Myrna a ruby pendant. It was a pendant, Myrna told me, which had been in his family for a long time and it was probably very valuable. She said that Bill wanted it back and that so far she had refused to return it. She told me that she didn't know whether she would ever give it back. Bill had offered to buy it. The last time he had seen her, he had been, as she put it, "nasty and bitter." He had told her he meant to have it back even if he had to rip it off her pretty neck. That's another quote. She said, just before I left, '*Andrew, I've messed up my life terribly. I've got people hating me. I'm sometimes almost afraid to come home at night and don't recommend a bodyguard. I tried that and it didn't work out.*'"

DON Alcott leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Parry had made both of these stories very real. His trick of quoting Myrna was partly responsible and his low, pleasant voice helped a good deal.

"The police look on both Bill Grant and Stan Bloomfield as disappointed suitors who might have killed Myrna in a moment of anger," Parry was saying. "What I have told you would have given more point to the suspicions of the police but couldn't have helped solve the murder. That's why I did not talk."

Don sat up, scowling. He didn't remember seeing any ruby pendant in the jewelry he had recovered from the bank. He decided, abruptly, that he wanted to see Bill Grant.

"I've just thought of something else," Parry said suddenly. "I want to check it. If there's anything to it at all, I'll give you a ring tonight."

Don nodded. He came slowly to his feet. Two hours had passed since he had come here. It was now late in the afternoon. "I ought to go and hunt up my shadow," he said, thinking of Detective Roth. "It was good whiskey, Parry, and I appreciate what you've told me. It may help."

Parry stood up and put out his hand. The tight smile was again on his face. He said, "Good hunting, Alcott. We'll get together again sometime."

FROM a telephone booth in a drugstore on the corner, Don telephoned Bill Grant's office. The girl who answered the call said that Mr. Grant wasn't in. She said she didn't know when he would be in. She sounded a little hopeless. Don telephoned Bill Grant's apartment. There was no answer.

Don had a late lunch at the counter in the drugstore and then telephoned Bill's apartment again but there was still no answer.

He took a cab to his hotel. Roth wasn't hanging around outside but another detective was. Don waved to him. The detective ignored the salute. At the hotel desk Don collected his mail and then he took the elevator to the floor on which his apartment was located. He walked down the hall and slid the key he always carried with him into the lock. He turned the key

and the doorknob and pushed the door open and stepped inside.

He was expecting no trouble here. He didn't see the man waiting in the semi-darkness of the room, close to the door. He sensed the man's presence as his arm went up and he ducked and twisted away, but he wasn't quick enough. Pain exploded in his skull and danced in flashing lights before his eyes. He pitched toward the floor and as he went down, all consciousness fled.

DON was securely bound in a chair when he woke up. Wide bands of adhesive tape held his arms securely against the arms of the chair. Strips of sheeting were wound around his chest and tied to the chair's back and his legs were fastened tightly. Adhesive tape was plastered across his face so that he couldn't talk, couldn't make a sound.

The lights in the room were on and he could see three men, two of them seated on the bed, one in a chair near it. He didn't know any of them. One of the men was thin, sharp featured and had a dark, oily skin. He was well dressed. He looked about thirty-five. The other two were seedy in appearance. One was old and one was young.

"He's coming out of it, Hendel," said the young man.

The man in the chair, the thin man, nodded his head. He got up and came over to where Don was tied and stared down at him. He had pale, blue eyes; thin, almost colorless lips. His nose was so sharp it was pointed.

"Move him up to the desk," Hendel ordered abruptly. "Loosen his right arm and give him a pencil and paper."

The two men got up from the bed. They shoved the chair Don was in over to the desk. One of them pulled away the adhesive tape which bound his right arm to the chair.

Hendel came up and stood close to the desk. "Listen to me, Alcott," he said sharply. "Take that pencil on the desk and write down on the paper where we can find the stuff you took from Myrna Jordan's apartment after you killed her. Don't write anything funny. Don't say you don't know because we know you do. It's all right to pull the innocent stuff with the cops but don't try it with us. We know the whole story. Start writing."

Don couldn't answer back because of the adhesive tape across his mouth. He couldn't argue with this man. He stared at the pencil on the desk and at the paper.

"Write it down!" Hendel snapped.

He stepped forward and his hand slapped out. It caught Don squarely across the face and the sting of the blow brought tears to his eyes. A cry which he couldn't stop was muffled by the tape across his mouth. Hendel slapped him again and then a third time and then stepped back. His lips were pulled away from his teeth.

"Write, damn you," he grated. "Write it down."

A sharp, throbbing pain hammered against Don's skull. The side of his face seemed to be on fire. His vision was blurred. He could see three Hendels. He closed his eyes and fought against the dizziness which threatened to overcome him.

"Write it down," Hendel shouted in his ear. "Write it down while you still have a chance."

Don fumbled for the pencil but couldn't find it. Someone put it in his hand. He couldn't hold it. He heard Hendel shouting at him again and then he heard another voice, the heavy, harsh voice of Detective Roth shouting at these men from the doorway, ordering them to stand back, to reach for the ceiling. He tried to look around but couldn't. The darkness which had been crowding against him closed in and blotted out every sound in the room.

VIII

FROM A STATEMENT TO THE POLICE BY
MRS. ARNO GRASKE

"**Y**ES, I worked for Myrna Jordan. It wasn't a full time job. Most days it took me only a couple of hours to slick up her apartment. Miss Jordan was a clean girl. She was neat. She didn't leave her clothing lying around. She didn't drop ashes on the floor. She wasn't messy. And she was kind. She was interested in people. She was interested in me. She talked to me as she would talk to another woman, not as a lady talks to her maid. The time I had trouble with one of my roomers, the man who threatened me, she wanted to know all about it. She said she knew someone who might be able

to give me some help. This was just before she was killed.

"She talked about herself, too, but not about her troubles. There was only once she ever came close to it and that was on the last morning of her life. I was late getting to the apartment. Myrna Jordan was ready to leave. She looked worried.

"She said, 'Mrs. Graske, I'm going to do it.'

"I asked her what she was going to do.

"She said, 'Mrs. Graske, I'm going to clean out the dark corners of my life. It may take a week. It may take a month, but I'm going to do it. I'm going to start all over again.'

"She didn't explain what she meant and I didn't ask her. Every life has its dark corners and sometimes they are best left alone.

"I don't know who killed Myrna Jordan, but I know where you'll find him. You'll find him in one of the dark corners of her life. And it shouldn't be hard, for there weren't many. She was too fine a girl."

IX

ROTH was in the chair near his bed. He was sitting there just as he had been sitting two nights before, silent, motionless, his thick hands folded in his lap. Don Alcott stared up at the ceiling. He was lying in his bed. It was probably after six, for not much lighted sifted in through the windows. There was still a hammering pain in his head and both eyes felt swollen. Don wondered how long he had been unconscious. He wondered what had happened to the men who had been here.

"Where are they, Roth?" he asked abruptly.

"Down at Headquarters by this time," Roth answered.

"Who are they?"

"Small-time thugs. I came at the wrong time, didn't I? I should have given them a few minutes more to work on you."

Don bit his lips. He wondered if he would be dizzy if he sat up. He lifted a hand and touched his cheek. He hadn't imagined that a slap could be as hard as a blow.

"What did they want, Alcott?" Roth asked. "What did they want or do you feel like telling me?"

"They wanted Myrna's jewels."

The detective's eyes narrowed. "I wonder why they came to you?"

Don made no answer. He sat up and swung his feet to the floor. He stared at the detective. Roth's scowl was as heavy as it had ever been. His lip was still a little puffed. He was leaning back in the chair as though he meant to spend the night there.

"Why don't you go home?" Don growled.

Roth shrugged his shoulders. "There's plenty of time for that. Time is only running out for you."

Don got to his feet. He went to the bathroom and got a drink. He bathed his face in cold water and then stared at his reflection in the mirror. He didn't look as badly as he had thought he would. His cheeks had a high color but the swelling was hard to detect. He fingered the lump on his head, the lump he had received when he had first stepped into the room. It was the size of a golf ball.

"What was in the package you mailed in the collection box in front of the Central Savings Bank this afternoon?" Roth called. "Was it the stuff you took from Myrna's apartment?"

Don stiffened. He caught his breath. His hands gripped the edge of the wash basin. He tried, desperately, to tell himself that he had misunderstood Roth's question. But he hadn't. Each word had been clear and distinct.

"Sometimes we get the breaks," Roth was saying. "One of the men on the force who wasn't even on duty at the time happened to be waiting there for a bus. He knew you for he saw you several times when we had you in for questioning. He told us about it."

Don had moved to the bathroom door. He stared toward the detective. Roth hadn't even turned around. He was still leaning back in his chair. All that Don could see of him was the top of his head.

"This man told us you came out of the bank," Roth continued. "We know a lot about you, Alcott. We know you don't have an account there, but maybe you had a safety deposit box. Maybe that's where you kept the stuff you took from Myrna's apartment. Maybe you've been getting worried. Maybe you decided to move it. It's a trick of amateurs to use the post office for a job like that. An old, old trick."

Don Alcott swallowed the lump in his throat. "What the hell are you talking about?" he growled.

"You, Alcott," the detective said. "I'm talking about you and the things which will hang you. We'll have to struggle some with red tape to get that package, of course, but we'll get it. We always do when we know about what we're looking for."

Don had forgotten the pain in his head. He was trying to fight down the panic which threatened to seize him. He wondered how much time he had, how much time until the police had that package in their hands.

"I was coming up here to ask you about that package when I busted in on your party," Roth mentioned. "There's another angle to work on. I wonder what underworld tip sent those three fellows up here? Maybe they'll crack, easy."

Don crossed over to the commode and got a cigarette. The last time he had taken a cigarette from the box here he had discovered the key to the vault in the Central Savings Bank. His eyes went to the pin tray now but there was nothing in it which didn't belong there.

Roth grunted as he got to his feet. He had a package in his hands, a small package which had probably been between his leg and the side of the chair all the time he had been sitting in it. The package was tied with red string and while Don watched, the detective broke the string and tossed it on the bed.

"I brought this for you," he said without looking up. "It's the same size as they use up-state. Of course, the one they put around your neck is longer."

He unwrapped the package while he was speaking. Inside was a coiled rope, perhaps eighteen inches long. Roth dangled it from his fingers. He looked up at Don. "Where will I put it?"

"Hang it from the ceiling, Roth. Make it really effective."

The detective shrugged his shoulders. He tossed the rope on the bed and moved over to the door and opened it. From the hall he glanced back.

"We're getting closer, Alcott," he said grimly. "We're already breathing down your neck."

Don clicked on the lights in the room. Then he pulled down the curtains at the

windows and walked over to the bed and sat down. He stared blankly across the room. The feeling of panic which had come to him when Roth mentioned the box he had mailed, was still there. It was pressing against the control he held over it. His breath was still a little short. The rope the detective had brought was lying almost under his hand and the sight of it sent a chill racing up and down his spine. He wondered if Roth had any notion of the effectiveness of his psychology.

There were no sounds in the room. Don got to his feet. He paced back and forth across the worn carpet. The police would get the box he had mailed. He had to face that. How they would get it or how long it would take he didn't know, but they would get it. When they did, he would be arrested. His possession of the jewelry was not proof of the murder, but it would be enough to hold him. He wouldn't hang, as Roth had promised, but if the murderer wasn't found he faced almost certain, circumstantial conviction.

This was what he had to face. The jaws of the trap were closing. Roth, with a lucky break and with the help of the murderer, was as close as he had boasted. Don suddenly remembered Bill Grant. He had wanted to see Bill Grant. He had wanted to ask him about the ruby pendant. The telephone was on the stand by the bed. Don moved that way. He picked it up and dialed Bill Grant's number.

BILL GRANT'S apartment was luxurious enough for a movie set. The living room could have held thirty people without crowding. Sometimes it held sixty. The furnishings were new and modern and by contrast, the paintings on the walls were excellent copies of old masters, expertly antiqued.

Hank answered the door. Hank was an ex-pug, ex-taxi driver, ex-bartender, and an ex many things. Don didn't know his other name. At the present time, Hank served as Bill Grant's butler, valet, chauffeur, body-guard and sometimes companion. He was in his late thirties. He was short, stocky, well-muscled. His face mirrored some of the battles he had been in.

"Hi-ya, Mr. Alcott," Hank greeted. "Bill's in his room dressing. It's a redhead,

tonight. Would you like a quick one while you're waiting?"

Don Alcott grinned. He said, "Yes, Hank. I think I would."

"Me, too," Hank nodded.

He turned and hurried from the room.

Don moved down toward the fireplace and stood there, scowling into its dead ashes. Hank had said it was a redhead for tonight. It might be the redhead for a week. Then it would be a blonde, or a girl with dark hair. Bill changed his girls almost as often as he changed ties. Myrna had been one of them for a while but it was hard to think that Myrna had been so important to him that he had killed her. Or that the ruby had been important. Bill had more money than he could ever spend. He could have bought a ruby twice as big as the one in the pendant, and never noticed the cost.

Hank came back with the whiskey. He said, "Canadian, and good." He tossed his drink off and poured another. "She has a sister, Mr. Alcott," he said slowly. "The redhead, I mean. I kinda wish you hadn't shown up. Maybe I would have had a chance."

"The sister's all yours, Hank," Don promised.

"You'll be sorry when you see her."

Bill came in from the bedroom. He called, "Hi, Don. What you doing tonight?"

Bill was looking fine. There was a broad smile on his face and his color was better than usual. There were no shadows under his eyes.

"I just told Hank he could have the extra girl," Don answered. "I don't think I'm up to it."

"Hank won't appreciate her," Bill growled.

"Maybe she'll appreciate Hank."

"Yeah," Hank grinned. "That's it. 'I'm a guy who's got to be appreciated.'"

Bill poured a drink. "Are the cops still riding you, Don?" he asked bluntly.

"They're still riding me," Don admitted.

"Do you know anything more about that clasp?"

"A little more."

"Do you know who left it?"

Don shook his head. "No. But I'm not interested in the clasp right now. The thing I'm interested in is a ruby pendant."

Bill straightened up. His eyes narrowed.

He sampled the drink he had poured. "A ruby pendant," he said slowly. "What kind of a ruby pendant?"

"I don't know," Don answered. "I can't accurately describe it, but you could. The one I'm talking about is the one you gave Myrna."

Bill was frowning. "What about it?"

