

"Murder for a Cigarette"—STEUART M. EMERY

Short Stories

ANC

October 25th

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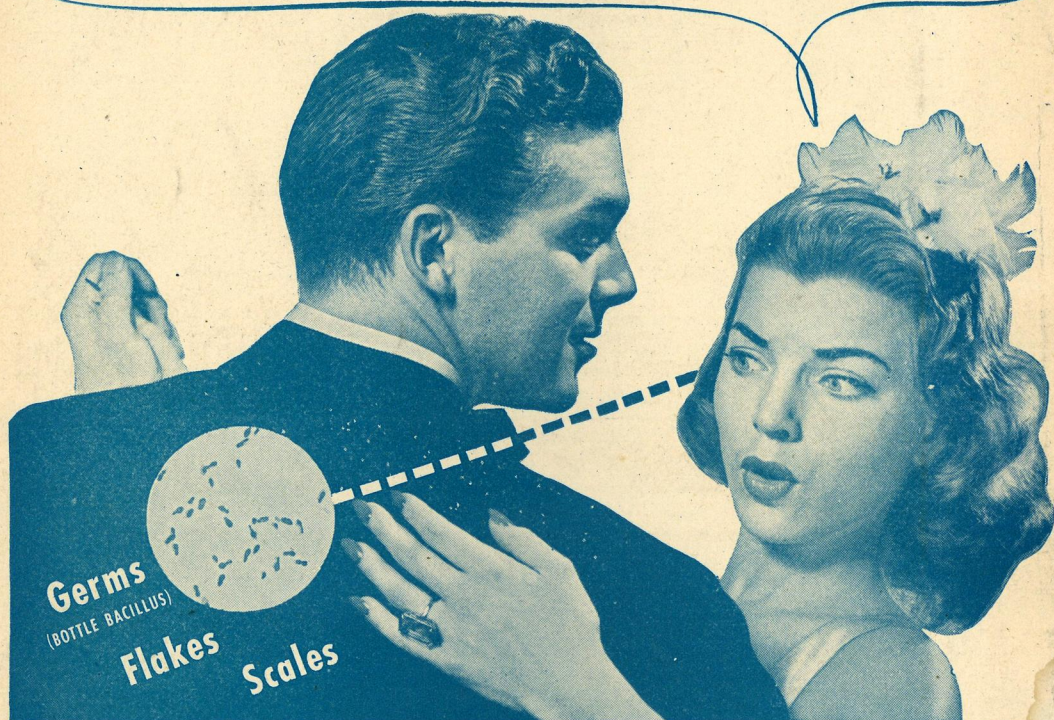
"Trouble
in the
Forest"

CADDO
CAMERON

... and the Ranger was
the man to take care
of it—from all angles!

KUHLMANN

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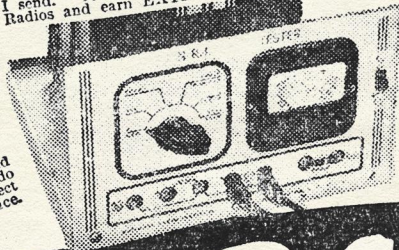
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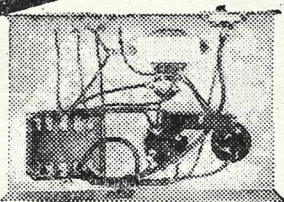
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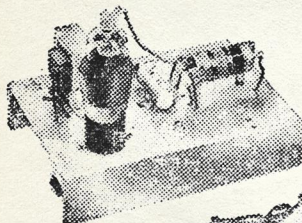
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Short Stories

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THE

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AMERICA'S

ACTION

ADVENTURE

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THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

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(A Long Novelette)

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(A Novelette)

Steuart M. Emery

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*New York—Diamond Trading Center of the World—
Where Else Would Turn up Jewels Sought by Land
and Sea, the Whole World Over?*

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LAMONT BUCHANAN

October 25th, 1947

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AND
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The Story Tellers' Circle

Utah or Cameron?

CADDO CAMERON always manages to have something interesting to say about his yarns—which are also interesting, we think. Maybe that comes of living in Utah, where city-bound folk guess plenty happens. Or maybe it just comes of being Caddo Cameron!

Anyway, the creator of "Trouble in the Forest" confides:

"It just goes to show how a fellow on any kind of a job can make it hard for himself if he's a mind to, or if the gears in his head ain't meshing properly. Take me, for example. We used to live at the Maple Lake in this story, (which isn't its real name), and also I patrolled that area off and on so that I was fairly familiar with most of the houses on the lake. Well, when writing the yarn I needed a house to be used as headquarters for the gamblers. Kind of wanting to make it a real place rather than a fictional one, I examined house after house in my mind's eye and not one of them was suitably designed or properly situated. After sweating over the problem for a while I concluded that it was no use—simply have to build an imaginary house for the story: Then all of a sudden I discovered one that was perfect in every respect. Yep—you're away ahead of me. It was the house that we had owned and lived in ourselves!

"We sold the house and moved away for the same reasons that caused the fisherman in the story to complain to Smoky Jones, swimmers and speedboats. He said they kept fish from biting. We found that they and their racket kept ideas from taking the bait I put out.

"Incidentally, the episodes in the Guard's patrol on the lake are actual experiences dressed up a little. One Saturday I ran onto a good-looking gal standing with one hand on a NO SMOKING sign and a lighted cigarette in her other just like Teddy Baker was behaving when Smoky showed up, only this other gal wasn't Teddy and she got plumb flustered when I asked her to please

read the sign. When you meet Widow Gilhooly in the yarn you're meeting a real person. (Of course, that isn't her name.) One hot day I rounded a curve up canyon and couldn't see the lake for smoke, so I romped on the gas and got there as quickly as I could. Mrs. Gilhooly was burning leaves. She had water under pressure and a hose in the yard and I asked her to put the fire out before a breath of wind scattered burning leaves and set all that part of California afire, whereupon she told me that if I wanted it put out I could good and well put it out myself. Now, this posed a delicate question. Inasmuch as she had started the blaze unlawfully, the prestige of the law demanded that she be required to extinguish it *herself*. Knowing the widow, the neighbors took grandstand seats and settled down in comfort and high glee to watch the fun. I was strictly on the spot. Mrs. Gilhooly and I discussed and disagreed upon a variety of subjects ranging from whether a citizen had a right to burn her own leaves on her own property, down to the comparative merits of Texas men and Boston Irish. (She was from back East). At length the lady consented to douse the fire. In so doing she managed also to douse my field boots and I had shined the dadblamed things that very morning. We became the best of friends.

"Along toward the end of the story I jump the trail and go skytootin' off to the lookout on top of the mountain where the Missus and I spent most of the war years. Literary critics will say that I hadn't ever ought to do this, and I *do* know better. But I wanted to tell you how our tomcat used to behave in bad fire weather. We got him when he was a very small kitten, named him Smoky and raised him up there. When the old desert wind boomed across the mountain and the humidity dropped to almost nothing, that tomcat behaved precisely the way he does in this yarn and we never arrived at a really satisfactory explanation of his peculiar actions."

Caddo Cameron

The Project

THERE'S more to "Last Chance" than the story. Author Berton E. Cook has the following to add, thinking it might be of interest to the readers, "of use to the project." There now, we're glad Mr. Cook said it; not us. That "project" is this of Story Tellers' Circle. It's as demanding as your in-laws, twice as hungry and never satisfied. Like those "projects" of depression days it never gets done—or at least so it seems.

We'll let Mr. Cook wind up this edition of the STC—while we start to worry about who'll-have-what-to-say next time!

"A seaman, gyrocompass expert and navigating officer off a tanker and world traveler and writer, all in one, sat in on our dinner one evening before the war. Using a large relief map of South America, he showed us the route he took down the west side of South America, up over the Andes, into the headwaters of the Amazon and then down it to the Atlantic in a small boat; camping ashore nights with a ridge of 'farina' poured around camp to keep ants too busy to quite get in before daybreak.

"Another time, however, we exchanged

info on our methods of writing. I could furnish a bit of help on a book he was writing and he certainly helped me in a few details anent the short story I called 'John Brown's Son' which SHORT STORIES accepted a while afterward. One of those invaluable and never-to-be-forgotten evenings, he told us of an incident which had long been puzzling him. Some few years back, he'd been on watch on the bridge of a large vessel crossing the Bay of Biscay in thick o' fog with a cross wind sweeping aside whatever whistles or horns might blow. Standing there, merely gazing for scarcely expected trouble in that particular stretch of going, just as sure as taxes he heard his grandad's voice warning him of impending danger. The man—a licensed officer in sailing ship days—had been dead some time.

"Next this young mate, knew he was swinging the big ship out of the way of a smaller one coming directly at her.

"Personally, I'd give plenty to locate that mariner today. Last time we met was when he showed me through one of the largest old tankers afloat before the war began. Was he in the 'tanker war' off Florida? Somebody probably knows. And I'd like to be the one."

Berton E. Cook



COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

**Richard
Howells
Watkins**

"MAN IN A DITCH"

Crime, death, and the sea—all violent, all inscrutable!

**Charles W.
Tyler**

"CODE OF THE MORSE MAN"

Those early days of the railroad—when men died in the morning and were forgotten by dusk.

and

GORDON RAY YOUNG — H. S. M. KEMP

TROUBLE IN THE FOREST

By CADDO CAMERON

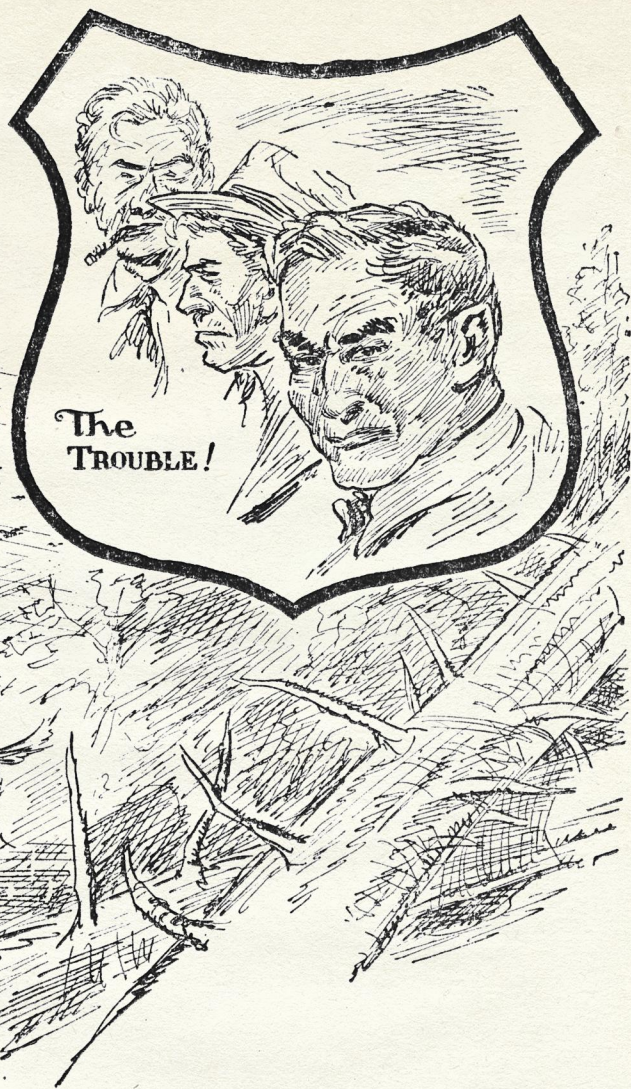


ANYBODY could see that she was a menace to males. A green bathing cap and green swim suit, what there was of it, went well with that Brother-I've-got-you-pegged look in her green eyes as she stood there sunning herself—tall, shapely and tanned, on the shore of Maple Lake in the Placerita District of the San Fernando National Forest. She took off the cap and shook out a head of auburn hair. This simple act accentuated the menace, for the hair glorified her unusual beauty without hiding the brain power behind her eyes or detracting from the intelligent cussedness in her face. She posed gracefully with one brown hand on a Forest Service NO SMOKING sign, a lighted cigarette in her other.

Obviously, the girl had an eye for good-

looking men. It was apparent that she caught sight of this one at the instant he rounded a turn in the rustic trail along the lake—a six-foot, one-hundred-ninety pounder with big shoulders and dangerous fists, a mop of yellow hair that his forest green hat didn't hide and a tanned face that was handsome in a tough and rugged fashion. The look in her eyes changed to a Brother-what-I'll-do-to-you promise with a punch. For the young man in the forest green trousers and khaki shirt was Smoky Jones, Forest Guard, formerly Detective Sergeant Johnny Jones of the Los Angeles Police Force, and he had lately engineered

*Use an Ex-Cop for Fire
Guard—and He Can
Cope With Several
Kinds of Trouble!*



a deal that sent her husband and some of his friends to the pen for long stretches, notwithstanding the influence of his wealth and crooked lawyers. Not that Teddy Baker entertained any marked affection for her husband, Snuffy. But he had been a good man to organize and control a mob engaged in any money-making racket that Teddy invented or horned into, and Snuffy was always more than willing to let her do the important thinking for the pair of them. That alone endeared him to her as a business partner, for Teddy Baker considered herself a smart dame who could out-think men singly or in squads. To top off his other sins against her, Smoky Jones had spoiled a perfectly good racket for Teddy. But, worst

of all, he had made her look dumb—an unpardonable sin in her estimation. The girl's heavy lids drooped as the big guard strode purposefully toward her.

He touched his hat, and said, "Hi, Teddy." Then he held out a hand. "Gimme."

Her voice was a low, smoky contralto and she could do tricks with it. "Give you what, honey?"

"That cigarette. You know better than to smoke here."

She took a long drag so that the coal burned fiercely, then dropped it into his palm, hot end first. "With pleasure, Ranger."

Jones let the cigarette fall on soft dust in the trail and ground it with his heel. Grin-

ning, he said, "I'd ought to give you a ticket. Why don't I?"

"You're secretly in love with me," she declared softly. "I know the symptoms, sweetheart."

"You'd ought to know 'em," he said dryly. "This ain't the first time I've caught you smoking on this trail. Stop it, Ted. If we burn off the north slope of the mountain there, floods will fill the lake with silt and boulders and ruin the resort. Think what that would cost property owners here, not to mention the homes that would be destroyed on leases on this side of the lake."

SHE shrugged. "I've got a more important thing to think about."

"What's more important than fire?"

"You." Teddy lifted her bare brown arms, clasped her hands on the signboard and looked up at him. "You're a handsome hunk of tough red meat, big boy, and I sometimes think your skull is filled with it, too."

Smoky chuckled. "Thanks, Ted. Spill it."

"Like I told Detective Johnny Jones down in L A before the war," she continued, "if you'd be reasonable and listen to me you could retire rich in a few years. You'd be even better-looking than you are, if you had money. Why don't you feather your nest while fools are growing feathers that are easy to pluck?"

"I don't get it."

"You're a liar, Johnny," she said softly. "You played honest but dumb in L A and look at you now. I didn't, so look at *me*. I've got a ranch down-canyon worth thirty-five thousand and much moolah salted in bonds and banks over the country."

Smoky grinned. "Yeah, Ted, and you've got a husband salted and packed on ice in a Federal pen following your advice."

"For *not* following my advice, Johnny," she said emphatically. "Time and again I warned him and the mob about you, told them what a slick and slippery cop you are and reminded them how dirty you can fight, but Snuffy had got to thinking he was a big-shot and wouldn't listen to me. So you put him away. But he won't be my husband much longer."

"Oh! So that's the angle."

She nodded brightly. "My lawyer is working on this California Community

Property thing. Snuffy don't need money where he'll spend the next fifteen years. When that's fixed I'll get my divorce. That will leave a vacancy and they're hard to find nowadays. Won't you be glad?"

Smoky Jones sort of stumbled over that one. "Well, er-r, I never did think Snuffy Baker was much of a husband for any woman."

The color of her green eyes deepened. They narrowed, and she said slowly, "Sweetheart, I'm beginning to think that you don't love me as much as I love you."

He laughed. "Oh, but I do, Ted. You see—I *know* how much you love me. Well, I've got to go now. Bet there are three thousand people in Maple Lake today and they're running wild. It'll be a wonder if they don't set us afire before night. So 'long, Ted. Be a good little girl while you're in the forest, won't you?"

She slipped her hand through his arm and when he went to pass, "Look, Johnny dear, I'm going to be a good little girl from now on. Got all the money I need. Let me walk with you, will you?"

Smoky grinned down at her. "Can't do it, Ted. While on duty I never touch intoxicants in any form."

Teddy Baker's laugh caused strangers to look at her with high approval. "You're a low-down pup, Johnny Jones, but I *do* love you."

ALTHOUGH the tall guard grinned, nodded and often spoke or paused to pass a word with the scores of people lounging or playing on the shores of the lake, inwardly he was frowning over his latest encounter with Teddy Baker. Said she was going to be good, which meant that she wasn't, probably meant that she was either cooking up a new racket or already had one in operation. He knew that woman—one of the smoothest crooks he had ever matched his wits against. While he was on the Los Angeles Police Force she had eluded the law time and again and when he recently nailed her husband and others in a meat racket, at the showdown he had nothing on Teddy herself, although he knew that she was the brains of the mob. Jones wouldn't go so far as to say that she had a criminal mind. High-spirited, egotistical, ambitious and clever, she was a **thrill hunter**

to whom any strictly orthodox and legal undertaking was dull and uninteresting, a woman who would violate life's speed laws until the day when she finally cracked up. Smoky devoutly wished she were somewhere else. He wished that Snuffy and Teddy Baker had stayed in Los Angeles instead of coming to the back-country and buying an expensive ranch in Molly Canyon two miles south of Maple Lake. He'd feel a lot safer if she were a hundred miles away, or better still—in some good, stout penitentiary and looking forward to a long stay there.

Smoky Jones slowly patrolled the resort which was now overflowing with a summer week-end crowd of vacationers and summer residents. The north shore of Maple Lake was privately owned. The south shore where he was walking belonged to the National Forest and the cottages and cabins that lined it had been built by private citizens on government leases carrying certain restrictions and regulations having to do principally with fire prevention and lawlessness. It was the guard's duty to see that these rules were obeyed. He was required to inspect residences, looking for accumulated rubbish that might catch fire through spontaneous combustion or otherwise, defective wiring, dangerous stoves, water heaters, chimneys and the like, oil and gasoline storages, and to enforce rules with respect to clearing around houses—the removal of dead grass, weeds, leaves and other inflammable materials. To do a good job he had to be a patient diplomat. In these and all other dealings with the public he was required to be a salesman rather than a cop, selling people on the idea that Forest Service Regulations were made for the protection of the forest and consequently for their own good, since they owned the forest and paid him and others like him to guard it for them. It wasn't any cinch, this selling the public when it took off to the mountains and tossed off its inhibitions. Smoky Jones often wondered why a few whiffs of mountain air usually served to awake the lawless instincts that lie peacefully sleeping deep inside of most good citizens.

Johnny's eyes didn't miss much that went on around him. On the trail ahead a group in swim suits—three young fellows and their girls, were stealing a little smoke for

themselves. They saw him coming and all but one tossed their cigarettes into the water. This husky young individualist cupped his in his palm—going to get away with something and be a hero.