"She had it the night before she was killed but it wasn't found in her apartment and it wasn't with the jewelry which the murderer carried away."

"How do you know?"

"Parry was at her apartment the night before she was killed. He saw it."

"Parry could have been lying. Do you think I killed her, Don? Is that what you're driving at?"

"You could have, Bill. Someone did. The night Myrna was killed you were giving a party. You told the police that you left here at about two with a girl named Cheri. You said you didn't know who brought her here. You said you didn't know the rest of her name or where she lived. You said she made you put her in a taxi after a couple of hours of what you called, 'driving around town'. Maybe that's what happened. It sounds like one of Bill Grant's adventures. On the other hand, it might be a clever lie. You could have used that time to meet Myrna. You could have taken her home. You could have killed her to get the ruby pendant back."

Hank's fists were doubled up. His face was twisted into a scowl. "Shall I bop him, Bill?" he asked grimly. "Just say the word. Shall I bop him?"

Bill shook his head. He said, "Go away, Hank. If you want to bop anyone, bop yourself. Don is right. Maybe there wasn't any girl named Cheri. Wait here a minute, Don."

He turned and left the room. Hank paced back and forth, glaring at Don, his fists still doubled up. He was muttering under his breath.

Bill was gone for only a moment. He returned with the ruby pendant in his hand. He showed it to Don. He said, "Here it is, Don. It's been in our family for generations. When I fell for Myrna I fell hard. I gave it to her. I wanted to marry her. For a couple of weeks, I suppose, I wanted to marry her more than anything in the world, then I woke up one morning and it was

gone, the feeling that I wanted to marry her. I don't know what had happened. I had just changed. Myrna had become just another girl. After a time I suggested that she give the ruby back, then I asked her to give it back. She refused. I offered to buy it. She said it wasn't for sale. I got a little nasty with her but she just laughed at me. She said it was about time for me to grow up and that losing the ruby might help."

"How did you get it back?" Don asked bluntly.

"Through the mail," Bill answered. "And I can't prove that any more than I can prove there was a girl named Cheri. I got the ruby in the mail the day Myrna's body was discovered. She must have mailed it the day before."

Don wondered if this was the truth. He wondered how he could check it. He heard the telephone ring and saw Hank start across the room to answer it.

"I don't blame you for asking your questions, Don," Bill Grant was saying. "If the cops were shoving me around I'd probably be digging up questions to ask you. I wish I could prove what I told you, but I can't. There really was a girl named Cheri."

"Hey, Mr. Alcott," Hank called sourly. "Someone wants to talk to you on the 'phone."

Don angled across the room, suddenly aware of how tired he was. He took the telephone from Hank and spoke his name into it and heard Parry's voice on the other end of the wire. "I thought I might catch you there when you didn't answer at home," Parry told him. "Can you get away?"

"Of course," Don replied. "Where are you?"

"I'm on my way to see Jane Patterson," the doctor answered, and there was a faint tinge of excitement in his voice. "She's Myrna's sister. She lives in the Cordovan Apartments on Broad Street. Number 5-B. Suppose you meet me there. I think I'm on the trail of something."

"I'll make it as quickly as I can," Don said into the telephone.

He hung up. He had forgotten how tired he felt a moment before. His mind called up a vivid picture of the dark-haired girl who had come to his room with a gun in her purse, and with whom Stan Bloomfield was supposed to be in love, Stan Bloomfield, who

had demanded his letters of Myrna, letters she had destroyed.

"Good news?" Bill asked.

Don didn't know. "When will you be back tonight, Bill?" he demanded. "When can I reach you?"

"I shouldn't be later than one or one-thirty."

Don nodded. He turned and hurried for the door.

THE Cordovan was a tall building. A man who lived there had his key in the door when Don Alcott came up and Don followed him inside after the man had unlocked the door. They got in the automatic elevator together. The man was short and stooped and about thirty-five. He looked worried.

"What floor for you?" he asked when they were in the elevator.

"Eight," Don answered.

The man put his finger on the panel button numbered eight. He said, "I live on twelve. It would be a long way to walk if this elevator ever broke down. And if it did the man who owns this rat trap would never fix it. He never fixes anything."

Don managed a weak grin. The elevator climbed slowly to the eighth floor and stopped. Don opened the door and stepped out. He turned up the hall. The first door he came to was numbered 8-A. Across from it was 8-B. The name above the bell was Jane Patterson. Don pushed the bell. He heard it ring but there was no immediate answer. He pushed it again and waited impatiently for some response.

There were no sounds from beyond the door. A vague, nameless apprehension came over him. His trip here had taken forty-five minutes, at least. Parry should already be here. And if Jane hadn't been home, Parry would most likely have waited for him in the lobby downstairs. A scowl worked up onto Don Alcott's face. He pushed the bell again and then knocked lightly on the door. After a moment of indecision he tried the knob. The door wasn't locked. It opened easily.

There were lights on in the apartment. He pushed the door wider. He called, "Hey, anyone home? Anyone——" His voice broke suddenly and his whole body went rigid. There was someone here, all right.

Andrew Parry. He was lying face down on the floor in front of the davenport, and from the awkward position of his body, Don knew that he wasn't asleep.

X

FROM A STATEMENT MADE TO THE POLICE
BY BEN CHALMERS

"YES, I knew Myrna Jordan. She came to my shop the first time maybe two years ago. I sell antiques. There was a spinning wheel in the window. She didn't want it. She just wanted to know how it worked. I told her. I wasn't busy and I like to talk and I love some of the things I have. I showed Myrna around my shop. After that she came in quite often for a while, and I don't think she's ever missed coming in to see me at least once a month. She had Mr. Grant with her not long ago. She introduced him as a collector.

"Mr. Grant," she said, 'collects girls. Tall girls, short girls, fat girls, thin girls. I happen to be one of his latest finds, but I won't last long. None of us do.'

"She often joked like that. Her sense of humor was one of the fine things about her. I liked to have her come in. Myrna was a real relief from the usual antique collectors. We grew quite friendly. She called me Uncle Ben. I think she used to come to see me when she wanted someone she could talk to quite frankly. I thought a lot of her. I didn't ever picture her as getting into trouble, real trouble, and I was a little surprised at what she said the last time I saw her, just a week before she was killed.

"Uncle Ben,' she said to me, 'I need some advice. I don't want to tell you what I've done but I'm frightened. If you thought someone was after you what would you do?'

"I said, 'After you? Why? Why should anyone be after you?'

"Myrna shook her head. She said, 'I don't know a good private detective. I wish I did.'

"I told her that if it was as bad as that she ought to go to the police but she said she didn't want to go to the police. She said she had had a bad experience with the police years before.

"Most people are afraid of the police, Myrna,' I said to her. 'We all have guilty feelings about something or other. Forget

it. If you need help you go straight to Police Headquarters.'

"Myrna laughed and said that maybe I was right. A little while later she left. I wish I had asked her more. I wish I had made her go to the police, but I didn't. And I wish I could help you more for I'd like to see him hang. I mean the man who killed Myrna."

XI

DON stepped into the room and closed the door. He leaned rigidly against it. The kitchenette was to the right. To the left was an open door, probably the door to the bedroom. There was no light in the bedroom but he thought he had heard a sound from there. He stood listening. He stood there for perhaps a full minute but the sound wasn't repeated.

Don's eyes circled the room. There was a wine bottle on the coffee table near the davenport and on the floor, near one of Parry's hands, was a glass. The story was written there, in the wine bottle and the glass and the awkward position of Parry's body. It would be in the horribly twisted look on Parry's face. A poison had been used, a poison which was swift, deadly.

Two quick steps carried Don to the side of the room. He moved down to the bedroom door and stood there, motionless. Who was in the bedroom? Jane Patterson? Jane Patterson or someone else? He didn't have a gun. He regretted, now, the impulse which had made him return to Roth the gun he had taken from Jane. He would have liked to have had that gun in his hand.

"Come on out of there!" he said suddenly, and there was a harsh, brittle note in his voice. "Come out where I can see you."

There was no answer from the bedroom.

"Come out," Don ordered again. "Come out or I'm coming in after you."

This was pure bluff. He wasn't going in there at all. Even if he could make sure that Jane Patterson was in there alone, he wasn't going in. She had come after him once with a gun. He wasn't forgetting it.

A sound reached him, the sound of a footstep. Don's muscles bunched. He heard another footstep and then another and then he saw her coming out of the shadows of the room. She stopped in the doorway and

leaned there suddenly covered her face with her hands and Don could see her shoulders quivering.

"I—didn't know who it was," she said in a half-whisper. "I was frightened."

"Who else is in the bedroom?" Don asked bluntly.

Jane shook her head. "No one."

"Turn on the bedroom lights."

The girl dropped her hands from her face. There was almost no color in her cheeks and her eyes had a vacant, glazed look. She turned and reached into the bedroom and clicked on the lights.



"Go sit down someplace," Don ordered.

He stepped into the bedroom. No one was there. He looked in a closet and in the bathroom and then came back to the living room. Jane was huddled in a chair not far from where Parry was lying. She was biting nervously at her lips. Her hands were tightly clenched.

"Shouldn't we—shouldn't we cover him up or something?" she asked thickly.

"Why?" Don grated. "He's only a dead man. He can't hurt you now. He can't even talk. He can't say what he was going to say."

Jane shuddered. She closed her eyes.

Don moved forward. He knelt down at Parry's side and touched the man's cheek. It was still faintly warm.

"I poured him the wine," Jane was saying under her breath. "He lifted the glass to his lips. He took just a sip. He seemed to gag. He jerked to his feet and clutched his throat. I—what am going to do?"

Don came to his feet. "Keep talking," he said bluntly.

"I liked him."

"So you poisoned him."

"No. No, I didn't."

"Then who did?"

The girl made no answer. She again covered her face with her hands.

The pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fall into place. The picture was suddenly growing clear. Parry had said this afternoon that he wanted to check something. Checking had led him here, to Myrna's sister, the girl with whom Stan Bloomfield was in love. Myrna had tried to come between Stan Bloomfield and her sister and Myrna had died. Parry had learned something which he shouldn't have learned and Parry was dead. Don stared at the girl. She was a good actress. Her first performance had been as good as this. She had made him think she had come to his room to kill him, when the only reason she had come had been to leave the key to the safety deposit box.

"Have you telephoned him yet?" Don asked abruptly.

Jane didn't look up. She said, "Telephoned whom?"

"Stan Bloomfield."

"No. Of course not. Why should I have telephoned him?"

"You've got to get rid of the body some way," Don answered brutally. "How were you going to do it?"

"Get rid of the body? But I don't—"

Jane was looking up at him now. Her dark eyes were wide, startled.

"Let's be practical," Don suggested. "You wouldn't want Parry's body found here. A dead body is hard to explain to the police. It would be much simpler to get Parry into a car and dump him in a vacant lot somewhere, but you could hardly tackle that alone. You would need help."

"No."

"You mean you could do it alone?"

The girl straightened. "I mean I wouldn't do it at all. I didn't kill him, I tell you. I didn't kill him."

"Whose wine did he drink?"

"Will you listen to me, Mr. Alcott? I tell you I didn't kill him."

Don reached for a cigarette. He lit it and inhaled deeply. He stared thoughtfully at Jane Patterson. He had to break her down.

He had to get the full story, or enough of it to tie in Parry's death with the death of Myrna Jordan. He had to know more than he knew now. Assumptions weren't strong enough. He needed some direct evidence. "When did Parry get here?" he asked suddenly.

"About fifteen minutes before you. Maybe twenty minutes. I don't know, exactly."

"Why had he come, Jane?"

"He wanted to ask me something about Myrna. He telephoned me. He said it was very important."

"How well did you know him?"

"I've known him a long time."

"What did he say when he got here?"

"He said that you were coming too. He said he had asked you."

"Did he say why?"

"No."

"What else did he say?"

The girl looked down at the figure lying on the floor. She looked quickly away. "He said he thought he knew who had killed Myrna," she whispered. "He seemed excited. He didn't want to sit down. He kept pacing back and forth across the room. He said he hoped you would hurry."

"What else?" Don insisted.

"He took some papers from his pocket and showed them to me. He said, '*It's here, Jane. Not the man's name or the proof we need, but fingers pointing to him.*' He put the papers back in his pocket. He walked over to the davenport and sat down."

"Are the papers still there?" Don asked.

Jane nodded her head.

Don stooped over the figure lying on the floor. He didn't like doing this but it was something which couldn't be avoided. After a time he stood up with some papers in his hand.

"Is this what Parry showed you?" he asked the girl.

Jane bit her lips. "I don't know. I think so."

Don unfolded the papers. The top one was headed:

FROM A STATEMENT MADE TO THE POLICE
BY JOSEPH H. TREADWELL

Don read it. He passed on to the next, a statement by Betty Starr. There were two more statements, one attributed to Mrs.

Arno Graske and one to Ben Chalmers. Don Alcott read these. He had heard all four people testify at the coroner's inquest, had heard them say substantially what was written here. He found nothing new in the four typed statements. Where Parry had secured the statements he didn't know. They were probably, he decided, from the police files on the case. Parry had worked quite closely with the police after they had been convinced of his innocence.

Don went through the four statements again, then folded them and put them on the table. He was much more disappointed than he wanted to admit. There had been nothing in any of the statements about Stan Bloomfield or Myrna's sister. By no stretch of the imagination had anything pointed to them. Don wondered if a further search of Parry's pockets would reveal anything more definitive but he was reluctant to undertake such a search.

"You were going to marry Stan Bloomfield," he said abruptly, scowling at the girl. "Is that the way things stand now?"

Jane shook her head. "I never planned to marry him."

"Myrna thought you did."

"I was the younger sister. Myrna was always looking after me, always afraid of my judgment. I wouldn't have married Stan. I don't really like him."

This was a lie. It had to be a lie. Don glared at the girl. "Where is he now?"

"Stan Bloomfield?"

"Yes, Stan Bloomfield."

"Home, I suppose. I don't know."

THE telephone on the stand near the bedroom door started ringing. Don's body jerked at the sound. He looked at the telephone and then looked at Jane Patterson. "Go ahead," he said grimly. "Answer it."

The girl got up and crossed to the telephone. She answered it, listened for a moment and then held the telephone toward Don Alcott. "It's for you," she told him.

Don moved toward her. He took the telephone and said, "Alcott, speaking. Who is it?"