"Howdy, people," said Smoky amiably. "About a hundred feet down yonder there's a smoking place. I suppose you didn't see the sign when you came by it. Too dangerous to smoke anywhere else along here."

HE grinned at the fellow with the cigarette. "Dunk it, will you, mister? You're setting a bad example to people who may not be as careful about fire as you are."

The other flipped his cigarette into the lake, and said truculently, "What's the big idea? There isn't anything around here that'll burn. That stuff up there is green."

He had pointed to chaparral on the steep slope that rose almost from the water's edge and swept up and back in a series of ridges and ravines to the summit of a mountain three miles distant and two thousand feet higher than the lake. With its usual nose for trouble, a crowd had quickly gathered around them. This put Smoky on the spot.

"I know that it looks too green to burn," he said, "but it will. Under this sun the temperature in the chaparral up there will run over one hundred fifty now, and when you add some heat from a fire, that brush will go to generating a gas that burns and and explodes like the gas in your home. Over on the Red Rock fire a while back, I saw chaparral like this take off on a steep slope and it was a solid sheet of flame two hundred feet wide and five hundred long.* We call that spontaneous ignition."

One of the group of young folks—a teenage girl with face, figure and a skimpy swim suit—evidently felt that she was being neglected by this handsome officer. So she assumed a pose calculated to make a slave of any man, and said, "He thinks he's a smart guy, Ra-a-nger. Why don't you give him a ticket?"

Johnny grinned at her and the boy "And make him hate me and the Forest Service? No, lady, not unless I absolutely have to, and I won't. He knows that he owns a piece of that forest up yonder. You all do. I fig-

* The author witnessed this phenomenon through binoculars from a lookout tower eleven miles away.
C. C.

ure that no decent citizen really *wants* to set it afire."

He dropped a hand to the boy's shoulder and pointed back up the trail. "There's a better swimming hole up yonder. Deepest part of the lake and a big tree with a rope to dive from. So 'long, folks."

"Why—why, *much obliged*, Ranger!" exclaimed the kid. "Say—look! Come take a dive with us. I've got another pair of trunks back in camp. I'll run get 'em and you can find a place to change. Sure!"

Smoky laughed. "Thanks, fella, but no can do. If the boss caught me in swimming while on duty, I'd be all wet."

His pun brought friendly groans and howls from the kids, admiring and understanding smiles from older folks—some of whom perhaps wished that they could handle their own youngsters so easily.

A LITTLE farther along Johnny found some small boys industriously killing a water snake, so he had to stop and tell them that this was a harmless reptile and a friend of man and explained how to recognize a poisonous one. That brought on more talk. He hunkered down on his heels and in no time there were ten of 'em around him and on him, while he emphatically denied reports that the bite of the big black lizard over there on that log would turn a fellow black all over. There were many more questions, too, but he didn't have time to answer them all. However, he took the time to convince some of his inquirers that the horned toad who had just escaped destruction by skittering under a boulder, would not sweat poison blood if you squeezed it good and hard, nor would your skin get dry and scaly like its own if it bopped you with the stinger in its tail. Besides, it didn't have a stinger in its tail.

After a while the kids reluctantly let him go. They were mostly boys from poor families in the city who didn't get around much and it gave Smoky Jones a warm feeling to think that this forest belonged to them and the rich alike, and it was a finer playground than private wealth could provide for its kids.

The tall guard continued his patrol toward the eastern end of the lake. Once he stopped to pacify an irate fisherman who demanded that swimmers and speed boats

be chased from the water so that fish could bite, if there were any fish. Again he halted to assist a home owner who was vainly trying to drive two families of picnickers from the lawn at his front door. They claimed that he had no right to it—that it was public property. Smoky showed them a better place to picnic and left everybody happy. A little farther along he nipped a fist fight in the bud. Some forest visitors insisted upon swimming from a private dock, asserting that no one had a right to build a dock in the lake and keep it for himself. The aggressors were really tough—wouldn't listen to reason—so Johnny had to get tough himself. They took him at his word and went on their way.

Near the end of the lake lived Mistress Gilhooly, a middle-aged widow—broad and wide. The Murphy kids from L. A. caught her yip-yip and dunked him in the drink. She charged them with a broom. Their parents came to the rescue. The situation looked bad when Smoky arrived. He made violent love to Widow Gilhooly and soon had everybody laughing, while the yip-yip hid under her house and yipped.

From the beach Johnny went on to the Maple Lake Suppression Camp, an old CCC establishment, taken over by the Forest Service—barracks, mess hall and garage, situated under giant pines two hundred yards from the lake. Dan Halliday's Suppression Crew of five men and a cook was stationed there. The garage doors were open disclosing a Green Hornet ready to roll—a big truck with cab, jump seat, a three-hundred-gallon tank, powerful pump, reels and baskets of hose—the Service's most effective weapon when it could get within range of a fire.

Smoky rang the District Ranger's office at Placerita to make his routine check-in to the District Dispatcher, Hex Mather.

"Yeah, Smoky," drawled Tex. "How's tricks?"

"Tricky," answered the guard, an ex-Marine. "We're full to the gun'les and sinking fast. Three thousand savages are doing a scalp dance at the lake and all of our camps are running over. If you don't mind, Tex, I'll eat here and patrol tonight instead of going back to headquarters."

"Suits me," said Mather, "but remember, fella, we haven't got any dough for

overtime. You get paid for eight hours today and if you work longer than that without orders, it's on you. If you don't like it, write to your Congressman."

"Lot of good that would do," growled Smoky. "He's to blame for us being so poor. But pay or no pay, Tex, I'd ought to be out among 'em tonight. I've got a hunch—a *solid* hunch."

"Huh?" grunted Tex. "You stop that! We've got so we're afraid of your hunches."

"So am I," confessed Smoky. "Nothing definite, yet. Just a feeling that something is going on or about to start. How's the fire danger?"

"Not so good," answered Mather. "But as long as the humidity stays up at night we'll be able to get a little sleep. Kind of hate to have you away from a phone tonight, but I reckon you'll do more good checking your crowded camps than you would in bed at headquarters. Are you sure that you ain't patrolling some girl tonight?"

"Nuts to you!" laughed Smoky. "But this hunch of mine *is* female."

"Huh-oh! Observe all speed laws, boy."

Johnny Jones walked from the Suppression Camp to the big stone lodge on the north side of the lake—a combined hotel, cafe, bar, store and post office—the social center of the resort. The place was filled with visitors who preferred to get their vacation exercise the easy way, flexing elbows at a table or the bar. Declining a dozen invitations to drink, he wandered around the large room talking to acquaintances and looking the crowd over on general principles. Suddenly he caught sight of a man who materialized right out of his past.

THE individual was small, slender, natty and bleached bloodless from his very light hair to his collar. His eyes were an icy blue and his hands were as pale as his face, nails perfectly manicured and delicately pink. One who knew the breed would instantly recognize him to be a man who had mastered his emotions to the point where they never betrayed themselves, a man who lived by night rather than by day, avoided sunlight and wore an eyeshade more than a hat—a professional gambler. Johnny Jones had known this one as Whitey Thomas. The Los Angeles Police knew him to be one of

the smoothest in his profession and a deadly man with a little .25 caliber automatic.

Smoky Jones quickly turned his back and walked out of the place. He needed to think some. What in hell was Whitey Thomas doing up here in the sticks? Nothing penny-ante about Whitey, and this wasn't a rich man's hangout. True, Whitey rarely had a stake, for he was one of those strange characters—a professional gambler with the gambling fever himself. When he *did* make a killing at his own game, which happened often, he'd usually go straight to the other sharper's game and lose it all. Consequently, Whitey seldom was able to operate strictly on his own. He generally had a backer who put up the money and they split the winnings sixty-forty, or some such percentage, and the backer took the losses—if any. Whitey's keen mind and magic hands made of him a gilt-edge investment. Of course, when Whitey took some underworld tycoon to the cleaner's, trouble might follow; but trouble never particularly troubled Whitey, and his backer usually could muster trigger men of his own. While Johnny Jones was on the Force two bloody gang wars were believed to have started at Whitey's poker table, but try as they did—the police never were able to pin anything on the nerveless little trickster himself.

The tall Guard walked west on the north side of the lake—thinking of Whitey Thomas and men like Whitey, nursing a hunch that trouble was moving into the forest and wondering where the hunch came from. Nearing the west end of the lake he stopped and looked across it. He was opposite the last house in the row of houses on the south side, an unpainted redwood hanging on a steep slope and built on two levels—two stories in front, one story in the rear with a solid bank of large windows overlooking the lake from the upper story. All windows, that could be reached from the ground were barred. The place had lately changed hands and, in accordance with Regulations, Smoky had inspected the premises before the lease was transferred. He had never met the new owner, William Roberts, although he had made two daylight calls there to notify him that the spark arrester had been knocked askew and should be fixed. No one had come to the door, although the place showed evidence of occu-

pancy. Maybe they were at home only at night. Better try 'em this evening, he figured.

After supper at the Suppression Camp and a patrol down Molly Canyon to Pine Camp, Smoky returned to the lake after dark. He drove his pickup straight to the parking place for the Roberts' house. Somehow or other, he hadn't been able to get it out of his mind. Maybe it had something to do with the hunch that was troubling him. Lights showed through its chintz curtains and he found four expensive cars parked there, one of which he recognized to be Teddy Baker's Cad sedan. In the rear seats of two of the cars, chauffeurs were dozing or pretending to doze. Smoky stopped and passed a word with each of them. They looked to him more like bodyguards than chauffeurs, but he shrugged the feeling off with the realization that police detective work in a great city had, perhaps, made him unduly suspicious of people—especially men and women. The house had a door in either end on the upper story ground level. At the west end which he now approached on a rustic walk, two short wings—the bath and kitchen, had been housed over to form a vestibule. If he knocked at this door he wouldn't see anything or anybody other than the person who answered, so he followed a dug-away walk around behind the house to the east door which opened directly into the long, studio living room. The Guard remembered these doors—double thickness with small barred wickets. The house was built during prohibition and after having some good liquor stolen, its owner took these precautions. Smoky knocked.