"I'm just checking up on you, Alcott," said the voice on the other end of the wire. "This is Roth. I wanted you to know that I wasn't far away."

Dan Alcott sucked in a long, slow breath.

He had been followed to Bill Grant's and then followed here. He had known that but had forgotten it. He wondered if Roth was downstairs or if some other detective had followed him and telephoned a report to Ed Roth.

"Do me a favor, will you, Alcott?" Roth was asking.

"What kind of a favor?" Don growled.

"Stay right where you are for a while. I want to see you. I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

The line clicked dead before Don could make any answer. He returned the telephone to its cradle and turned and stared at the figure on the floor. Roth would pin this on him, too. He had no doubts in his mind on that score. To Ed Roth he was a murderer, already convicted. Parry's body would only cinch the case.

"I didn't finish," Jane was saying. "There was something Dr. Parry asked me that might be important. It was after he had shown me the papers and while he was sitting on the davenport. It was almost the last thing he said."

Don turned to face her. "What was it?"

"He asked me why Myrna was afraid of the police."

"Afraid of the police?"

"Yes. He said Myrna had told someone that she had once had a bad experience with the police. He wanted to know what it was."

Don recalled a reference to this in one of the statements he had read. He was aware of a sudden, sharp excitement. Perhaps this was one of the pointing fingers which Parry had mentioned.

"Did you tell him?" he demanded.

"I didn't have a chance. I had poured him a glass of wine. He lifted it. He—"

"But you could have told him?"

Jane was nodding her head. "I think so. I had almost forgotten the story. Two years ago, before Myrna was very well known, she took a job in a variety show. There was a police raid on the show one night and all the girls were taken down to Police Headquarters. The charge was that they had given an indecent performance. They were released and the case never came to trial, but for a while, after that, one of the policemen wouldn't let Myrna alone. He would show up where she was working. He pulled several fake arrests just to get her off by herself."

She threatened to go to the chief but he laughed at her. He said her reputation wouldn't stand it. Once she really had to fight him off."

Don was leaning forward. "What finally happened?"

"Myrna got a job at the Cobra Club. She was an immediate success. She was big time. She had arrived. A week later she could have gone to the chief and had a private audience. She didn't have any more trouble with the policeman."

"Who was he? What was his name?"

"I don't know his name. I didn't live here then. When Myrna told me the story it was all over. She didn't even make it seem important. I didn't think it was. There isn't a girl living who hasn't had to fight off at least a few men."

"Did she tell you how he looked?"

"She said he was big. She—she didn't tell me much about him."

Don grabbed the girl by the arms. "She must have told you more than that, Jane," he almost shouted. "Think, girl. Think. I've got to know. Tell me anything you can remember."

Jane winced. "You're hurting me."

Don still held her. "Tell me," he insisted. "Tell me anything she said about him."

"She said his hands made her skin crawl. She said he was persistent. She said she went home one night and unlocked the door and turned on the light and there he was, just sitting in a chair in the darkness of the room, waiting for her. She said—"

"Roth!" Don said under his breath. "Ed Roth!"

His hands fell from Jane's arm and a shiver ran over his body. He was clammy with perspiration. He lifted a hand and smoothed back his hair. His mind was racing so fast he was almost dizzy. It wasn't a picture manufactured of supposition which he had now. It was crystal clear.

HE HAD found Myrna's sunburst clasp after Roth had been in his room. The key to the safety deposit box could have been left at the same time even though he didn't discover it until the next evening. If Roth, himself, couldn't have forged his signature to have taken a safety deposit box in his name, the detective had easy access to under-

world characters who could have forged his name. Roth hadn't had to depend on a lucky break to know about the removal of the jewelry from the Central Savings Bank vault. He could have been watching the bank himself. It was a good guess that he might have been. Roth, himself, could have tipped off the three men who came to his room and demanded Myrna's jewelry. He might have hoped they would go for their guns when he showed up in the doorway. This would have given the detective a chance to shoot him and label it accidental. And if that had happened, a certain Don Alcott wouldn't have been alive to still insist that he hadn't killed Myrna. The jewelry could have been traced to him. The phony tip which had sent the three men to his room would have cinched the case.

"Roth!" Jane was saying. "You mean the detective who —"

Don nodded. "I mean the detective who gave you a gun and who sent you to my room, hoping you would kill me."

Jane's eyes were wide. She backed away from him, shaking her head. "He—he just asked me for help."

"He's clever," Don said slowly, "terribly clever. He probably told you that there was only a bare chance of ever convicting me. He probably said I would go free, that I had murdered your sister but would never pay for the crime. He built that up in your mind. He painted me as sadistic, cruel. Isn't that right? He gave you a gun and sent you to my room."

Jane was biting her lips. She was still shaking her head but the movement was barely noticeable.

"Roth needed someone to pin the crime on," Don continued. "He picked on me as the easiest victim. I was an ex-service man, used to violence. I had loved Myrna and she had laughed at me. I had brooded over it and in a moment of insane anger, had killed her. He planted the stolen jewelry where it could easily be traced to me. He was in charge of the investigation and in an ideal place to build up his case. The poisoned wine was meant for you. Did you ever tell him of the policeman who bothered your sister?"

Jane was staring at the wine bottle. "He brought it," she whispered.

"Roth?"

"Yes. Last night, quite late. He came to see me. He said he was sorry about what had happened. He had a bottle of sherry. He insisted that I have some but I had a headache and didn't want any. He opened the bottle. I almost took the drink he poured. He finally left. He told me to take the drink before I went to bed. He said it would help me sleep."

"It would have," Don said grimly. "It would have helped you to sleep forever."

Jane covered her face with her hands. She shuddered. "I poured the drink out," she said under her breath.

Don reached for his cigarettes. He lit one and passed it to Jane and lit another for himself. He looked at her thoughtfully. She was in this as deep as he was. She had been as close to death. Perhaps they were still close to death, both of them.

"He's coming here, Jane," Don said abruptly.

"Roth?"

Don nodded. "It was Roth who called me. He said he would be here in fifteen minutes. Maybe he wants to propose a toast. Do you have a gun?"

"No. What will we do, Don? We can't stay here."

"No, we can't stay here. We've—"

Don broke off at the sound of the doorbell. He stared desperately at Jane. Roth was already here. It was too late to get away.

"Pick up the wine bottle and the glass," he said under his breath. "Put them away, then let him in. We'll try to bluff it out."

Jane nodded. She picked up the wine bottle and the glass which had fallen from Parry's hand. She started toward the kitchenette.

Don stepped over Parry's body and lifted it. He headed for the bedroom. The doorbell was ringing insistently.

XII

EXCERPT FROM DETECTIVE ROTH'S NOTEBOOK

"I have been right from the beginning. Don Alcott is the man who killed Myrna. We are close to him. The jewelry he took he deposited in a vault in the Central Savings Bank. He has withdrawn it and

mailed it but we have a good description of the package and will recover it from the postal authorities. His fingerprints will be in and on it.

"I have made a study of Alcott. He is the type who will fight when cornered or will choose to escape by suicide. I hope that we can take him alive, but it will require swift action. I am afraid it may not be possible.

"One other thing bothers me in connection with this case. Jane Patterson, Myrna's sister, has seemed very depressed. She should be placed in the care of a good psychiatrist before, in a fit of despondency, she ends her own life.

"Since I did not get to see the chief today I am filing a copy of this with my regular report."

XIII

DETECTIVE ROTH stood in the doorway, glancing from Don to the girl. His eyes were red-rimmed, tired. He was scowling but Don had never see him when he wasn't. He stepped into the room and closed the door and leaned his heavy shoulders against it. "Nice of you to wait for me, Alcott," he said flatly. "I didn't really expect it. I thought you'd run."

Don shook his head. "Maybe I don't want to run. Maybe I don't have to. Maybe I've learned something which makes it unnecessary. In fact, I'm rather glad you came here tonight."

"Why, Alcott?"

"It's a night for celebration," Don replied. "Jane, I think you'll have to furnish the drinks. What about that bottle of sherry you offered me when I came in? I didn't want it then but I do now. We'll all have some."

Jane gulped. "The—the sherry?"

"Yes. You set the bottle on the coffee table for a while and then put it away. Pour us three glasses."

Don tried not to look at the detective while he was talking to Jane but he couldn't help but notice the way Roth's eyes narrowed at the mention of the sherry.

Jane headed for the kitchenette. "This bottle of sherry was a present," she called over her shoulder.

"Pour three glasses," Don suggested.

"And bring the bottle back with you. We might want more."

Roth moistened his lips. He crossed the room to the davenport and sat down, probably in the same corner where Parry had been sitting. His scowl was uglier than it had been a moment before. "This won't get you any place, Alcott," he said flatly. "The hangman is still waiting."

"But I didn't kill Myrna," Don answered. "Do you see those papers on the coffee table?"

Roth stared at the coffee table. The typed statements which Don had taken from Parry's pocket were lying there. He leaned forward, reached for them, picked them up.

"Go ahead," Don nodded. "You'll get it quicker than I did. Dr. Parry brought me those papers. Do you know what he said. He said that we wouldn't find the murderer's name mentioned in those statements but that if we read them carefully we would find fingers pointing to him."

Jane Patterson came back from the kitchenette carrying a tray. On it were three glasses of wine and the bottle which had been on the coffee table only a few moments before. She shot a warning look at Don as she set the tray down.

Roth looked up from reading the papers to stare at the tray, the three glasses and the bottle. Don stooped over and picked up one of the glasses. He carried it toward his lips and though Roth was still holding the papers in front of him, Don knew that the detective wasn't reading.

Don lowered the glass. "Do you see them, Roth?" he asked quietly. "Do you see the pointing fingers?"

Roth shook his head. He laid the papers aside.

"Shall I show you?"

"Go ahead and drink your wine."

Don picked up the wine glass. "Didn't you find them, Roth?" he insisted. "The pointing fingers? Didn't you see them at all?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Roth growled.

Don set his wine down again. "I'm talking about Myrna telling the doorman not to be afraid of the man who was calling for her. Who are people almost universally afraid of. A policeman. I'm talking about Myrna telling Betty Starr that the fly in the

ointment was official. Who is official? A policeman. I'm talking about Myrna saying to Mrs. Graske that she knew someone who could help her with a troublesome roomer. Who could help her? A policeman. I'm talking about the fear Myrna expressed to Ben Chalmers. Fear of whom? A policeman. Shall I name him for you, Roth?"

The detective made no answer. He showed no surprise. His unblinking eyes were fixed on Don Alcott. Jane, standing a little to one side, was rigid. Don could hear the sound of her breath, quick, irregular.

"I've learned why Myrna was afraid of policemen," Don said slowly. "Jane told me, just as she probably told you. But Jane didn't guess that you were the policeman who arrested Myrna in that raid on the variety show, two years ago, and who kept bothering her afterwards."

Again there was no sound in the room when Don finished talking. Roth's eyes shifted to the girl, then came back to Don Alcott. A faint perspiration showed on Roth's upper lip. His breath was coming a little faster.

Don stooped over once more and picked up the wine glass. A sip of this wine had brought instant death to Dr. Parry. A sip of it and he would be dead. And Roth knew that. Roth's eyes were watching not him, but the wine glass he held. Roth was expecting him to take a drink. It would be simple for the detective after that. He would have only Jane to deal with. Twice before Don had lifted the glass toward his lips and then had set it down. He wondered how long Roth's nerves could stand up under a strain like this.

He brought the glass closer to his lips. "A night to celebrate," he said grimly. "Your case against me backfired, didn't it, Roth."

The detective moistened his lips but made no answer. Don could imagine the struggle the man was having. Roth didn't want to say anything which might prevent him from tasting the wine. In fact, it was this wine which had probably brought Roth here. Roth must have counted on serving it if Jane hadn't already done so when he arrived.

Don lifted the glass almost to his lips, then shook his head and set it down. "Suppose we clear up everything before our toast," he suggested. "It'll all come out,

you know, Roth. Police records will tie you to Myrna's first arrest. There will be others who will remember the story of how a policeman bothered her. The men with whom you have worked can run down the tip which sent three men to me to collect Myrna's jewelry. They will find the man who forged my name to rent a safety deposit box in the Central Savings bank. How does your throat feel, Roth? Is the rope drawing tighter?"

Ed Roth shook his head. "You can never prove it, Alcott. Never in the world."

"But it's true. You killed her."

"And you will hang for it."

Don managed a grin. "We'll have a drink on that, Roth. It's you or me. May the guilty man hang."

As he said that Don reached once more for his glass. He lifted it and stood waiting.

Roth reached for one of the other two glasses, then glanced over at the girl. "Will you join us, Miss Patterson?" he asked quietly.

Jane took the third glass. Her hand wasn't very steady. She looked at Don but Don was staring at the detective.

Roth came slowly to his feet. He raised his glass. "May the guilty man hang," he said grimly.

He started the glass toward his lips, then lowered it. His hard, slate colored eyes were fixed on Don's face. Perspiration was now showing on his forehead and his body seemed tense.

"What's the matter, Roth?" Don asked in a half whisper.

"I don't like sherry," Roth muttered.

Don shook his head. "I don't either, *especially sherry which has been poisoned.*"

There wasn't a sound in the room. Don could see the shock of understanding in Roth's eyes and following it he saw again the blazing hatred which Roth had betrayed that night as he was lying in the hall outside of Don's room.

"The poison in the wine can be traced, too," Don said grimly. "You're trapped, Roth. This is the end."

ROTH set the wine glass down on the coffee table and as he stooped over to do this his other hand moved with a startling swiftness toward his pocket. Don lunged

directly at the man, stabbing his fist in Roth's face as the detective straightened up. Roth didn't have a chance, then, to get his gun. He fell against the davenport, rolled to the floor, scrambled to his feet. And as Don moved in toward him, he was ready. He blocked one smashing blow, caught another on his shoulder. He stepped forward and hit out twice with his fists, ducked under a blow Don aimed at him and hammered again at Don's head.

He was quick for a big man, quick and he knew how to use his fists. He knew how to block and cover up and how to twist the weight of his body behind a blow. Don backed away from him, then suddenly bulled in and smashed a stiff blow to Roth's chin. He hit the detective again but Roth didn't back away from him. He didn't even seem hurt. He jabbed at Don's face, and suddenly lunging forward, caught Don around the shoulders.