He stood a little on one side so as to look past anyone who showed up at the wicket when it opened. Sound didn't pass readily through this door, but he did catch men's mumbling voices and distinctly heard a woman say, "Don't be dumb! See who it is."

The wicket opened, disclosing the lean face of a man whom Smoky didn't know. Shooting a quick glance past him before he shifted to block the view, Johnny got a brief glimpse of several people at a long table which had been moved to the north side of the room so as to utilize the upholstered window seat under the front windows overlooking the lake. One of those he saw was Teddy Baker!

Evidently the man at the door had seen his badge. He asked politely, "What can I do for you, Ranger?"

"Are you Mr. William Roberts?"

"Yes, Bill Roberts from Hollywood."

"The wind or something has knocked your spark arrester cockeyed, Mr. Roberts," said the Guard. "It's dangerous that way. Will you please have it fixed as soon as you can?"

"Of course, Ranger," said Roberts. "Right away. I should've had it taken care of before this. Sorry you had to get on me about it."

"Thank you, sir," said Jones. "By the way—I caught a glimpse of Ted Baker in there. May I speak to her a moment?"

She heard him, of course. "Hey, Bill! Bring him in. Don't keep my ever-lovin' standing out there in the damp night air."

THE door swung open and Smoky walked into a mild surprise. Teddy Baker and four men were seated at the table, Whitey Thomas at the head with a rack of poker chips at his elbow and a deck of cards in his pale hands. No money in sight.

"Good evening, Ted," said the Guard. "Nice of you to have Mr. Roberts invite me in. How did you know I'm afraid in the dark?"

She got up laughing. In all his life, Smoky had never seen a woman who could wear sports outfits the way this redhead could.

She came over and put her arm across his shoulder. "Fellows, I want you to meet my leading man. I've loved him for years, damn him! Ranger Smoky Jones who used to be Detective Johnny Jones of the Los Angeles Police Force—the meanest, toughest, dirtiest dick that ever framed a poor working woman."

The men grinned. Roberts came and stood nearby.

Teddy went on, "The little gambler at the head of the table is Whitey Thomas. You fellows must've met before."

Whitey's voice was every bit as smooth as his appearance. "Sorry, Ted, I've never had that pleasure. How are you, Mr. Jones?"

Johnny spoke, smiled dryly. Whitey lied. While on the Homicide Squad, Johnny had once hauled the gambler in for a grilling that he couldn't have forgotten in five years.

"And the tall gentleman," continued the girl, "is Ralph M. Mason. Know him?"

Smoky's heart skipped a beat—big stuff! Ralph M. Mason—RM, he was called—was at one time king of the gambling underworld in Los Angeles and said to be about the most dangerous man in town, but the police had never laid their plebeian hands on his aristocratic person. The old hunch was solid. This room was packed with dynamite. If Whitey Thomas should give RM a shellacking, there'd be hell to pay all over this part of the San Fernando National Forest.

The other men whom Teddy introduced—Fred Drake, Harry Sanders and Bill Roberts himself—were obviously sporting characters who might be making big money in any sort of racket. None of their names or faces registered with Johnny.

"Ranger," said Roberts, "I hope you don't mind a little private Saturday night game on a government lease."

Before he could answer, Teddy pulled his ear, and said, "You won't arrest us, will you sweetheart?"

Smoky Jones laughed. "Look, folks. If we arrested everybody who gambles on a Forest Lease there wouldn't be any US Forest Service before long. The public would rise up in righteous wrath and slap us down."

"That's sensible," said Whitey Thomas quietly. "If you can spare the time, Ranger, why not sit in for a while? Glad to have you."

The others hastened to assure him that he was more than welcome.

Smoky grinned dryly. "Thanks for the compliment, fellows. My salary for a month wouldn't buy one blue chip in this game. Besides, I've got work to do tonight. I'll be going now. Glad to have met you, gentlemen—you, too, Ted. Good night."

She kissed him and pushed him toward the door through which he had entered. He turned and went out the other way. Wanted to see what he could see in the vestibule. He saw nothing at all. Just outside the door at the west end of the house he halted in the shadow of a shrub to take a look around. A car was coming slowly down the mountain on the road that wound along the cliff above the house. This road could be reached by a flight of steps, thus affording another entrance to the place. The car stopped up there in bright moonlight, switched off its lights,

but its motor continued to purr softly. Three men got out of the sedan leaving it unoccupied, so far as Johnny could see, with the motor still running. They grouped and spoke softly, then came quickly down the steps. When they passed through a strip of light on the way down the Guard saw—yes, he'd swear he saw it—a Tommy Gun in the hands of the leader!

SMOKY JONES was mighty thankful that, because of his hunch, he had buckled on his shoulder-holster under his shirt before starting on this night patrol. He rarely carried his thirty-eight. Now it was a mighty comforting thing to feel against his ribs.

The steps came down to the shelf upon which the house was built, thirty feet from the east door. As soon as the men were out of sight around the corner, Smoky ran silently back that way on the walk behind the house. There was a sharp knock.

After a moment's delay: "Yes, gentlemen. What can I do for you?"

"Deputy sheriffs. Open up, mister!"

Another delay, then Bill Roberts said, "I don't like to be skeptical, officer, but show me your badge—will you?"

"Sure. Here it is."

"Mmmm-huh. Well, it's a badge all right. I can't tell what kind, but—come in."

The latch clicked, the hinges creaked softly.

A tough voice, "All right, guys, take it easy! Hands on the table over there! You—Whitey! Watch yourself, pal. And you, sport, move over to the table with the rest of 'em. Move! I've got a jumpy trigger finger and this cutter ain't no toy!"

Meanwhile, Johnny was right at the heels of the last man to go in. He paused on the porch an instant to get a glimpse of the room. Bill Roberts was moving cautiously toward his empty chair. The others were seated at the table, hands in sight. The three bandits had lined up just inside the door, the man in the middle threatening the gamblers with the sub-machine gun. The fellow on the left reached back without turning his head and gave the door a flip to close it. Smoky stepped silently over the threshold onto a thick rug, caught the door, then let it close naturally behind him.

He jabbed the muzzle of his automatic into the Tommy man's back. "Hold it! This is the law!" he commanded quietly. "Point that thing at the floor! Careful, mug! I'll blow your kidneys out!"

The stickup man obeyed instantly. He didn't look around. The muzzle of the Tommy gun sagged to the floor. The other two had turned, but a sharp word from the table jerked their heads around. Whitey Thomas and his companions acted an instant after Johnny did. Each came up with a gun. With the law behind them and five pistols facing them, the Tommy gunman's partners caved in and dropped their weapons. Smoky kicked their automatics away, then reached around and took possession of the sub-machine gun.

"Move ahead to the middle of the floor," he commanded. "Now, arms out! You know the routine. Whitey, come here and cover these babies while I frisk 'em. And, Mr. Roberts, will you give me some towels or anything to tie 'em with. I don't carry bracelets."

Three minutes later the holdups had been searched and tied securely. No one had much to say while Smoky was doing the job. Afterwards, everybody went to talking, Ralph M. Mason taking the lead.

"Ranger," he said in a deep, calm voice, "that was the smoothest and most workman-like arrest I ever saw. Congratulations and thanks."

"Classy pinch," said Fred Drake, burly, red-faced and moneyed-looking. "I'll gamble that you *were* a mean copper, like Ted said."

Harry Sanders—a lean, hard-bitten, but suave individual with the look of the open country about him—had this to say, "I'd sure like to have you riding shotgun on my private stagecoach, Ranger, and I'll pay big dough to get you."

Bill Roberts spoke up, "We owe you a lot, Ranger, for saving our money and, perhaps, our lives."

At that, Ralph M. Mason cut in again, "You're dead right, Bill." He arose to his imposing height, took a thick billfold from his inside coat pocket. "Those goons were hopped up and trigger-happy. They might have cut us down for no reason. We owe the Ranger plenty, men. As far as I'm concerned, my life is worth at least a thousand to me."

He tossed a one-thousand-dollar bill onto the table.

"I'm for a grand," said Drake, covering Mason's bill, "and glad to be here to do it."

"I'm staying," said Sanders, "and here's my ten C's. If anybody here craves action and goes to raising, I'll be mighty hard to stampede. Shower down, Bill."

"At a grand, it's cheap," declared Roberts, adding his money to the pile. "I've always hoped to live 'to make old bones,' as the song says, but, until the Ranger showed tonight it looked as if I'd never do it."

Whitey Thomas' colorless smile and level voice were in keeping with the man. "My life isn't worth a tinker's dam to me or anybody else, but you saved me dough and I'm glad to kitty a grand."

He neatly placed a crisp one-thousand-dollar bill on the pile.

Teddy Baker's eyes were shining. *What an actress!* thought Smoky. She spoke up. "I'm not coming into the pot, Johnny, because this is bound to be a misdeal. But you already know how I feel about you—and everything."

SMOKY JONES thought he had met S proffered bribes of every description, but this was a new one on him. These big-time gamblers were, in effect, telling him that they could be shaken down for enough to satisfy his simple tastes as long as he lived. All he had to do was to cover and protect a game in which hundreds of thousands of dollars would probably change hands in a comparatively short period of time. The gamblers would be getting off cheap.

Away up here in the back-country they were safely removed from big-city reformers and the heavy payoffs regularly necessary to continue operation in town, and, moreover, should they ever decide to team up and shear a lamb its bleat wouldn't carry dangerously far in these mountains. The clever part of the bribe was, they made it in a way which could not possibly offend anyone or taint themselves with guilt.

The tall guard grinned, and said, "I sure thank you, gentlemen, but I'm only doing the job Uncle Sam pays me to do and I can't accept your reward. I suppose you'll think

I'm a sucker and maybe I am, but it's the way I feel about it anyhow."

Mason spoke up quickly, "No, Ranger, we don't think you're a sucker to turn down our dough. I admire a man who lives up to his code of honor, whatever it happens to be. Take me, for example. My code of honor—I wrote it myself—permits me to be crooked in all games of chance for money. Consequently, I am; and I get a boot out of matching wits with others who are as sharp or sharper than I—like Whitey Thomas, for instance. Isn't that your code, Whitey?"

Thomas smiled coldly, and remarked, "My code, RM, is every fellow for himself and God send me plenty of wealthy suckers like you."

Everybody laughed, including Mason himself. Johnny reflected that either of these men would shoot the other down or have him shot with as little feeling as they now showed while joking about their crooked gambling.

Smoky inquired, "Do any of you know any of these hijackers?"

Each denied acquaintance with the robbers.

Jones looked hard at Thomas. "I seem to remember that one of 'em called you by name. Are you sure, Whitey, that you don't know the man in the middle?"

"Him? Never saw the punk before."

Johnny turned on the robber. "You know Whitey Thomas. How come he doesn't know you? Is it because he thinks he's too good to admit knowing a guy like you?"

The crook's pinched face was as vicious as a cornered rat's and his wicked little eyes were venomous when they darted from Thomas to Teddy Baker and back to the guard. "Save it, Copper! I ain't talking."

Smoky had a strong hunch that somebody, maybe everybody, was lying but there was nothing he could do about it now. He told them they'd be called upon to testify at the trial and he'd have to turn their names over to the L A County sheriff's office as witnesses.

"Give me your cards if you have cards with you," he added, "or write your name, address and phone number on something and let me have it."

He knew they hated to do this, but these men were big-time operators and too smooth to show more than a momentary hesitancy.

Teddy Baker wrote her information on a playing card and handed it to him with a tricky smile. It was the queen of hearts.

Johnny glanced at the card, grinned, and said, "The way you look in that outfit, Ted, you ain't kidding."

"Why, Johnny Jones!" she exclaimed. "I've been knowing you for years and that's the first sugar you ever spilled. Th-a-nks! What are you going to do with those lugs?"

"Call the sheriff's branch office at Lansdowne and ask them to send for 'em," he answered, "unless the District Ranger wants them brought down there and clinked in the Placerita calaboose. I don't think he will, but I'll ask him."

"And, by the way, Ted," he added. "I imagine you're just more or less kibitzing this game, so I'm deputizing you to drive me and my prisoners over to the Suppression Camp. D'you mind?"

"It's an honor and a pleasure, Ranger," she declared quaintly. "I'm proud to have you trust me like this."

"Stow it, lady. I *don't* trust you. I've got a gun."

As he prepared to leave, the men again thanked him. Ralph M. Mason went on to say, "And if there's ever anything I can do for you, Ranger, get in touch with me."

"You've been good sports tonight, gentlemen, and I appreciate it," replied the Guard. "So will my boss, the District Ranger, and the men over him when they hear about it."

A change suddenly came over Smoky Jones—subtle, but not *too* subtle. He remained apparently the same big, good-natured fellow with a boyish grin, but his light blue eyes lost some of their sociability, his calm and unhurried speech carried a distinct note of warning. At the moment he looked and talked more like a tough cop than a diplomatic Forest Guard.

Glancing from Mason to Whitey Thomas and back again, he said quietly, "Look, gentlemen, this forest has just gone through four years of war, closed to the public. It's wide-open now, a peaceful playground for peaceable people. It wants to stay that way, fellows. It wants peace and it'll fight like hell to get it. If you happen to hear anybody making war talk in the forest, tell 'em how the forest feels about it—will you? So 'long."

IN THE absence of a going fire there was no one on duty in the District Ranger's office at this time of night, but the Ranger himself—Charley Reagan—answered over the extension line to his home. He listened, told Smoky that he had done a good job of work and said to send the prisoners to Lansdowne.

Before hanging up, the Guard asked, "Say, Charley, I've got something important that needs talking over. With the big Sunday crowd we'll have, I shouldn't leave here tomorrow. Could you or Mike come up in the morning?"

"Mike has another job for tomorrow, but I'll be at Whiteoak Canyon bright and early."

When Smoky turned away from the phone after talking to the sheriff's branch office at Lansdowne, he saw Teddy Baker's car in the light from the open door. He frowned thoughtfully to himself. Now, what the hell? What was she waiting for? Did she want to make certain where the stick-up men were being taken? Johnny borrowed a pair of gloves from Foreman Dan Halliday, asked him and his men to guard the prisoners and went outside.

"Thought you had gone home, Ted. How come?"

She opened a door for him. "Get in. I'll take you back to your car."

"Thanks, Ted," he said, "but I've got to go and pick up the bandits' car. It's parked above the Roberts' place with the motor running."

"Climb in. I'll drive you around to Roberts'."

They hadn't gone far before she asked where he was sending the prisoners. He told her the truth. From there on she drove fast and talked more or less absent-mindedly as if she were doing some hard and furious thinking.

Having in mind the possible value of fingerprints, Smoky wore gloves while handling the hold-up car and when he had placed it in the Suppression Camp garage, he asked Dan and his men not to touch it.

It wasn't long before two deputies arrived after a fast twenty-mile run from Lansdowne. Smoky cautioned the officers that an attempt might be made to hijack their prisoners before they got back to town.

"There's something about this deal that smells bad," he went on to say, "and I wish I knew exactly what it is. I've got a strong suspicion that this gal, Teddy Baker, framed the caper, but don't mention it to anyone. I can't prove a damned thing."

When he had walked back to his car at the Roberts' place Johnny took particular note of the fact that the Baker Cad was no longer there, although the house was still lighted. He wished that he knew where she had gone and what the little devil was doing.

AFTER visiting Upper and Lower Stake and Horsehead Camps and finding dangerous open fires in each of them—strictly prohibited by Regulations posted in the very center of the camps—Smoky returned to his headquarters at Whiteoak Canyon Guard Station. It was one a.m. and his phone was ringing when he went in.

This proved to be one of the men at Maple Lake Fire Station where Los Angeles County maintained a Suppression Crew the year around. "Been calling you off and on since eleven o'clock, Smoky. Got news for you."

"Ten-to-one it's bad. Shoot."

"Deputy Bob Williams phoned in. He and his pardner were stuck up and—"

"Hell's bells! Go ahead, Gene."

"A road-block at that sharp curve in Portales Pass, sub-machine gun, suicide to make a fight. Two goons took their prisoners and guns, smashed their distributor and left 'em sitting there. The Deputies got a look at the stickups' car—not a good look, though. It was a pick-up like a million others in this part of the country. Bob said it was parked on a spot of soft ground and he thought they'd be able to get a cast of one tread. He had walked to the Wolf Ranch and phoned from there."

"Well, thanks, Gene. I was afraid of that."

"Bob was anxious to get word to you. He said maybe those babies would hide out in the forest and be laying for you."

"Not a chance! Their boss is too smart to waste any time or ammunition on revenge. They're in L A long before this." Then he added to himself, "Damn that woman!"

"What's that, Smoky?"

"Nothing, Gene. Just kinda slap-happy

and mumbling in my beard. Much obliged, and good night."

SMOKY JONES was up at six, raked the yard, swept walks and driveway, watered some flowers, gassed his car, cooked and ate a hasty breakfast, washed dishes, swept and dusted the house and was ready to roll by eight o'clock. He hoped the boss didn't keep him waiting here at headquarters. Had things on his mind and a lot of work to do. His morning check-in time was eight o five. The dispatcher, Tex Mather, had no special assignments for him, said that Charley Reagan ought to get to Whiteoak any minute now, warned that fire danger was getting no better fast, ordered him to check in often during the day and cautioned him not to waste Uncle Sam's time on women.

"To hell with women!" growled Smoky. "From now on, me and women ain't speaking."

"Huh-oh! So she's done slipped you the business."

"They'll do it every time. So 'long, Tex."

The Ranger's green pick-up stopped at the Guard Station and Smoky met him on the porch. Having spent forty years in the Service and started at the very bottom, Charley Reagan was now top man in a district comprising two hundred and seventy thousand acres of National Forest. Lean, leathery and tough, the nickname "Rawhide" fitted him to perfection and he wore it with the proud knowledge that his men gave it to him because they admired, respected and plain liked him.

Across cups of strong coffee Smoky Jones told his story from its beginning—just the facts, omitting his own suspicions and opinions. In conclusion, he said, "And there you are, Charley. What d'you think of it and what d'you want me to do about it?"

Outwardly unperturbed by this threat to the peace of his District, Rawhide grinned, and said, "Maybe you'd better tell me what *you* think about it, then we'll decide what we'd ought to do."

That was Rawhide Reagan's way. Never jealous of his own prerogatives or fearful that the men under him wouldn't recognize his superior wisdom, he always encouraged them to solve the problems of their jobs without his assistance and he had a keen eye

for the symptoms of a secret feeling of inferiority. He never knowingly did anything to make one of his men feel inferior. Rawhide was once heard to say, "When it comes to handling the public, give me a Guard who thinks he's so damned good he don't ever have to show off to prove it."