The weight of the detective's body carried them both to the floor. Fingers clawed at Don's face, then buried themselves in his throat. Don twisted, squirmed, and abruptly kicked free. He rolled over and came to his knees. He stood up. He was breathing heavily now, and his legs weren't very steady. He started toward Roth who was just getting up. He saw Roth's hand coming from his pocket, he saw the gun and he knew, bitterly, that the fight was over. Roth was a safe distance away. He could use his gun before Don could reach him. And he would. Don could read that promise in the man's eyes.

"This is quicker than a rope, Alcott," Roth said heavily. "Quicker but just as deadly."

JANE was coming up behind the man. She held a vase in her hand. It was half-raised. She was coming up behind him but she was still several steps away.

"Wait a minute, Roth," Don said hoarsely. "Wait a minute. You—"

"I've waited too long already," Roth answered. "That was the only mistake I made, waiting too long."

His gun was raised, leveled. There was a tight, ugly look on his face. Jane was just behind him now. Don saw the vase swing up and then start down toward Roth's head. He twisted sideways. He heard the roar of

³⁵ the detective's gun smothering the sound the vase made as it struck against his head. Roth took a step forward. His knees buckled and he sank slowly to the floor. His hand was still curled around his gun.

Where Roth's bullet had gone, Don did not know. Jane's vase, he realized, must have struck the man the instant before he fired. It had been close, so close that in some of the nights to come he would wake up in a cold sweat from a weird, dream-picture of this fight. He didn't know that, however, and wouldn't have cared if he had. He moved forward and got Roth's gun and looked at Jane, who was standing as rigidly as though frozen.

"It's all over, Jane," he heard himself saying. "All but a lot of explaining and questioning and publicity, which there's no way in the world to dodge. You know, you're pretty good with a vase."

Some of the tension went out of the girl's body. A smile showed briefly on her lips. Don grinned at her. He crossed over to the telephone to call the police.

XIV

TELEGRAM FROM BILL GRANT
TO DON ALCOTT:

DONALD C. ALCOTT
BILTMORE HOTEL
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

YOU WILL NOT HAVE TO RETURN FOR THE TRIAL. THE MAN WHO KILLED MYRNA COMMITTED SUICIDE IN HIS CELL LAST NIGHT. HE LEFT A FULL, WRITTEN CONFESSION, SAYING THAT HE KILLED MYRNA BECAUSE THE WORLD WAS TOO FULL OF WOMEN LIKE HER, WOMEN WHO TRAP MEN BY THEIR BEAUTY. I THINK HE WAS NUTS, AND NOT BECAUSE OF THE VASE JANE PATTERSON BROKE OVER HIS HEAD. I ALSO THINK YOU ARE NUTS IF YOU HAVEN'T DISCOVERED THAT JANE PATTERSON IS STAYING AT YOUR HOTEL FOR WHAT IS SUPPOSED TO BE A REST. MAYBE I AM NUTS FOR THINKING THAT YOU AND JANE DIDN'T PLAN THINGS THAT WAY. AT ANY RATE, HAVE A GOOD TIME, BOTH OF YOU, BUT GET BACK HERE FOR MY BIRTHDAY PARTY NEXT MONTH. LOVE AND KISSES.

BILL

In our next issue

Nature says, "Here are the trees . . . get 'em if you can!"



GUMBOOT LOGGER

A Complete Novel

Frank Richardson Pierce

Even the forces of nature on the Frontier can't force a young lady's hand.

RED HAID SNAPS UP

William MacLeod Raine

A weapon that turned up on Halfaday—a boomerang in the shape of a double cross!

THE PARTNER- SHIP BUSINESS

James B. Hendryx

*There's Times When a Fella Can Load
His Guns with Politics and Do Himself
a Heap More Good Than He Can with
Powder and Lead*



A GUNMAN'S CONSCIENCE

By CADDO CAMERON

IN this here dogfight that we call Life there are top-dogs and under-dogs and I imagine there always will be. Me—I figure I'm what you might call a middle-dog. I catch hell from above and below, but I ain't a-moanin' none because I'm havin' my fun as I go along and

ever so often I take a nip at the under-dog and bite a chunk out of the top-dog. If we were to pair off and fight clean in life, reckon I'd side the under-dog. Why? Damned if I know, unless it's because he generally needs help more'n the top-dog needs it and appreciates it more when he gets it.

Like, for example—Joe Tucker, an under-dog and John H. Barden, a top-dog.

It happens like this—

I've transacted a little business down here in The Choctaw Nation south and east of Caddo, a station on the Katy Railroad not far north of Red River, and I'm headin' back toward my temporary hangout over in Arkansaw. Nope, I ain't been run out of my home in the breaks of the North Canadian here in The Nations.

I'm simply spendin' some time in an old log house just south of Rich Mountain across the line because that country has got the best huntin' and fishin' I've ever run onto and it ain't far from Hot Springs where a fella can go and get the lead boiled out of his system if he needs to. In my business you never can tell when you'll accumulate more lead than it's comfortable to carry around. A whole slew of top-dogs go to Hot Springs to get the cussedness steamed out of 'em, but far's I been able to see the water ain't hot enough to do *them* much good.

Anyhow, I'm a-headin' back to Arkansaw and on my way I aim to drop in and spend the night with my old friend, Joe Tucker, whose father intermarried with the Choctaws makin' Joe half-and-half. Joe has got a cabin and corrals and such and he's tryin' to build him up a little herd. You probably know that the Choctaws hold their land in common—that is, as a tribe, so that every fella has just as much right to use it as the other one and it's all open range with nobody bein' allowed to fence more'n a thousand acres. But Indians have got top-dogs and under-dogs like other folks, only not so many of 'em, and Joe Tucker is a sure-enough under-dog. He ain't exactly dumb, but he ain't overly bright neither and he's so dadblamed good-natured he won't fight for *his* rights or rights that *don't* belong to him like some of us do. He's a poor cuss who always rides in the drag and won't never drive himself to make the point.

The trail tops a low ridge in light timber and I look down on Joe's place half a mile away. Three riders are comin' up the valley east of the house, two behind and one in front, and somehow or other they ain't behavin' natural. I pull my spyglass and take a quick look. Joe is in the lead. Can't

mistake him because he's a lanky cuss who'd be mighty nigh as tall as me if he'd straighten his backbone. And Joe Tucker's hands are tied behind him!

I know one of the other men. He's John H. Barden—Big John, they call him—and his father was an intermarried white man, too. Barden is a genuine top-dog in the Choctaw Nation. He has run for Principal Chief and come mighty close to gettin' elected, too, and he sure rides high, wide and handsome in this part of the country. In his dealin's with other top-dogs he's plumb honest, but it's different with under-dogs. You all know men like that. He wouldn't think of brandin' a neighbor top-dog's calf, but far's he's concerned an under-dog ain't got no right to own a calf. He brands 'em regular and gets away with it. The little fellas are afraid to accuse him and nobody would believe 'em if they did. Big John won't give a grubline rider or a hungry mover with a wagonload of kids a meal to keep 'em from starvin', but he gives away schoolhouses and hospitals like nothin' at all—providin', of course, that John H. Barden's name is put over the door in letters that won't come off.

After one quick look at what's goin' on down there I drop my packhorse lead rope and lift old Blaze into a gallop. We boil down the slope. Big John and his rider sorta slow up when they catch sight of us and the stranger jerks his rifle from its scabbard. I lay along my sorrel's neck and tell him to ramble some. A bullet gnaws at the ground behind Blaze, then the crack of a rifle comes up the valley to meet us and my horse piles on more coal. He's got more nerve than I have. He'd rather run into lead than to run out of it. The fool with the rifle ain't got no better sense than to shoot from the saddle so he ain't hittin' nothin', or maybe he's just tryin' to scare us off. Two more bullets miss us clean, then we've got the house between us and them. I pile off and run through the front door to the lean-to kitchen at the back. The riders are just movin' in behind the log stable.

I holler through the kitchen window, "Who in hell d'you think you're shootin' at?"

I know Big John's voice. "Can't you take a hint? We don't want company now!"

"You've got it anyhow!" I yell. "I'm comin' out there!"

This is a fool play and I know it, but I've got to get to them before they do somethin' to Joe Tucker. I'm gamblin' that Barden won't shoot me down, for he ain't a killer. So I mosey out of the house like there ain't nobody within miles, amble on to the stable and around the corner. First thing I see is a poison-lookin' little rat—a fullblood, I'd say—and he's got a six-shooter and I'm meetin' it face-to-face. Joe is a-settin' his horse with his chin on his chest like he's plumb give up. He looks at me, opens his mouth, but chokes up and don't say nothin'. Big John has got a rope and he's tyin' a hangman's knot. He cocks an eye at me and his round, heavy face ain't no ways pretty to look at.

"Watch him, Weasel!" he snaps. "What are you doing here, Gunman?"

So this is Little Weasel, a Choctaw badman I've heard about but never run onto before, and he's on Big John's payroll which ain't surprisin'.

I DON'T pay no attention to Barden or Weasel. "Howdy, Joe," I say sociable. "What they fixin' to do to you, fella?"

Joe swallows two three times before he can talk. "They're—Mister Barden says that I stuck him up and stole two thousand from him yesterday. He's—he says he's goin' to hang me."

"Did you do it, Joe?"

"No! No, Slim, I didn't!"

Joe Tucker ain't smart enough to be a good liar. I *know* he's tellin' the truth.

"He's a liar!" growls Barden. "Ever since he settled in here Tucker has been robbing me, building up his herd at my expense. He ambushed me yesterday when I was coming home from Caddo and that's the last straw. I'm going to hang him on his own corral gate as a lesson to others in this country who think they can prey on men with money and get away with it. Besides, Gunman, what I do is none of *your* damned business."

Little Weasel is standin' maybe three yards left of a line between me and Barden. The look in his mean eyes makes the hair crawl all over me.

I tell Big John, "Why don't you turn him over to the law?"

"Law, hell!" barks Barden. "I make the law around here."

Right before Joe Tucker's eyes he's testin' the hangman's knot now, a-slidin' the rope, openin' and closin' the loop.

This is powerful hard to do, but I've got to do it. I tell Tucker, "I'm mighty sorry, Joe, but Little Weasel has got me covered and I reckon there ain't a damned thing I can do to help you. D'you want to send word to anybody?"

At that Tucker goes limp in his saddle. He coughs, and says hoarse, "Thanks, Slim. I know you'd help me if you could. There's—there's a girl in Durant, Mary Sutter. We were goin' to—to get married. Tell her, Slim—tell her I'm sorry. And, Slim—*tell her I didn't do it!*"

"All right, Joe, I'll tell her," I say low. "I'm goin' now, Joe, gettin' away from here before they—Barden you're hangin' an innocent man! So 'long, Joe."

I turn slow to the right away from Little Weasel. All this talk has sorta throwed the Choctaw badman off his guard, which I hoped it would do. Either that or he ain't never seen a man draw with his off hand, then fire back across his body while he's makin' out to turn away like I do now. I put all I've got into it, too. I couldn't have made that draw a thousandth of a second faster and if I'd been that much slower Little Weasel would've got me. His gun explodes so close to mine you can't tell 'em apart. His bullet rips my vest an inch from my hide. He spins half around, staggers back, tries to lift his gun, then falls on his face.

Barden made no move to draw. Not Big John Barden. He thinks too much of his health to take a chance like that. He hires men to do his fightin' for him.

I take a look at Weasel. He ain't dead, hadn't ought to die if a doctor gets a-hold of him before *too* long. The shock of a forty-five slug has knocked him cold.

After cuttin' Joe a-loose, I walk over to Barden's horse. "Come here, Barden!" I snap. "Fetch me that rope!"

"Go to hell!" he growls. "I don't take orders from the likes of you."

He's wearin' a new Stetson—maybe forty dollars worth of hat. Before he knows what, I drive a bullet through the crown of that there skypiece and I ain't none to *par-*

ticular whether I trim his scalp lock either. He flinches, but don't make a move.

"Now, I'm goin' to earmark you," I tell him quiet, "right and left underbit. That's Joe Tucker's mark and I aim to put you in his brand. Better hold still, mister, mighty still."

Big John changes his mind then. He starts my way slow and moves like he's got drag-leg. He's cussin' fit to kill. Shore is tough on a top-dog to take orders thisaway, but Barden ain't no fool and I betcha he knows that I mean business. I drop the loop with the hangman's knot over his head and draw it shut on his neck. Then I carry the balance of the rope down and tie his hands good and tight so that he'll choke himself if he ain't mighty careful while tryin' to work 'em free. Me and Joe put Big John on his horse, hobble his feet, close his reins and hang 'em around his neck.

"Now, git for home, Barden," I tell him, "and I'm hopin' that you meet a whole slew of folks on the way so's they can see what happens to a top-dog that gets too big for his britches and tries to run it over underdogs who can't help themselves. Git!"

John H. Barden is half white and he has graduated from two Indian colleges that I know of, but the red blood of his grandpappies comes to the surface of him now. He looks at me and Joe like he wants to make certain that he never forgets us, and says low and steady, "Listen to me—Gunman, and you—Tucker. You'll both hang and the law won't do it. I'll work you over in my own way, then you'll be damned glad when I hang you."

Joe turns plumb white. I don't feel none to comfortable myownself.

"Git!" I tell him. "Git, or I'll strip you and send you home naked!"

He rides off. Even if his horse don't want to head for home, which ain't likely, he can guide it with his knees and if it runs away he can hold it back with the reins around his neck. I don't want to kill the man—at least not yet.

Joe Tucker is plumb shaky. He says, "I'll never forget what you done for me, Slim, but I'm afraid of what Big John will do to us. We hadn't ought to have treated him that way and we'd better get clean out of the country quick!"

I'm sorry for Joe. It isn't his fault

that there ain't no man-fight in him. He was borned thataway, I reckon. It ain't what you'd call cowardice. He'll fight hard times and he'll fight a red-eyed cow or a bronc, but far's other folks are concerned he's an underdog.

"Now, don't you go and get yourself in a lather," I tell him. "You've got as much right to this here land as Barden has. The Indian Agent will tell you that. You've done built yourself a nice place here, Joe, and some day you'll have a fine little spread with a wife and kids and everything. I'll admit that Big John is a top-dog, but there ain't no call for you to lay down and roll over everytime he barks. What's more—we're goin' to take some of the bark out of him. Hear me?"

"But, Slim! By mornin' he'll have twenty men combin' the country for us. He will!"