Smoky lit another cigarette. "Okay, boss," he said. "Far as I'm concerned those bigshots can gamble all they please in a private home on a Forest Lease so long as they're not running a public game. I think we'd stick our necks out of we tried to stop 'em. Of course, if there was any disorderly conduct in the house or that fellow Roberts—whoever he is—failed to comply with fire-prevention rules I'd favor cancelling the lease. That's not likely to happen, though. Those big gamblers don't drink to amount to anything, there'll never be any money in sight in their games and no strangers, and they dress and behave like gentlemen. Even their personal murders are quick and clean and don't soil their own clothes."

Rawhide chuckled, "So I've heard. You've had experience with 'em, haven't you?"

"Yes, Charley," admitted Smoky, "and I've never yet pinned a killing on a top-flight gambler. They're clever clams. The thing I'm afraid of here is the danger that they'll bring their trigger men into the forest and start a shooting war among themselves. I went through two such wars in L A and they both started at Whitey's poker table. That little guy has got a backer, I'm sure, and I'd give anything to know who it is. Don't laugh, boss, and I'll tell you who I *think* it is."

"Go ahead. I won't laugh *too* loud."

"Teddy Baker!"

"No! Why, she just missed a peck of trouble by a hair."

"I know," agreed the Guard, "and that's all the more reason why she should make another pass at the law. That gal is a thrill-chasing fool. She figures that all men are her meat. She'll risk the gas to beat a big man at any game. Why, Ted would be the proudest woman in the world if she threw in with Whitey Thomas and trimmed some of the hotshot gamblers on the Coast, men like R. M. Mason and others I know. Those tycoons don't take a trimming lying down. They'll drop ten grand at one sitting and brush it off, but when you slicker 'em out

of a hundred thousand or so there's bound to be fireworks. That's what I'm afraid of here. Teddy Baker is a plunger in anything she undertakes. Those boys weren't playing for peanuts last night."

"Big business," said the Ranger. "If you hadn't interfered, those holdups might have made a killing."

"Teddy Baker would have."

"Wh-at?"

"Yes, Charley," continued Jones. "I'll bet a stack of blues that she organized that operation. Wouldn't she be preening her feathers now if they'd h'isted a hundred grand off Ralph M. Mason and his pals? That wouldn't have busted up the joint. Those moguls would have been back tonight with more dough and a thirst for bigger stakes."

Rawhide Reagan's keen eyes thoughtfully took the big Guard's measure. Then his leathery face cracked in a dry grin, and he asked, "Everything you've said sounds plausible. If you were in my place, what would you do?"

Johnny laughed, emptied his cup, and declared, "If I were in your place, Charley, the man who put me there would have a hell of a mistake to answer for. But you asked for it, so here it is. I'd tell Smoky Jones that this mess was his headache, for the time being at least. And I'd tell the big lug that the District Ranger would be watching the skyline for smoke when he went to work on certain parties in his own private, personal and maybe unlawful way. I'd also tell him that he had to get results somehow, but, if he got himself into a jam that put me or the Forest Service on the spot I'd fire the fool. That's what I'd do if I were in your place, boss."

Charley Reagan chuckled, fired up another smoke, and said, "After you turned down our offer of a job in the Law Enforcement Department, the Supervisor told me that we should use you on such work whenever possible so as to save the Forest Law Enforcement Officer's time. He's overworked. Your police and military training, not to mention a fairly level head, qualify you to handle a situation like this. Let Tex know whenever you need a cover-up. We have authority for another patrolman. Come to think of it, I should spend more of my time watching the skyline for smoke."

So Johnny Jones asked for it and he got it.

THE first thing he did after Rawhide left was to phone Bob Williams, the deputy sheriff at Lansdowne, and inquire whether he had arranged to have the hold-up car checked for fingerprints. Bob said that he had and a man was already on the way to Maple Lake from Los Angeles. Smoky didn't have high hopes that this would develop anything of value, but there was a long chance that it might and he was now in a spot where he couldn't afford to neglect any possibility no matter how thin it appeared. During Snuffy Baker's trial several of his mob had been identified. Armed with proof that one or more of Snuffy's mob were in that car, which he now suspected, he'd put the squeeze on Teddy; assuming, of course, that she was actually mixed up in this gambling business. That he still had to prove and it might not be easy to do. She and these big-time gamblers and racketeers had brains, money and nerve; and, moreover, they had a certain contempt for the law, since they had succeeded in giving it the run-around for years. It was this contempt that Smoky feared most. Because of it, they wouldn't hesitate to go to shooting one another up right here in the forest whenever the spirit moved them and that he had to prevent. Should a gang war break loose here, Smoky Jones would have fallen down on the job.

When he got to the lake this morning Johnny saw a man on the roof of the Roberts' house, fixing the spark arrester. Evidently they weren't going to let him get anything like that on them. Looking closer, he saw that the man doing the work was Frank Winthrop, the new manager of the Baker Ranch whom Teddy herself had hired. Of course, she might have loaned Bill Roberts her man.

The following two days were tough on Smoky Jones. It's true that the game in the Roberts' house went on its quiet way and nothing happened to disturb the peace of the forest, but here he was with a job to do—a big job that he had asked for, and he didn't know where to start. Impatiently he waited for a report from the sheriff's office, calling Bob Williams every day. Finally, Wednesday evening, the deputy told him

that of all the prints found on the hold-up car, three were identified as belonging to men with police records. They were Suds Carter, Tom Mendoza and Barney Roush, gunmen who were at one time members of Snuffy Baker's mob.

Johnny Jones hung up the receiver with a look of grim satisfaction on his rugged face. He glanced at his watch—four o'clock. Good time to catch her at home. He spun the crank on his service phone with a vigor—two long rings.

"Forest Service."

"Say, Tex. Will it be all right if I drift down to the Baker Ranch for a little while, then have supper at the Suppression Camp and patrol the lake tonight?"

"Yeah, Smoky, I reckon so," drawled Tex Mather. "How come *she* didn't ask you to supper?"

"Look, wise guy. If that woman ever asks me to supper and I accept the invitation, it'll be my *Last Supper*. So 'long, Tex."

"Uh-h, Smoky. Check in as soon as you get back to camp, will you?"

"Sure, but why the anxiety to hear my voice?"

"I'll be glad to know that you *did* get back to camp."

"Huh! Not a bad idea, Tex."

He went and buckled on his shoulder-holster under his shirt, thinking that he'd been carrying this thing so much lately he felt lop-sided without it. Teddy Baker's fault, damn her. Well, he'd go now and give Teddy a rough few minutes and leave her something to think about in her spare moments.

When Smoky swung his pick-up into the Baker driveway, she was talking to two workmen at the woodpile. One of the men was sawing, the other splitting wood for her fireplace and outdoor barbecue no doubt. Each was clumsy and awkward, and yet these back-country farmhands should all know how to handle a bucksaw and an axe. Jones figured he'd ought to give those boys a looking over.

Teddy waved and told him she'd be there in a moment.

Smoky stopped his car immediately back of the Baker pick-up, at right angles to it, and from where he sat its license plate wasn't more than six feet away. Like most

ranch vehicles, it looked as if it hadn't been washed in the last twelve months—layers of dust and old mud. However, the license plate had been recently cleaned so that it contrasted sharply with the balance of the car, but the taillight above it had not. This fact caught Smoky's eye and set him to thinking. Closer examination showed that the bolts holding the plate in its bracket bore recent screwdriver scratches, food for more thought. He got out and lifted the hood of his own car, which took him close enough to glance quickly at the threads on the rear of protruding ends of the license-plate bolts. The nuts had lately been removed, indicating that the plate had been taken off and replaced for some reason. Another thing caught his attention, an important thing. The rubber on this car had recently been changed. By moving around the front of his own car to lift its hood on the other side he was able to get a look at all four wheels on the Baker pick-up. Each showed evidence of a tire change. What was the reason for this? The rubber now on the car was not new. The big Guard fastened down the hood and climbed thoughtfully back into his car.

Teddy Baker came strolling over. How that woman could wear green! This time it was a Tahitian hat three feet in diameter and a sun suit, lush but limited. "Hello, Johnny dear!" she exclaimed. "I'm *so* glad you came. I've been thinking of you. Get out and come into the house and I'll build you a drink as long as your arm."

"Not so fast, lady love. You climb in here with me."

She faked surprise and fear, then obeyed. "What's this, sweetheart? A snatch? You don't have to kidnap me. I'll go gladly and pay whatever ransom you demand—*what-ever*."

"Nuts!" he snapped. "You're heading for one of two places and you can't ransom yourself out of either of 'em."

"What places, honey?"

"Tehachapi or hell."

"The hen pen or perdition?" Her pretty and intelligent face assumed an expression of dead-pan innocence. "I—why, Johnny, I don't understand why you're saying such things to me. You're usually so sweet."

"Huh!" snorted Smoky. He offered her a cigarette, then lighted hers and one of his

own. "I used to say that you were the smartest woman I ever knew, but I'm not saying that any more."

"You're *not*? Why, dear?"

"Because I know better," he answered coldly. "You've gotten away with murder so long, outsmarted the law so many times, success has gone to your head and fogged your brain. Now, you've gone to behaving like any other dumb dame who *thinks* she's a genius—a mastermind. Tchachapi is full of 'em."

HE WANTED to make her mad and that he did it—hopping mad. An insult to Teddy Baker's ego would rile her vicious temper every time, and Smoky knew it. Her throaty contralto was even softer than normal now, "Very interesting, Ranger. To hear you talk one would think you're a big-shot instead of just a two-bit cop. You should talk about who's smart! You may own the clothes on your back and an old jalopy, but that's about all. Maybe I *am* a dumb dame, as you said, but I can cash in for about five hundred thousand and I made every dollar of it with this foggy brain of mine. Did some real living and had fun and excitement while making the dough, too. Dumb, hell! I've been dumb like a fox, brother!"

Smoky grinned. "Lot of good your dough will do you in Tehachapi. You're not dumb like a fox when you don't know any better than to tangle with Ralph M. Mason. Try playing him for a sucker and you'll find out that all your jack won't buy you a cool drink in hell. What's your take from that game so far?"

Her eyes shot sparks. She tossed caution overboard and came under forced draft to the defense of her prized intellect. "So you think RM is too smart for me, eh?" she said viciously. "Well, weisenheimer, I've banked fifty grand of his dough and I'm not through with him yet."

That was one of the things that Johnny wanted to learn. Evidently this game hadn't hit the upper brackets for such gamblers as yet. When it did, trouble would break—more than likely. Maybe he'd be able to bust up her racket before that happened—maybe. Anyhow, her confession listened good. He got that much by getting her mad. Wouldn't hurt to try for more.

Smoky said scornfully, "That just goes to show how much you know about RM. You're even dumber than I thought. Compared to him, you're strictly bush league. Fifty thousand is small change for him. He'll drop that much or more just to tease a biddy like you along, then some fine night he'll send you hoofing it home in your pinkies." After giving that an instant to soak in, he added, "So you're not through with Old RM and I suppose there are others like him, just waiting to be trimmed—ch, Ted?"

"You're damned right! And I'm just the sweet little girl to do the trimming."

Johnny Jones grinned, but there was little mirth in his face. Fixing a speculative eye on this rare specimen of womanhood, he asked, "Just out of curiosity, I'd like to know why you didn't deny backing that game. Mind telling me?"

"Not at all," she said loftily. "I knew you tumbled when you looked in there and saw Whitey and me. I know you've got brains of a sort. They're sucker brains, but you've got 'em. You know, sweetheart—or you'd ought to know by now, I'm always a country mile out ahead of you."

Smoky Jones tried again to take advantage of her egotism with respect to her cleverness. "Being dumb like a fox, you naturally know that I know that you engineered that stick-up the other night. Don't you, Ted, or are you dumb enough to think that you're kidding RM and me about that?"

She started to say something, then caught her lip between her teeth and eyed him obliquely for a moment. Presently, she demanded, "What in hell are you talking about?"

HE GRINNED in a way fit to make any body poison mad. "That crack proves what I've been saying about you being dumb, Ted. In the old days when you *were* a smart gal—before your head swelled to the point where there isn't any room for brains left in it—you would've admitted that you were behind that caper and dared me to prove it on you. I couldn't have done it then. But, in those days you didn't pull the boners that you do now."

Teddy Baker got on her dignity then. Opening the car door, she said, "If you're

business here is finished, Ranger, I wish you'd go. After all, this is a private residence and I own it. You've accused me of things that you can't prove. You have insulted and bullied me. I'll report you to your boss, Charley Reagan. I've met him at the lodge two or three times and he seems to like me. Now—good-bye, and don't come back until you have some legitimate business to transact with me or my manager."

Smoky Jones laughed quietly. Then he sobered, his face hardened and his cold blue eyes regarded her with unadulterated scorn. "If you're half as smart as you claim to be, Ted, you'll stick around long enough to hear what I'm going to say now."

SHE slammed the door shut, crossed her long brown legs and folded her arms.

"Now, it'll pay you to listen close," he continued. "You say I can't prove my charges. Maybe not, but I've got enough to take you to court and show you a bad time. Your record won't help you any. Why am I after you so hard? Simply because I'm going to break up that game one way or another. It's dangerous as hell. It's liable to start a gang war right here in the forest. You're backing that sharper, Whitey Thomas. He's dynamite. You aim to trim a lot of big-shots. That means war sooner or later. You don't give a damn about that, of course, but we Forest Officers do. Now, Ted, I'm asking you straight—will you break up that game, or would you rather take a beating that will leave you hanging on the ropes?"

"Who is going to give me a beating? You? Nuts!"

"You *are* a fool," he told her. "Maybe I'd better show you one of my cards. It's known that Mason sometimes goes into a game with anywhere from fifty to a hundred thousand in cash on him. So you framed that stick-up the other night, figuring that what you got off Mason, Drake and Sanders would be velvet because they'd come back into the game with more dough. I now know that the hold-ups were your gunmen."

"You don't know any such a damned thing!"

"If I told you who they are, Ted, would you get the idea?"

"Who are they?"

"Suds Carter, Tom Mendoza and Barney Roush."

Her arms were still folded. The fingers of her right hand went white where they were biting into her left arm. "So what? That doesn't prove anything on me."

"I've shown you just one of my cards," said Jones quietly. "There are others. Thinking you're so smart and being so dumb, you dealt me a fistful of 'em, and sister—I aim to bet my hand to the limit unless you bust up that game now, before it starts trouble. What'd you say?"

Smoky Jones had never seen a face so pretty that looked so infernally wicked. Staring through the windshield with her jaw set, she had nothing to say for a long moment. Presently, she turned her head and looked at him. He was thankful that she couldn't possibly hide a knife or gun in that sun suit.

"Is that all, Ranger?" she asked.

He nodded, "Yes, for today."

She opened the door, stepped out, and told him quietly, "You'll be in hell a long time before I get there, Johnny. I'll be old and wrinkled when we meet down there, but I'll expect you to take me around and show me the hot spots. Good-bye, sweetheart."

AS HE drove away, Smoky Jones was thinking, *I bluffed and she called me. Well, it didn't cost anything and I know more than I did. Maybe she'll blow her top and get careless.*

The big Guard now felt like a man who had baited a bear trap, using himself as bait. He had given Teddy Baker a scare and when that woman got scared she did something about it. He was the cause of her fright. Her remedy? Remove the cause, of course. Smoky expected and hoped for a direct attack upon himself. If he could force her to lead, there was always the chance that he might win by a counter-punch. He was now winding up to launch another feint—a feint that might possibly be carried through as a pretty fair wallop itself.

Johnny Jones drove straight to the Suppression Camp and called Tex Mather.

"Yeah, Smoky. Glad to hear your raucous voice. Charley will be likewise. He's keeping cases on you, too."

"Much obliged to you and the boss, Tex. I'd like to talk to him if he's there. How's fire danger?"

"Well, it ain't improving," said the Dispatcher. "When you get back to headquarters tonight, run the weather, will you? I'd like to know what the humidity is doing at night up there in those canyons. Give it to me with your morning report. Charley is on the line now."

"Say, Smoky," said the District Ranger over the extension to his private office. "I was talking to Bill Manners" (the Forest Supervisor) "and he approves the arrangement we made. He has been in touch with the Los Angeles Chief of Police and the County Sheriff and they both told him that we're up against the real thing, just like you said. They'll help us in any way they can."

"Thanks for telling me, Charley," said Jones. "That's good news, too, for we're needing help right now. I think I've found the car and the men who hijacked those prisoners off the deputies, but I won't make a pinch on the strength of what I know now for fear of getting the Service tangled in a suit for false arrest. I've got a friend in the Sheriff's office at Lansdowne, but I won't ask him to do it either. Might get him in trouble. This is hot stuff to handle. The people in it have money and guts. I'd rather let the big-shots take a chance of burning their fingers on this deal. Somebody told me that Bill Manners and the Sheriff are pals. Wonder if he could get the Sheriff to send a couple of Deputies up here early in the morning with a warrant to search a certain ranch for evidence and orders to take some guys down for a quiz? Understand, Charley, I don't guarantee anything and it may cause a hell of a stink, but it's certainly worth the gamble. D'you think you could talk Mr. Manners into doing that?"

"Won't have to talk him into it," answered the District Ranger. "Bill is a gambling fool and he's all steamed up about this business. Wouldn't surprise me if he ordered you to bring 'em in yourself."

"Fine!" said the Guard. "Have the Deputies come to Whiteoak. I'll wait there for them. Mind if I phone you tonight to learn how you made out?"

"Sure, phone me. I want you to report

in when you get back to headquarters, no matter what time it is. You're too young and innocent to be running around in the brush alone at night. If we could spare a man, I'd give you a pardner to keep you company."

So that's the angle, thought Smoky when he hung up. Evidently the Supervisor had found out and told Rawhide Reagan that Johnny Jones was monkeying with dynamite and might get himself blown to smithereens.

While patrolling tonight Smoky walked with his chin on his shoulder—so to speak, and on two trips over mountain truck trails to investigate suspicious lights, he took all sharp blind turns with unaccustomed care and caution. He visited his Forest Service public camps before bedtime for campers. At each of them the Guard made it a point to get acquainted with any visitors whom he hadn't previously met, checked strangers for campfire permits which they were required to have, and otherwise looked his guests over even more closely than was his usual practice. If any of Teddy Baker's victims were parking their trigger men in these secluded camps, he wanted to know about it. Since he had been off the Force for over four years he might not know the new crop of mobsters by names and faces, but, like all trained lawmen he had learned to rely upon a sort of sixth sense that frequently tipped him off to what he called "quiz kids"—characters who *could* answer pertinent questions.

Smoky got back to his Whiteoak Canyon headquarters at eleven and immediately called the Ranger Station.

Rawhide Reagan himself answered, "Glad to hear from you, Smoky. Anything startling?"

"Everything is still under control, Charley. Our friends are having their usual game tonight. I didn't go in, but the same cars are parked there. How did you do with the Supervisor?"

"It's all set. Two men will get to Whiteoak by noon, at the latest. You wait for them. Bill Manners said to use your best judgment in that situation, but don't be afraid that he won't back us all the way. That's what Bill said."

"Sounds good, Charley, mighty good. Well, I'm in for the night. So 'long."

Around ten o'clock the next morning Smoky was in the garage checking over his fire tools. The large bell on the outside wall set up a clatter and he answered the phone on the extension in there.

It was Tex Mather, "Yeah, Smoky. The boss talked to the Supervisor again and Bill says when your company comes he wants you to go with 'em and help them if they need help. We're putting an extra patrolman on your division—Jim Taylor, and his headquarters will be Maple Lake Suppression Camp. He's on his way now. Check out before you leave. The boss sure is watching over you like an old hen with one chick and it an ugly duckling."