I know this is a fact and it ain't no ways comfortin' to think about. I've been on the wrong end of too many man-hunts to like 'em any more. But I don't let on to Joe.

"Let 'em comb!" I snap. "We've got a lot of hard fast work ahead of us and it's time we were on our way."

We bandage Little Weasel the best we can and when he comes to we try to make him comfortable. He'll be able to ride and Joe will take him to a friend's house and have 'em send for a doctor.

While we're makin' up a pack of grub and stuff I learn several things from Tucker. For instance—the Choctaw Nation is split into two factions more or less, one backin' Chief Henry Thomas who beat Barden in the last election and the other one behind Big John. This is interestin'. There's times when a fella can load his guns with politics and do himself a heap more good than he can with powder and lead. Several Thomas backers live in this part of The Nation and they don't like Barden none at all. They're mostly underdogs, but Joe says they're good and dependable people and I know that when you can depend on a red man he's a sight more dependable than the average white man. Once he gives his word, turnin' his toenails inside out won't make him break it. Another thing—Barden has got under fence five thousand acres of the best grass and water in this part of the country, which is just five times what tribal law allows him to fence, and he's eternally try-

in' to grab onto more of it—mostly what Joe Tucker and other little fellas around Big John are grazin' as open range. Barden gets away with this because he ain't a-pes-terin' the top-dogs none and the under-dogs are afraid to howl.

Shortly after noon me and Joe go in opposite directions. He's on his way to visit some of the Thomas backers in this neighborhood and have a little talk with them about somethin' I cooked up, and I'm goin' to try to keep Big John and his boys busy so's to lead the chase away from Joe. We figure to meet at a certain spot inside the Barden pasture tomorrow. I ain't afraid but what Joe can take care of himself runnin' away, for when it comes to plainscraft and woodcraft he can out-Injun any full-blood I ever seen. I'll swear he can foul his trail so's he can't find himself a day later.

Joe has taken my packhorse and I'm a-travelin' light, headin' straight for Barden's home ranch. I don't throw off none, either, because I want to get in sight of the place as soon as I can after he gets there. Figurin' that he'd have to travel slow, I ain't far behind him when I top a knoll lookin' down on his headquarters. It sets in a long, narrow valley bordered by timber—the big house, stable, corrals and bunkhouse, with a sizeable horse pasture runnin' down the valley from the stable to a creek at its far end. I look the place over good with my spyglass.

Barden's horse is dozin' in the yard under saddle. Men are bunched under a big burroak in front of the bunkhouse, eight of 'em. I don't see any loose horses in the corral, but there's fifty or more in the creek bottom at the lower end of the pasture. I'm wonderin' how many there are in the stable. While I'm thinkin' about this, the men head for the big house with Barden himself in the lead. Time for me to get movin'.

Ridin' hellbent through the timber until I'm below or east of headquarters, I turn right to the pasture fence where the ground dips and they can't see me from the house, cut the wires and go inside. From there it's no trick to ride back to the stable, keepin' it between me and the house. I know that I ain't got a lick of sense. If Barden's powwow with his men ends sudden and they rampse out here to get their horses, I'll be

in one hell of a jackpot. Won't be the first time, though, and if I can pull off this she-nanigan it'll be quite a spell before Big John is able to get his man-hunt organized because he's got to send far and wide to get word to his line riders and other hands on the range. The stable has got a back door openin' into the pasture. I get down there, look through cracks and listen. Horses, but no men inside, so I go in and quick cut eight horses a-loose and turn 'em into the pasture. I could've shot the nag that nickered, kicked up his heels and tore off to the band in the creek bottom. But it seems like Big John's women folks and everybody else are so wrapped up in what he's tellin' 'em, they ain't a-payin' no mind to what's goin' on outside. Or maybe they don't expect anything to happen in broad daylight like this. I'm kind of gamblin' on that. Leavin' the stable I take along an old yellow slicker and a cowbell that's hangin' in there.

The ponies in the pasture are still feedin' in the bottom out of sight of the house. I cut the fence down there in three places, then ride easy among the horses so's not to stir 'em up and find me a wall-eyed roan whose coat and general looks intimate that he's had a taste of loco in his day—not a bad dose, just enough to make him kind of unbalanced in the head at times like a man with a pint of mountain branch water under his belt. He lets me ride close and I flip a loop over his head without startin' any excitement. My luck shore is a-holdin' good so far. Old Wall-eye behaves plumb gentle when I snub him to my saddlehorn and change my ketch rope for a neckrope tied in a bowknot that I can jerk off sudden. I'm a-thinkin', *this is too easy*. Well, it ain't. When I go to tie the slicker and cowbell to Wall-eye's tail I get careless and he kicks my hat off. Reckon I'll have to hobble the cuss—tie his hind legs, but that'll take time and time is powerful precious right now. I'll tell a man it is!

Up at the barn somebody lets out a yell!

It's a pretty far piece up there, but this ain't no time for foolishness. I grab a-hold of Wall-eye's tail again and swing around quick to where he can't find me with his heels, but I ain't snubbed him close enough and he mighty nigh rips my britches off with his teeth, takin' a middlin' big patch

of hide along, and he keeps me dancin' like a bug in an ant hill until I've tied the slicker and bell to his tail so daggoned tight he'll have to shed hair and hide to get away from 'em. Then I turn Old Wall-eye a-loose and point him at the gap in the fence. He makes one jump, the bell clatters, the slicker flops up and slaps him on the rump, he squeals and he's long gone. That crazy roan tears through the band of ponies like a locoed cyclone. There's some spooky spring broncs in the bunch and they go crazy, too, and before you could say Sam Houston the whole shebang is a-smokin' down the valley bound for hell or Arkansaw. Shore is a crazy run of horses. Old Blaze himself goes kinda crazy and he damned nigh piles me, right there in Barden's pasture!

I untangle him and make a quick run for the woods. After hidin' Blaze in undergrowth, I take my rifle and slip back to the edge and find a down log that makes a good shootin' rest. I'm expectin' company before long. In a little while here comes a rider on Barden's horse hot after the band of ponies that has left a fog of dust streakin' down the valley. He passes so close I could hit him with my eyes shut. I crease his pony, shoot it through the upper part of the neck—a paralyzin' shot that mustangers sometimes use to knock down wild horses without hurtin' 'em much. The pony falls. The rider goes down hard and sets up slow. Four men with rifles show up this side of the stable.

This ain't no place for me now. I make a run for my horse. They must have caught a glimpse of me, for they go to shootin' and bullets chop at trees and brush around me. I climb aboard and ride a part circle through the timber until I'm about due north of headquarters, then I work my way afoot to a point not far from the house and climb a big tree with my spyglass. The boys are a-hoofin' it back from the pasture—five of 'em, one limpin' bad. Big John and the others meet them at the corral and they powwow again. Betcha there's plenty cussin' to go with the arm wavin' and pointin'. There they are a-foot while me and Joe Tucker run wild. This must be tough on a top-dog like Barden. I'm havin' so much fun I wouldn't swap places with a bear in a berry patch.

Pretty soon one man hits for the bunkhouse. He comes out in a minute and strikes an easy run up the main trail. I watch him, a-thinkin' some. He don't run like a man in high-heel boots. Naturally! He's an Indian and he has switched to moccasins and he's goin' for help, maybe five ten miles to the nearest ranch or camp. Maybe I'd better do somethin' about this. I climb down and ride a circle until I cut the main trail about two mile east. When he comes along I'm hidin' behind a bush on a cutbank six feet above the road. He's a lean and wiry fullblood packin' knife and six-shooter, and from the looks of him I can see that this little surprise party could easy turn into a man-size mess. I don't want any shootin'. Can't tell who's in the woods hereabouts. So I jump down onto the Indian and dally myself around him like a boa.

That's where I go wrong. Give me a gun and I'll get along fair to middlin', but it's too far from the ground to my belt and from there to my hat for me to be good in a rough-and-tumble ruckus. And that ain't all that's wrong. I've rassled everything from broncs to bobcats, but this is the first time I ever tangled with a slippery eel with a stinger in both ends of him. I got shed of his knife and gun all right. But I'll carry his tooth marks an inch from my juglar from now on, and what he does to me with his bony knee ought to be against the law anywheres north or south of hell. This here fullblood puts up a larrupin' fight against a man a foot taller than him. Fact is, he gives me such a devil of a lickin' before I finally manage to pacify him with my fist, I take a shine to the nervy cuss.

I'm a-settin' there, smokin' and grinnin' at him when he comes to. "Howdy, mister. How they stackin'?"

He grunts and shakes his head and sets up and feels of his jaw, looks around him, then grins at me. This Indian talks English, of course, a sight better'n I do. "Why didn't I see that one comin'?"

"Hard to tell," I answer. "Maybe it was because you were too daggoned busy goug-in' my eyes and rippin' my windpipe out by the roots. Could be."

He laughs plumb cheerful. "No hard feelings, I hope."

"Nary a one. Here—roll you a smoke. It'll ease the misery in your head."

"Thanks," he says, "but I don't smoke. Hurts my wind."

"Are you a foot-racer?"

"Yes, a distance runner. Went out for track at college."

"More'n likely you know who I am," I tell him, "but somehow or other I can't place you."

He grins friendly. "Of course I know you, Mister Gunman. Everybody does, especially the law. My Choctaw name is translated Antelope and the boys at school added Johnny, so I'm Johnny Antelope."

"Huh? Are you the—?"

"Yes, I'm the man."

"Glad to meet you, Mister Antelope," and I mean it. "You shore set fire to Kansas a while back, didn't you?"

"That's what they say. Fun, isn't it?"

So this is the Johnny Antelope who h'isted a couple of banks in Kansas, then turned himself into a ghost and made the law chase him until it wore itself clean down to the hocks. After havin' fun he up and disappeared complete. All of a sudden I grab a-hold of an idea.

"How long you been ridin' for Big John Barden," I ask him, "if it's a fair question?"

He grins sorta dry. "Any question is fair. I don't have to answer, do I?"

"Nope."

"Well, since we're brother outlaws," he goes on, "I'll tell you that I've been with Barden's outfit just four days. I heard that he had sold off some stuff and would receive payment in cash at Caddo, so—you understand, don't you?"

"Reckon so. Go ahead if you're a-mind to."

Johnny laughs quiet. "My idea was all right, but some son-of-a-gun beat me to it and stuck up Big John while he was comin' home with the money."

He looks like he's tellin' the truth, but I grin sorta doubtful. "You wouldn't lie to a pore cuss like me, would you, Johnny? And now that I've got you I don't know what to do with you. I could tie you and leave you here in the woods until day after tomorrow, but that would be too damned rough on you. Or I could give you your gun and shoot it out with you, but that might be too rough on me."

Johnny chuckles. "Don't be funny. But I will fight you with knives."

"No you won't!" I tell him positive. "But this is what I will do. I've got to go to Caddo. I'll take you along and turn you loose there if you'll give me your word that you won't go near Barden's for three days or tell anybody what's comin' off at headquarters. Promise?"

"What makes you think I might promise to do that?"

"In the first place," I say firm, "you know damned well that I'll tie you down and leave you here for wolf bait if you don't, but mainly, I calc'late that you ain't the kind of a fella who backs Barden in runnin' it over under-dogs like Joe Tucker. What say, Johnny?"

He grins friendly. "All right, Mister Gunman, you out-hold me. I promise."

"Shake! Here's your gun and tooth-pick."

Now, I'm gamblin' that Barden will wait for Johnny Antelope to fetch help until it's too late to start a man-hunt before tomorrow mornin', which will give Joe all the time he needs. Even if he had the horses, Big John would know better than to go after me and Joe Tucker at night. So this here outlaw Indian steps into my saddle and I climb on behind him and old Blaze don't like the idea worth a durn and we have a heap of fun all the way to Caddo. He's a ridin' fool, that Johnny Antelope. We separate at the Katy depot. Johnny goes his way, wherever that is, and I go inside to send a telegram. This is what I send—

DEPUTY U S MARSHAL HECK HENDERSON
McALESTER I T.

HOP TRAIN TO CADDO COME TO BIG
JOHN BARDEN HEADQUARTERS TOMORROW
WEDNESDAY BY FOUR O'CLOCK WAIT
THERE FOR ME DIRTY WORK

SLIM

I'm certain that Heck will get it, because a few days ago the boys were passin' the word in this part of the country that he had slipped into McAlester unbeknownst to anybody, *so he thought*, and aimed to stay there a week ten days. I'd like to see Old Heck's face when he reads that telegram. Of course, he knows that us fellas outside the law take what you might call a personal interest in his goin's and comin's, but he thinks he's pretty slick at puttin' it over on us. He is, too, sometimes.

I do some ridin', some work with cows,

a little sleepin'—not much, and by two o'clock the next day I'm up a tree with my spyglass where I can watch Barden's headquarters. Things are pretty quiet down there. It taken him so long to get horses for his man-hunt, I imagine he figures that me and Joe Tucker are clean out of The Nation by now and it ain't much use to go after us hard. I spotted two fellas in timber near Joe's place and seen five riders sorta scoutin' around, and that's all. One of the hands drove away with Barden's women folks in a spring-wagon a while ago, but Big John himself is stayin' close to home with two other men. Maybe he's waitin' there in hopes that one of his trackers will pick up a hot trail. If that's what he's up to, then the men with him are hand-picked fighters and I don't want to forget it.

Around three by the sun a man comes joggin' down the main trail. There ain't no mistakin' that ornery cuss with the long black hair and big mustache, and the crow-bait he's a-forkin' is sure enough livery stable stuff. It's Marshal Heck Henderson and I'm mighty glad he got here. I do the same as yesterday and I do it fast—ride east to the creek bottom, let down the fence and ride back through the pasture to the stable.

The big house is a one-story frame, square with a gallery on three sides. Figurin' that Big John and his company will be in the front room I walk around that way, makin' no more noise on the hard ground than I have to, and when passin' the kitchen door I nod to the colored cook like I belong here. Steppin' cautious onto the porch, I move soft to the east window on that side. It's open and I listen a minute.

Barden is talkin' big like he does. "Glad you dropped in, Marshal. I've been having trouble here and didn't call the Indian police because they've already got too much to do and I don't like to bother them with my affairs."

"What kind of trouble?" asks Heck.

"Well," says Barden, "I'd sold off a little stuff and took payment at Caddo, two thousand cash, and while riding home alone I was held up and robbed. The road agent was masked, but I recognized him. It was my nearest neighbor, Joe Tucker, a cowthief who has a little place north of here and has been stealing from me for all of five years.

I've let him alone, though, because he hasn't taken much—just a cow or calf now and then, and I figured he needed it worse than I. You know how a person feels about such things, Marshal."

"Oh, shore," admits Heck.

Big John goes on, "But this stickup was too much. Little Weasel and I captured Tucker yesterday morning. We were taking him to the Agency to turn him over to the law when the bandit, Gunman, showed up. He shot Weasel. Of course, I can't afford to fight a man like that, so he turned Tucker loose and they disappeared. That's the story, officer. I'll swear out a warrant for them if you'll undertake to serve it, but I haven't any idea where you'd go to look for the outlaws."

I walk quick around the corner and through the open door. "Howdy, gents! You don't have to look no farther for me."

HECK HENDERSON is settin' a little way off to my left. Big John is straight in front and his two men are at his left. I don't make a move to draw and neither does anybody else. Heck grins sly like. Barden and his men are more or less pop-eyed.

I give them a look, and say quick, "Let's us not have no shootin', fellas. It might mess up Missus Barden's nice, clean floor."

"Hi, Slim!" says Henderson. "What in hell are you doin' here? Thought you were over in Arkansaw takin' steam baths to render out your cussedness."

Daggone him! Here I been thinkin' I was hid out. "I come away over here to tell you that Big John Barden is a damned liar," I answer. "Him and Little Weasel were a-fixin' to hang Joe Tucker on his own corral gate when I got there. And as for stealin'—Barden himself is the big thief in this part of the country and I can prove it."

Barden bursts out a-talkin' so fast his words tromp one another and he looks at his two men as if he could kill 'em for not takin' a shot at me, then he winds up, "Marshal, why don't you arrest that man? He's the most notorious outlaw in the country. Arrest him, or I'll report you. Remember, I'm an influential man, Henderson!"

Old Heck curls his mustche and cocks an eye at me like he's lookin' a horse over for its good and bad points. "Mmmm, huh.

Arrest him? Easier said than done, Barden. You've already admitted that *you* didn't have the nerve to fight him. But I *will* make him prove what he says he can prove. Show your cards, Slim, face up!"

"Mighty glad to do it, Marshal," I tell him. "Climb onto your horse and fetch these here fellas along. We're takin' a little ride."

It's doubtful whether Barden himself has ever before seen the little box canyon where I take them, even though it is on land he fenced. And I know he ain't never seen what he sees when we get there. Joe Tucker and four other under-dogs from this end of The Choctaw Nation are holdin' a little bunch of cows and calves, and every last critter is packin' a brand that has lately been burned over into JHB Connected, which is Barden's brand, and they're either ear-marked with his mark or cropped!

It's a pretty fair job of burnin' and markin', if I do say so myself.

Barden has picked up four more hands on the way here. When we walk over to the cattle I'm careful to keep him and his men in front of me all the time.

"There's my cards, Marshal," I say quiet. "Read 'em and tell me who ought to be arrested."

For a minute all I hear is plenty low cussin' from Big John and his men. Heck ain't sayin' a word—just keepin' one eye on them and lookin' at the stock.

So I go on, "Joe Tucker caught Barden and Little Weasel a-workin' on this stuff and that's why they run him down and was fixin' to hang him. Ain't that the truth, Joe?"

"Shore is, Slim," says Joe. "These other boys have been losin' stock, too, but they dassn't say anything against Mister Barden."

Big John starts to explode.

"Shut up, Barden!" snaps Heck. "Let me look at this stuff."

He gives the cows a good goin' over, askin' Joe and his friends about the original brands and marks. Then he growls, "D'you men want to swear out a warrant for Barden? Strikes me it ought to be done."

The top-dog starts to say somethin' then, but Joe beats him to it. I'm right proud of the way this under-dog is showin' his bristles.

"No, sir, Marshal," says Tucker. "We

don't want to cause Mister Barden any trouble. All we want is for him to leave us and our stock alone."

HECK Henderson can be as cussed as a double-distilled, triple-aged snake poison when he's a mind to. What I mean—he's thataway now. He whirls on Barden, and growls, "This is the old story! A big man stompin' little men and gettin' away with it. Be still, Barden! I've been hearin' plenty from several people about your doin's down here. Now, you listen to me. I'll make a report of this affair and copies will go to the Choctaw Agent and Henry Thomas the Principal Chief. Believe me—you'd better behave yourself from now on!"

Big John doesn't say a word to the Marshal. He jerks around to where I was, but I ain't there now. I've moved back until I'm well clear of him and his men. He's got murder in his face—Barden has, and me—I'm set on hair trigger.

"Slim! Barden!" It's Heck a-roarin'. "Looky here!"

I look. So does Big John and everybody else. We see a pair of six-shooters in the hands of a man who can build the damndest smoke I ever seen. *I know*. I've been there when he done it. I fold my arms cautious. So does Barden.

"Hit for home, all of you!" barks the Marshal. "Slim, you come with me. *I want to talk to you!*"

Hub-ob! I'm a-thinkin'. *Has he got a warrant that I ain't heard about?*

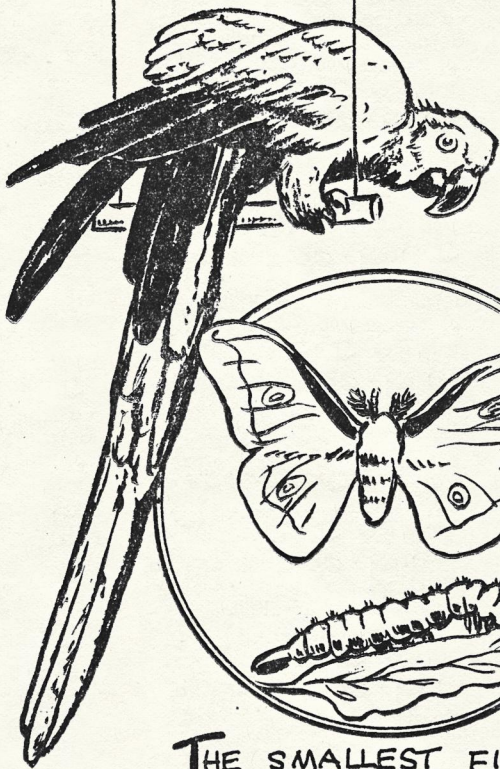
The balance of 'em split up and go here and yander. I'm a-ridin' slow with the Marshal.

He grins sorta slaunchwise, and allows, "Nice piece of work, mister. Barden has had it comin' to him for a long time. But it does appear to me, Slim, that you went to a heap of trouble for a triflin' cuss like Joe Tucker. How come?"

Whether I do or not, I shore feel like grinnin' back at Old Heck. I just tell him, "Bein' a stomped-on, Marshal-ridden puppy myownself, officer, I hate like hell to see a top-dog chaw up an under-dog."

Of course, I don't mention my conscience. I'd be foolish to tell the Marshal that my conscience won't let me watch another man get hung for somethin' *I done myself!*

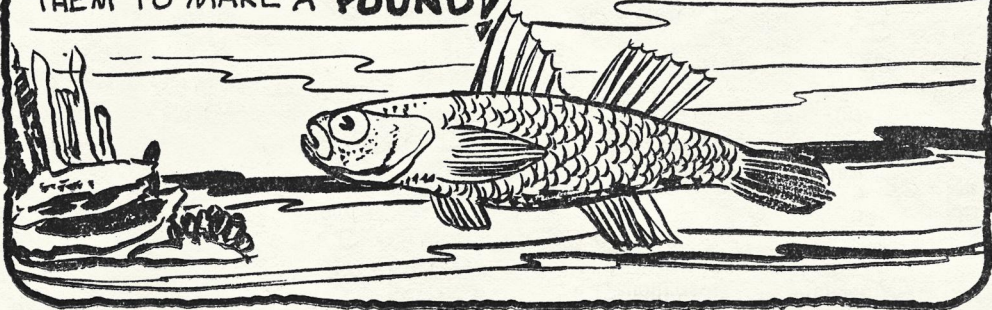
Curiosities ^{By} Weill

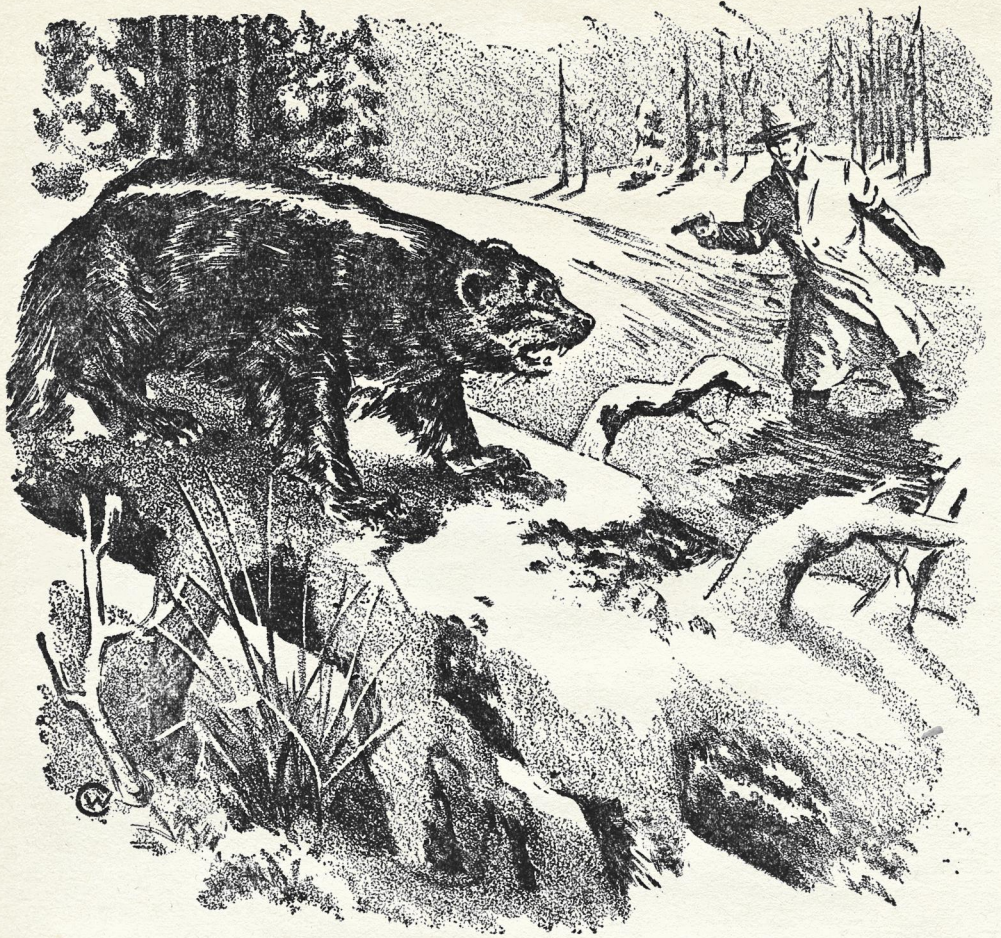


THE AVERAGE AGE FOR ALL SPECIES OF PARROTS IS **FIFTY YEARS**, BUT THERE ARE SOME VARIETIES WHICH ATTAIN AN AGE OF **NEARLY SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS** ✓

THE MANUFACTURE OF RAW SILK WAS INTRODUCED INTO EUROPE FROM INDIA BY SOME MONKS IN 550 A.D. ✓
AT ONE TIME A POUND OF IT WAS WORTH A **POUND OF GOLD** ✓

THE SMALLEST FISH IN THE WORLD IS THE "DWARF PYGMY" OF THE ISLAND OF LUZON IN THE PHILIPPINES. IT IS ONLY TWO-FIFTHS OF AN INCH LONG, AND IT TAKES **16,000** OF THEM TO MAKE A **POUND** ✓





THE HEARTLESS LAND

By JIM CHAPMAN

EVER since Sliver Reese was eight years old and threw a yellow tomcat through a butcher shop window, he'd been in trouble with the cops. "It ain't that Sliver's bad," his straggle-haired mother used to whine, "it's only because he's got so much nerve. Got now so's I can't do nuthin' with him."

He stopped growing when he was twelve and began to wear coats with padded shoulders and hats which made his pinched face look smaller and meaner than it actually was. He was seventeen when his mother

died. After that he didn't have a place to eat. Work wouldn't fit with his night life so for the next ten years he lived by his wits and got pretty smooth at the confidence game. Then he made a slip and things were tough. That was why he'd stuck up the old dame for her money and got rough when she wouldn't come across. It was rotten luck that somebody had seen him getting out of the joint.

Sliver had come a long way in the last week, thumbing rides and grabbing freights, always just one jump ahead of the Royal Canadian Mounted. Montreal was on the

other side of Canada from where he was eating lunch at a road-side cafe in British Columbia.

His weasely eyes kept darting toward the front window and he ate quickly and without pleasure, like a freight engine taking on coal.

The sandwich was almost gone and Sliver's thin lips split into a grin, revealing two gold teeth which glistened in the light. He winked at the waitress.

"Hey sugar," he called, holding up his sandwich, "bring another of these and a mug of java."

The hiss of tires on gravel brought a frightened gleam to Sliver's eyes. It was the look of a rabbit which had been trying to escape from a fox, yet knew it would be caught in the end. Sliver half rose in his seat, one hand gripping the porcelain tabletop and the other slipping under the lapel of his full-cut sports jacket.

He flung himself out of the booth, ran toward the kitchen, kicked open one door and then another. The night air struck his face like a diver's striking water. A woodshed and heap of cordwood cast dark shadows and he plunged into them. He heard running feet as he crashed into the dense evergreen forest a few yards beyond. Sliver tripped and fell; scrambled up and fell again. He ripped his pleated trousers on a snag. Then he regained his wits and moved more silently.

He stopped on the sloping bank of a gully, in a dense growth of cedars, and listened. The officer was moving back and forth at the edge of the trees. Sliver saw the beam of his flashlight. Then there was silence.

"Acted like a scared kid!" he fumed to himself, "makin' a break like that! Maybe the copper didn't know. Now he'll figure I'm on the lam!"

He worked slowly down the gully and the little .38 was comforting in his hand. "I don't want to use it," Sliver thought, "but I can't let 'em get me. I'd get a twenty-year stretch for sluggin' that dame!"

He'd have to lie low for a couple of weeks, he decided, and keep off the highways. So he avoided the next village and soon afterward picked a side road which wormed along beside a mountain creek. He began to hurry.

He'd gone half a mile when a terrier pup came rushing out from a cabin back in the trees. It yapped excitedly and bounced toward Sliver wagging its stubby tail. He waited until it was close, then kicked with all his strength. The little dog sprawled into the ditch. It struggled to get up and managed to hobble toward the cabin, one front leg hanging limply.

Sliver listened to its yelping with mirth in his eyes. "That's one cur less," he muttered.

PINE, cedar and hemlock towered on either side as the road climbed higher along the bank of the creek. The sound of hurrying water became a distant roar. A breeze whispered through the tree-tops and Sliver shivered. "Gives me the creeps," he muttered. "It ain't my line."

He gazed up at the moon; realized that he'd looked over the wrong shoulder and turned around three times to break the bad luck. "Last time I did that I got jugged on a stick-up charge!" he thought, then to reassure himself; "but it don't mean a thing!"

Half an hour later he heard a loud crash beside the road, followed by another. A picture of some savage animal flashed through his mind. He clawed for his gun and quivered while the crashes faded into the distance. Later he heard another and flattened his body against a towering cedar.

Water dripped off a ledge, mountain coyotes howled dismally and overhead the trees whispered. To Sliver the black forest was laughing, leering, smothering him. To make matters worse it had become cloudy and the darkness was like ink in the gorge.

It was near daylight when he reached the snow; a complication which he hadn't expected. It covered the trail in a thin crusted layer and clung to the evergreens in gobs of white. Sliver buttoned his collar and pulled the green hat lower. He rolled up his pants cuffs but he couldn't keep it from getting into his low oxfords.

"Can't go back," he thought. "Gotta' keep going. They might have the hounds out by now."

The road continued to climb. By daylight Sliver was walking in snow well above his shoes. Then he heard the baying sounds. The cries were deep and far away—but

plain! For a long moment he stood listening, trying to think and reason. Then terror swept over him like an engulfing fog.

"They're after me," he gasped. "Gotta' get away!"

He left the trail and skidded down the mountainside, clinging to shrubs and branches as he went. He knocked snow off the trees and it fell down his neck. He began to curse and sweat as he climbed over heaps of deadfall. Ten minutes later he was down to the creek.

The stream was smaller at this high level; its roar less deafening. Sliver had heard of men walking in water to escape from hounds and now he tried it. In less than a minute his feet were numb. The chill crept up his legs. He slipped on the icy rocks and boulders; fell when he tried to cross the slippery logs. After a hundred yards he gave up and climbed the opposite bank. He stopped long enough to look back through the dull gray of the morning. No hounds were in sight.

"They'll be coming," he panted, and plunged into the trees.

THE gray light of dawn had filtered into the high mountains, revealing clouds which lay like dirty wool around the peaks and masses of fog that drifted through the jagged passes. Snow was deep on these high levels. It clung to the steep slopes like feathers to a bird. Scattered spruce and pine dotted the snowy expanse, many of them gnarled and torn by the fierce winds which on occasion blew through these high passes in the Selkirks.

There was movement on a rocky ledge and Karka the wolverine came into view. His stubby legs were tired for he had traveled steadily most of the previous night. Now he paused to look into the basin below.

He was six inches shorter at the shoulders than a mountain coyote, with a body twice as broad. His coat was brown with two wide stripes which arched from neck to tail, giving his species the oft-used nickname of the "skunk-bear." Now he sat on his haunches, front paws dangling like a weasel, and gazed intently downward.

His eyes scanned the sheltered basin which nestled among the peaks and came to rest on a large patch of green. It stood out sharply on the sparsely wooded floor. Karka knew it to be a swamp. Once many seasons

before he had visited the spot and found it well populated with rabbits. He returned to seek food.

Two weeks ago the deer had left their high pastures, driven to lower levels by the early snows. Even the goats had moved to new feeding grounds. For almost a week Karka had hunted vainly, his only food having been a single red squirrel—a mere mouthful. He needed at least one hearty meal, and preferably several every week to keep up his strength.

Karka raised his nose to test the thin air which drew up the mountain. There was only the smell of trees, snow and moss. He listened to the whisper of a breeze through the needles of a pine which clung precariously to a fissure in the mountainside. Then he settled to all fours and lumbered along the ledge. With a sure-footed skill he picked his way downward. A thousand feet below he broke into the unhurried lope of his species and angled toward the swamp over the crusted snow.

On his mild inoffensive countenance there was little to show that here was the notorious renegade of the Selkirks, Karka the dreaded despoiler and killer, feared by men and animal alike.

SLIVER REESE was lucky that morning. Not far up this new mountain he blundered upon a foot path; a man-made ledge which zigzagged upward across the precipitous face. He was lucky in another way for it began to snow heavily, great flakes tumbling out of the leaden sky. "Blottin' out my tracks," he exulted. "Maybe they won't catch me after all!"

It was still snowing two hours later when Sliver stumbled around the shoulder of the mountain far above. He had no idea where the foot path was taking him. Perhaps it would lead through some pass into a remote settlement where he'd not be known. Sliver little realized the slimness of such a possibility.

The snow had become deep and he was wading half up to his knees. His pants, which were the latest thing in Montreal, were useless here. The cold breezes blew through them like cheesecloth. The path became worse the further he went and was hard to follow. Willows grew from its face, trees had fallen across the way and even

boulders were lodged on its narrow ledge. A dozen times he lost the path and was forced to go back and find it. Once he stopped for a smoke in an attempt to ease the ache of his empty stomach, but imagined that he saw a pursuer and hurried on. At last he reached more level ground, but his surroundings were blotted out by the storm.

It was past noon when he waded into the fringe of the swamp. He looked neither to right or left, concentrating all his energy on the trail. Once a snowshoe rabbit leapt out almost at his feet and he scarcely saw it.

The cabin loomed up suddenly less than fifty yards away. Sliver stopped and saw that it was the end of the trail. He swayed, feet spread wide apart, then stumbled forward.

"Maybe there'll be some grub," he muttered.

His hopes fell as he drew near. The cabin door hung open at a drunken angle and the one window, staring like a single eye, was covered with dirt and cobwebs. He stepped through the low door and looked about. It hadn't been used for years because the chinking was out. The place was small, just large enough for a bunk across one end and about three times as long. The walls were five logs high to the eaves and from there the rafters sloped up to make a peaked roof.

Immediately Sliver noticed something else. Someone had been here before him, and not long ago!

WHOEVER it was had been in a destructive mood. The little four-lid stove was overturned, a leg had been shattered from the table and all other moveable material was piled in a heap in one corner. Sliver could see firewood, an old rusty pail, some empty cans, a piece of canvas, as well as leaves and dirt. There were fresh tracks on the dusty floor and he looked at them. Instead of being human they were round and big over as a cup! Sliver glanced about nervously and ran his tongue over his two gold teeth. "Queer trick!" he muttered aloud and looked more closely.

Sliver knew that trappers seldom left a cabin without some food and he began to search. Hung from the rafters there was a coil of copper wire, parts of two or three traps, and a small emery stone. Two boxes were nailed to the wall and the top one held

three chipped enamel plates, a mug, two sooty saucepans and a fork.

He sank down on the edge of the bunk, hopelessness reaching into his vitals—like the cold had soaked into his wet and half-frozen feet. He slumped forward and leaned on the table. Sliver Reese could be cruel and ruthless beyond belief and he could reach a similar depth of despair.

His eyes focused on the table-top and saw tracks. He wondered dully what reason an animal would have for leaving the floor. Suddenly his head snapped up. He saw that a chip of wood had been freshly broken out of the ridge-pole, as though a spike had been torn from the wood. He got up quickly and began to dig eagerly in the heap of debris. A moment later he held up a water-stained but unopened can of pork and beans!

He used his pocket knife to open the top. The beans were frozen solid. After hacking out a few he straightened the stove and put up the rusty pipes, partly crushing one in his haste. The fire caught and Sliver ate the beans as fast as they thawed.

THE food gave him new hope. He turned to the heap and dug again. Soon he was cursing angrily. Obviously there had been a considerable cache of food hung from the ridge-pole, probably wrapped in the piece of canvas. Mixed with the dirt and other rubbish he found flour, tea, coffee, salt, and some sort of breakfast food. All of it was fouled and utterly useless. At the very bottom, jammed in the corner, was a second can of beans. It had been chewed and dented.

When Sliver was through with his search his eyes were smouldering. He felt that he had been tricked and cheated. He went to where the animal's tracks disappeared through the doorway into the newly fallen snow; spat at them contemptuously; wiped his lips on the sleeve of his coat and kicked shut the door.

He warmed his feet while he ate the second can of beans, then realized that night had almost arrived. With pieces of wood and spruce bough he blocked the larger chinks between the logs. Then he huddled down beside the stove and tried to think. It wasn't easy.

He kept wondering whether the hounds had been after him after all, and he couldn't

forget the cop. Even yet he could see him getting out of the car in front of the restaurant, a broad-shouldered man with graying hair beneath the circle of his broad-brimmed hat. The Mountie's eyes had been cold and detached. His pursuit would be as relentless as death itself, and as certain. Sliver drove the memory from his mind and thought of food.

"I gotta' stay here," he decided. "Tomorrow I'll shoot something to eat."

KARKA knew that a man had come to the high swamp before Sliver Reese entered the outermost fringes. From a shadowed spot under the spruces he watched the two-legged creature stagger to the cabin and disappear. He knew what lay within and triumph flashed in his narrowed green eyes. He'd already been there to do his work.

All wolverine have the instinct to foul and destroy. They are the vandals of the animal kingdom. But some individuals, through circumstances, surroundings, or natural perversity, become outlaws.

Such a one was Karka. He had ruthlessly followed trappers' lines week after week, stealing baits, eating or carrying off any animals found in the traps—sometimes even tearing the traps themselves from their moorings and hiding them as well. He had raided caches left by woodsmen, fouling what he could not carry away. He had even broken into cabins which had been carefully barred against him.

But it had not been all one-sided. One winter night he had eaten poison set for him and almost died. Another man had tricked him into the jaws of a steel trap and only the prompt chewing off of two toes had bought his escape. The battle with man had become more bitter with the passing years, building a hate in Karka's heart which was like an unquenchable fire.

Now Karka moved to where he could watch the cabin through the falling snow. Somehow, this man did not seem like the others he had known. His clothing was strange and he was small. Once Karka saw the man come to the door. He hissed at the distant figure.

After dark, he circled the cabin, staying close to the shadows beneath the trees. The snow had stopped falling and overhead the

moon shone weakly through the overcast. Karka's eyes glowed with defiance. He sniffed the woodsmoke, tobacco smoke, and the taint of man which filled the air. It stirred his hate and he determined to drive this intruder from the high swamp which he had claimed for his own. After another cautious circle, this time close to the cabin, he loped off to the opposite end of the swamp to do his hunting.

DAWN was bright in the high mountains. Above the snowy peaks the sky was crystal clear. Cedar waxwings were twittering and hopping about in the limbs of a pine when Sliver Reese jerked open the sagging door and looked out. He scowled at the birds and looked even more darkly at the snow which was now deeper than ever. The man winced as he stepped out into it and began to wade away from the cabin. He paused when he saw the fresh tracks, round like the top of a cup.

A squirrel chattered excitedly when he entered the trees, then began to scold. Sliver glared at the little animal peeking around the trunk. He broke off a branch and flung it.

"Shut up you little devil!" he muttered.

The squirrel ducked behind the trunk and scuttled upward. It scolded louder than ever.

Sliver was hunting for the first time in his life. Dimly he remembered the rabbit he'd seen the day before and went in search of it. For an hour he crashed through a tangle of willows near the fringe of the swamp, little dreaming that this was only their feeding place. He found the large round pad marks everywhere and cursed the creature which had made them. Wasn't it enough for the animal to destroy all the food in the cabin? Now it had frightened away all the rabbits.

He cursed the snow, his low shoes and thin trousers. He stopped often to pant, breathing through his mouth. The two gold teeth were cold against his lips and he rubbed them with his tongue. The squirrels scolded from their watching places and to Sliver they were laughing.

At last, too exhausted to hunt further, he turned back to the cabin. Quite by accident he passed a heavy heap of dead-fall and a big snowshoe rabbit leapt from beneath it. Too surprised to shoot, Sliver gaped at it.

The little animal stopped thirty yards away and sat up. The man began to shake like a ten-year-old boy who had just seen his first buck. He raised the handgun and it wobbled crazily. The blast echoed through the woods and chattered back and forth between the peaks. The rabbit kicked up its heels and fled. Sliver saw his prospective meal about to disappear and he shot until the hammer clicked. Then he flung the weapon angrily into the snow.

Something was standing in a sunlit clearing a hundred yards away. For a moment Sliver thought it was a man and fear twisted like a dagger in his heart. Then he saw that it was a large brown animal sitting on its haunches as it watched him. It wasn't like the bears in the zoo; too small and its ears were sharp.

Suddenly the creature raised one of its front paws and shaded its eyes from the glare of the sun! It was a half-human gesture and the man felt a knot of superstitious fear tighten within him. He remembered the cunning of the animal which had destroyed the food cache. Sliver stood perfectly still, returning the animal's stare.

Abruptly it vanished behind a tree. For a minute Sliver was frozen where he stood. He didn't want to believe what he'd seen. After a time he dug his handgun out of the snow, cleaned and reloaded it. Then he walked slowly forward. As he had suspected, in the clearing were the same round tracks which he'd found in the cabin.

"Brown devil!" he swore nervously. "I'll plug it next time!"

But in Sliver's heart there was more doubt than he was willing to admit. He lit a cigarette and dragged on it in an attempt to steady his quaking nerves.

THAT afternoon, deep in the shadowy spruces, Sliver was sure that he saw the animal again. It was fifty feet away, staring at him exactly as it had in the clearing. But after he'd shot four times he looked more closely and saw a pointed stump! Worse still, not a single bullet had hit its mark.

"If it'd been a man I'd have plugged him for sure!" swore Sliver, speaking from experience. He still refused to admit, even to himself, that he was losing his nerve.

It was when he prepared to reload his gun that he discovered that calamity had

overtaken him. The heavy cartridges had worn a hole in his pocket and were gone! Sliver sat down on a fallen tree. The two cartridges still in his gun were small insurance against starvation! Now the gnawing in his stomach was again joined by the emptiness of despair.

In the cabin he made a dozen crude snares from the wire which he'd found hanging from a rafter. He set them on rabbit runs throughout the swamp, guessing at how it should be done. With his task completed he returned, well satisfied with his work. "Nuthin' to it!" he thought to himself. "Tomorrow I'll be eatin' rabbit stew." It was like thinking of a feast. He grimaced at the thought of how far he had fallen. Two weeks ago he'd been dining on caviar in a Montreal swank spot.

That night Sliver smoked his last cigarette. He lay on the hard bunk and gazed at the flickering light which the stove cast on the roof. Then he turned to watching a shaft of moonlight which streamed through a chink in the wall. The thought of no more tobacco deepened the emptiness in the pit of his stomach. The thought of the brown devil deepened it still more.

He couldn't forget the calculated, almost human actions of the beast. The mere thought made him jumpy and he cursed himself for being afraid. At last he could stand it no longer. He went to the smoky dust-smothered window and rubbed a hole so that he could see out.

Moonlight was bright in the clearing among the spruces. Long shadows cast by the trees made a lattice-work on the snow. Sliver stood with his face against the glass, his whiskers prickly against his face, watching for something which he hoped that he wouldn't see.

It was an hour before a shadow moved at the edge of the trees. It rushed into the moonlight and paused. The animal sat up, head swinging from side to side. To Sliver, peering from the window twenty yards away, the creature was huge. He saw the greenish light in its eyes and the flash of moonlight on white fangs.

It dropped to all fours and loped closer. Sliver cringed back. His scalp prickled. It was like an evil spell. He felt as though a powerful force were hovering close, ready to strike a fatal blow. It filled the cabin,

Sliver stood still. He could hear the pounding of his own heart. A spider crawled across his face and he was afraid to brush it off. There was a snuffing at the door, then the air became so still that it was thick. An hour passed. The fire went out. The shadows of the trees shifted across the clearing. Once Sliver heard the pitiful scream of a dying rabbit. He shuddered. To him it was like the helpless scream of a dying woman. "That dame in Montreal," he thought, "I wonder if I croaked her?"

Half an hour passed and he remembered the big Mountie with gray hair and cold expressionless eyes.

Toward morning he gathered enough courage to light a fire because he was slowly freezing. Dawn found his face white and drawn into lines of fatigue.

The sunlight reflected from the snow in a blaze of glory. Again it made a fairyland of light and shadow under the spruces. A whiskey jack settled on the cabin roof and screamed at the smoke which was pouring from the pipe. Sliver Reese stepped outdoors and blinked at the brightness, but for him it held no beauty. Instead it was hard and cruel. He paid no attention to the squirrels which scolded from the trees. They sounded far off, like in a dream.

At the first snare he stared dumbly, for it had been torn from the sapling to which it was fastened. The familiar tracks covered the snow. A feeble grin split the small man's lips and sunlight glinted on his two gold teeth. "Good!" he thought. "The brown devil was caught. Now perhaps it will leave!"

AT THE next snare his elation faded for it, too, was gone! He hurried on, stumbling through the snow. At each set the story was the same. Either the snare had been torn away or it was twisted and tangled beyond hope of future use. Rabbits had been caught in two of them because he could see fur on the surrounding bushes. But each had been eaten or carried away.

Like all men, Sliver Reese feared what he could not understand, but unlike others he had a violent creed. When opposition faced him he knew but one reply. Now this cruel ruthlessness rose up to drive him. "It can be killed even if I dunno' what it is," he reasoned, trying to forget some of the things

which the creature had done. "I'll kill it!" he swore.

At last the two outlaws, Sliver Reese, gangster of the underworld and Karka, renegade of the wilderness, were pledged to battle.

KARKA heard the man threshing about in the swamp and there was something about the way he acted which disturbed him. Twice the man passed at a distance. Then, as fortune would have it, he came straight toward where Karka was basking on a bed of needles at the base of a tamarack. Karka waited until the man was close, then stood up unhurriedly. The man paused and looked at him, then came on deliberately. Karka snarled and showed his teeth.

Man-hate was like a fire as he remembered the ceaseless struggle. This was his enemy; the only creature bold enough to dispute his kingship of the forests; the only creature which he had not killed or sent into headlong flight. Karka's hate and defiance blazed in his eyes.

Now the man came closer! A shiver of indecision ran through the wolverine's frame.

Never before had he faced a human openly. There was determination and cruelty in the man-thing's eyes which matched his own. And there was more which Karka sensed rather than saw. It was the power of will and reason. Suddenly the wolverine fled in the face of the man's steady advance. Ten yards away he turned once more. There was triumph in the man-creature's eyes.

Karka leapt onto the trunk of a great fallen spruce and dug his long claws through the snow into its mossy bark. A fierce struggle raged within him. Never before had he known retreat. He snarled aloud and it was a guttural sound, like the roaring of a boar.

The man had stopped a dozen steps away. Karka watched him raise his arm and point. Then there was a roar and a hot pain above one of his shoulders. The blow spun him half around; knocked him off the log into the snow.

A torrent of rage surged through Karka's thick muscular body. He'd never before known the sting of a bullet and this one caused only anger at the two-legged creature who had fired it. He snarled savagely as he pulled himself back onto the fallen spruce.

Then he charged, leaping off an upended root and flinging his body through space.

The man teetered back on his heels and once more there was a roar. Then Karka landed where he had stood. Already the man was running toward the edge of the swamp. Karka followed, fury and pain driving his short legs, but he couldn't gain. The man was like a frightened deer and the wolverine had learned long ago that his legs were not meant for such a chase.

At the edge of the swamp Karka stopped, sat up on his haunches, and watched the man disappear down the path. His enemy was leaving the way he had come and Karka knew that he would not return.

The wolverine loped back into the swamp, growling and clicking his teeth. He was deeply disturbed and his confidence shaken. He grumbled as he moved uneasily through the spruces. The breeze brought him the hot scent of a rabbit. In one leap he cleared a log and landed beside a leaning clump of willows.

The rabbit leapt but within two feet Karka seized it, tore the unfortunate creature to pieces and went on without swallowing a bite.

He lifted his gaze to the peaks. The wound above his shoulder was aching and he sought to escape. He had been humiliated and the swamp was no longer the same.

Only distance and the freedom of the white solitudes would heal his pride.

An hour later Karka looked back from far above. Then he vanished onto the sparsely wooded slopes of the opposite mountain.

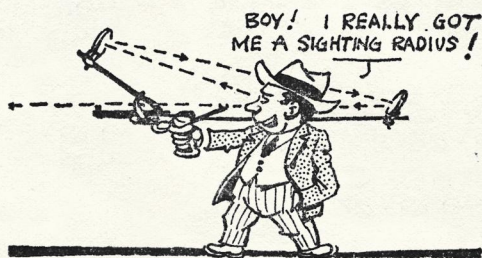
SLIVER REESE was already far down the foot trail. The knowledge that he had been defeated was like fire in his brain. Once he stopped to look back and shake his fist. Then he went on, hating the overpowering vastness of the cold aloof peaks, writhing in the memory of the wilderness animal which had put him to rout.

He saw the fur-clad figure of the waiting Mountie when still far above. Sliver's lips twisted into a snarl of hate, but he didn't turn back. He was close before the officer stood up.

Sliver saw the same broad-shouldered Mountie with graying hair beneath his broad-brimmed hat. The eyes were cold and expressionless. The little man quailed, then held out his wrists.

"Okay, Copper," he said, and on his lips there was a defiant leer. "I'm licked but it wasn't you that licked me! It was——"

"Yeah," interrupted the Mountie, "I know. Those mountains have a way of dealing out justice. I thought you'd be down today!"



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLOFF

Should We Take Up the Free Pistol?

THE Free Pistol has never been very popular in the United States. The main reason for this is quite simple and understandable. During the development of our country a practical or work handgun was more or less a necessity and we have never completely gotten away from the desire for a sturdy foolproof handgun of general usefulness.

Consequently, the Free type of handgun is not legal in almost 100% of our matches.

The Free Pistol is a highly specialized target handgun and gets its name from the fact that Free pistol tournaments have no restriction. "Free" meaning any caliber pistol or revolver, any length gun barrel, and any weight trigger-pull. The only require-

25

(in the case of double set triggers) or by pushing a lever or button as the case may be. Then when the shooting trigger is pulled, the striker is released and it flies up and strikes the regular sear, knocking it from its notch and discharging the arm.

The lock time (instant between trigger let off and actual firing of cartridge) is slowed up a bit with set triggers but Free Pistol shooters figure that the advantages of the light pull offsets this slight disadvantage.

Many of these triggers may be set so light that the gun can be discharged by blowing on the trigger.

Set triggers are quite dangerous as accidental discharges are frequent.

This danger is kept at a minimum in the International Matches by having the competitors stand in front of a long bench and in loading, the gun barrels are at rest on the bench so that the muzzles point downward toward the ground at an angle of about 45 degrees. Thus the shooter loads his pistol, closes the breech and sets the trigger.

If an accident occurs so that the set trigger goes off prematurely, it is not charged against the shooter's score provided that the barrel of the gun is resting on the bench. If the gun has been raised off the bench and the set trigger goes off accidentally, it counts as a zero unless it makes a score on the target.

To become an expert in the use of the set trigger it takes a lot of practice as the technique is entirely different from that used with the regular or ordinary trigger. The Free Pistol shooter does not put his finger in front of the trigger and then squeeze as we customarily fire our guns in the United States. Instead, he places his index finger carefully on the edge of the set trigger, pushing a little forward as he does so, thus insuring that there will be no chance of discharging the piece. When the pistol is on the target with proper aim, all he does to make the gun go off is to relax the finger muscles slightly, so as to release the forward pressure on the edge of the set trigger, and with the trigger set very fine, that is all that is needed. And it is almost impossible to see the motion of the muscles of the finger as the gun is fired.

The grips on the modern Free Pistol is a

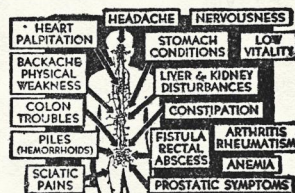
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weird-looking hunk of wood to the eye of the shooter who has used nothing but American handguns with factory handles. The finger hooks are gone from the trigger guard—but the wood is generally carved to exactly fit the shooter's hand.

Each finger has its groove and there is a shelf for the thumb.

Once one has gripped the modern Free Pistol it is almost as hard to slip off as a glove.

THESE pistols are generally barreled and chambered for the .22 Long Rifle cartridge, as this is the most accurate handgun cartridge developed so far.

It is a mistaken idea that a shooter can obtain a Free Pistol and immediately improve his scores. It just ain't in the cards. It's a tough gun to handle but it's a fact, that a good shooter with a Free Pistol can most always beat a good shooter with any other type of handgun.

With the increased interest in match shooting in Mexico and South America where the Free Pistol is extensively used, it wouldn't surprise me a bit to see this interesting game receive a spurt of interest hereabouts.

The International Free Pistol course consists of 60 shots at 50 meters without a time limit (some matches have a two-hour limit)—so long as the course is completed in one day. The shooting is on a target the 10 ring of which is a little smaller than the 10 ring of our fifty yard target. The possible score is 600, and I believe the present record is 559. All the 60 shots may be fired in one string or as many as the shooter wishes to let off without stopping. Double strings of 10 shots each are usually fired and if the going is good, 40 or all 60, depending on how the arm muscles hold up.

Eighteen sighting shots are allowed for the entire course of 60 shots, and may be fired at any time during the match as long as a string of 10 shots is not interrupted.

In most instances in the past United States teams have not done so well with the Free Pistol in International Matches. But if this type of shooting ever becomes generally popular with the average shooter we will no doubt go to town.

What's My Job?—I Manufacture Weaklings into MEN!

Charles Atlas

Actual photograph of the man who holds the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

GIVE ME a skinny, pepless, second-rate body—and I'll cram it so full of handsome, bulging new muscle that your friends will grow bug-eyes! . . . I'll wake up that sleeping energy of yours and make it hum like a high-powered motor! Man, you'll feel and look different! You'll begin to LIVE!



Let Me Make YOU a NEW MAN —IN JUST 15 MINUTES A DAY

You wouldn't believe it, but I myself used to be a 97-lb. weakling. Fellows called me "Skimpy." Girls snickered and made fun of me behind my back. I was a flop. THEN I discovered my marvelous new muscle-building system—"Dynamic Tension." And it turned me into such a complete specimen of MANHOOD that today I hold the title "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN."

That's how I trauced in my "bag of bones" for a barrel of muscle! And I felt so much better, so much on top of the world in my big new, husky body, that I decided to devote my whole life to helping other fellows change themselves into "perfectly developed men."

What Is "Dynamic Tension"? How Does It Work?

When you look in the mirror and see a healthy, husky, strapping fellow smiling back at you—then you'll be astonished at how short a time it takes "Dynamic Tension" to GET RESULTS!

"Dynamic Tension" is the easy, NATURAL method you can practice in the privacy of your own room—JUST 15 MINUTES EACH DAY—while your scrawny shoulder muscles begin to swell, ripple . . . those spindly arms and legs of yours bulge . . . and your whole body starts to feel "alive," full of zip and go!

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As I've pictured up above, I'm steadily building broad-shouldered dynamic MEN—day by day—the country over.

2,000,000 fellows young and old, have already gambled a postage stamp to ask for my FREE book. They wanted to read and see for themselves how I'm building up scrawny bodies, and how I'm paring down fat, flabby ones—how I'm turning them into breath-taking human dynamos of pure MANPOWER.

Take just a few seconds NOW to fill in and mail the coupon at right, and you will receive at once my FREE book—"Everlasting Health and Strength"—that PROVES with actual snap-shots what "Dynamic Tension" has done for others—what it can do for YOU! Address: CHARLES ATLAS, Dept 97, 115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

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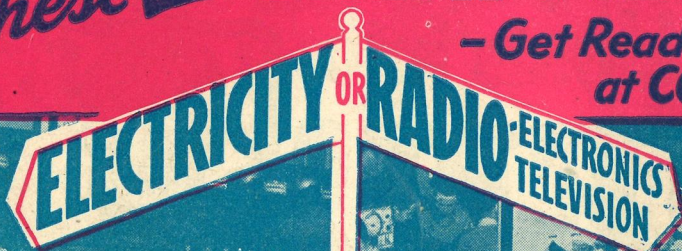
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