The two Deputy Sheriffs—Bob Ostrom and Jack Henderson, arrived at eleven-thirty. Ostrom, a burly old-timer, had heard plenty about Johnny's work while with the Los Angeles Police and had some nice things to say.

"When you finished licking the Japs," he asked, "why didn't you go back on the Force? Better money than this job, I'd think."

"More money," admitted Smoky, "but take a look at this Guard Station and these mountains and you won't blame me for falling in love with 'em. The war did something to me. I'll live here and ride herd on this brush and be happy with less than half the money I'd make living in L A and burrowing in rat holes for city crooks."

Both Deputies agreed that he might have something there. "But from what I hear, Ranger," said Ostrom, "you've got rat holes and city crooks up here in the sticks."

WHEREUPON Smoky Jones gave them the story, adding a thumb-nail sketch of Teddy and Snuffy Baker and their operations before Snuffy went to the pen.

"And that's it, officers," he concluded. "Like I told my boss, this thing is dynamite and it *could* blow up in our faces. I can't guarantee that you'll find anything at the Baker Ranch today and those two citizens I saw there yesterday may be as innocent as babes in the bullrushes. But, if I were a sheriff or a cop, I'd take a chance and do just what you came up here to do."

"That's enough for me," said Ostrom. "If Johnny Jones thinks that ranch needs a shakedown and those two characters ought

to be interviewed—well, what're we waiting for? Let's go!"

"Me too, sheriff?" asked Smoky.

"You, too?" growled the husky officer. "Don't be silly. Of course!"

SO Johnny reported to Tex, hopped into his pickup and followed the Sheriff's car to the Baker Ranch. They got there about twelve-thirty. The cook came to the kitchen door, then disappeared and a moment later Teddy Baker strolled into the yard with three men at her heels. The big light-haired man and a short bull-necked fellow with a dark face were the two Smoky had seen yesterday and he assumed that the third was Winthrop, the ranch manager, a slender middle-aged person.

In green slacks, a green halter, bare feet, toenails the color of her hair, sandals and a self-satisfied look, Teddy Baker was easy on the eyes and her smoky voice easy on the ears. She was effusive in her welcome, "Why, Johnny dear! After the way we quarrelled yesterday I thought I'd never see you again. I cried myself to sleep last night. Honest, I did!"

The tall Guard chuckled. "Honest, you're a liar, Ted. These gentlemen came all the way from L A to see you and they picked me up and brought me along to introduce them. They're nice guys, honey, Deputy Sheriffs."

The look she gave him might have staggered a weaker man. Winthrop didn't seem to be especially bothered by the news, but the other two shot furtive glances around them as if in search of a way out.

With a dry grin, Smoky went on to say, "The big good-looking officer is Bob Ostrom, Ted, and the big young man is Officer Jack Henderson. Sheriff, you take it from here."

Before Teddy Baker had a chance to say anything, Bob Ostrom showed that he believed in coming to the point without delay. "We're going to search this place, Mrs. Baker. I've got a warrant if you want to see it. Who are these men?"

Teddy's fist clenched for an instant and her eyes narrowed dangerously, but she quickly got hold of herself. "Of course, you may search us," she said softly. "I'll take your word about the warrant."

She then introduced Fred Winthrop as her manager, the sandy-complexioned man

as Ole Swenson and the dark fellow as Tony Martello, both farm hands employed on the ranch.

"May I inquire, Officer," she added, "what you are looking for?"

"Sure, you got a right to know," answered Ostrom. "We're looking for the men who hijacked three prisoners from our Lansdowne Deputies the other night and we won't object to finding the car they used. You come with us, Mrs. Baker. The three men will stay here." Ranger Jones, I deputize you to guard them. Keep 'em here, even if you have to use force to do it."

Martello growled belligerently, "Is this a pinch?"

"Not yet, mug," snapped Ostrom.

Johnny Jones loved Old Bob Ostrom then. Just the kind of man to handle a smooth article like Teddy Baker. For a brief moment he envied the Deputy his freedom of action, wished that Forest Officers dared to take such long chances when dealing with suspected lawbreakers. But he supposed the big-shots who wrote the Regulations knew what was best for the Service. Most of them were practical men who had worked their way from fire line to general offices.

The Baker pickup was parked nearby. Bob went there first and while Teddy stood frowning thoughtfully at them, he and Henderson examined each wheel and the license plate. Afterwards, he reached in and got the keys and put them in his pocket. From the pickup the Deputies went to the garage and Smoky soon realized that when Bob Ostrom said "shakedown" he meant it. Apparently he turned everything upside-down in there, even going through Teddy's sedan, lifting seat cushions and opening the trunk over her somewhat violent protest. Johnny didn't hear what she said, but he could imagine what it was like. Meanwhile, this search was beginning to get on his nerves already. He was responsible for it and notwithstanding what he had told Charley Reagan, if it failed to produce something of value he'd get a black eye that might cost him. Although the big Guard was satisfied that the Deputies would do as good a job as he could do, he nevertheless wished that he might have a hand in it. This waiting got him. He found himself fidget-

ing around and smoking one cigarette after another. He was definitely relieved when Tony Martello started something.

"Look, you," growled the bull-necked fellow, "I ain't under arrest, so I'm going away from here and quick! Get it?"

He started toward the house.

SMOKY took two quick steps and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Stay here, please! You heard my orders and—"

Martello whirled with an oath. He launched a huge fist in a roundhouse swing that would've put Johnny out of business had it landed. The tall Guard moved his head six inches—the fist missed his chin just that far. The blow spun Martello almost half around. The way Smoky Jones felt now, this was exactly what the doctor ordered. He buried his left fist in Tony's short ribs. The mobster grunted, lurched forward and sidewise a little, then picked his own left off the ground and gave it a good start. Smoky stepped inside the wild swing. He whipped a right uppercut with all the strength of his legs, shoulder, arm and wrist. His fist landed where he wanted it to land, squarely in the middle of Martello's big throat. But the blow didn't stop there. The fist darted on. Johnny's elbow crunched viciously under Tony's chin—a killing blow with the strength and terrific leverage there was behind it. However, the big fellow was tough. He went down and out like a log, but a glance sufficed to assure Smoky that the man would live to cause more trouble.

"Need any help, Ranger?"

Johnny glanced over at the Deputies. They were grinning all the way across their faces. "No, thanks. I'll manage to get along somehow."

Bob Ostrom's laughter exploded. "Evidently that punk never heard of Detective Johnny Jones and his fists. He'll know better next time, I betcha."

The search continued from the garage to a shed equipped with tubs and other containers where apples were washed, on to a tool shed, thence to a modern chicken house and from there to the last outbuilding—a feed bin and general storeroom. The farther the Deputies went without apparently finding anything worth while, the lower sank Smoky's heart. They were inside the store-

room for what seemed like a long time. Striding impatiently back and forth, Johnny Jones dragged nervously on his cigarette and watched the door.

While all this was going on, Tony Martello had come to and half-dragged himself to a bench under a tree nearby where the others were now sitting. Coughing and massaging his throat, he repeatedly tried to say something and failed to make it intelligible. At length he succeeded in gasping hoarsely, "Some day—I'll slit your—windpipe—for that!"

Smoky halted in front of him, and said quietly, "I'm generally around somewhere. When you get ready, I won't be hard to find."

Just then they came from the storeroom—Teddy, Henderson, and finally Bob Ostrom. With the aid of a handkerchief, he was carefully carrying a sub-machine gun! Smoky let go his breath in a huge sigh of relief. Instantly, he jerked his eyes to the men on the bench. Winthrop was surprised. Swenson's stolid face was impassive.

Martello wore the look of a wounded bear backed into a corner and prepared to fight to the death. His bloodshot eyes followed every step taken by the Deputies and the woman as they came quickly in this direction. Teddy Baker's jaw was set and her cheeks showed hard lines that signified the mental strain of furious thinking.

As they came nearer, Bob Ostrom said, "Looky what we found, Ranger! Under a loose board in the floor of the feed bin. Had to move a lot of sacks of chicken feed to get to it, too. Betcha the boys in the lab will discover that this is a very interesting document when they go to reading it. Mrs. Baker says she simply *can't imagine* how it got where it was."

"Well, I can't!" she said huskily. "I don't work this damned ranch. I'm away from here half the time. You can't expect me to know everything that goes on around here. You can't hold *me* responsible."

"I suppose you'll try to put the blame on your men," said Ostrom craftily, "and I can tell from the looks of Martello that they ain't going to like that."

Quick to sense the danger of the Deputy's remark, she said, "Of course not! My men know me better than to think that I'd do

that. But I still say you can't hold *me* responsible."

"You own this place and live here, don't you?" asked Ostrom. "Or do you?"

"I do! But—"

"Sister, that's enough for me," growled the big Deputy. "I'll have the pleasure of your society from here to L. A. But we ain't going right away. Still have to find a set of shoes for that pickup of yours and a license plate that belongs to somebody else. You could save your time and ours by telling us where they are, Mrs. Baker."

"Go to hell!"

"Okay, if that's the sweet way you feel about it," said Ostrom grimly, "your house is going to get a shaking down that it'll never forget. Show us the way, please."

"Hold on a minute, will you, Sheriff," said Smoky. "While you've been doing all the work, I've been doing a little thinking. Do you mind if I make a suggestion?"

"Lord, no, Ranger!" exclaimed Ostrom. "After all, this *is* your case. Shoot!"

JOHNNY pointed to the garage. "Evidently the former owner of this ranch liked to keep his old license plates. See 'em tacked on the south wall? I'd take a look-see at them. And another thing—when I was here yesterday these overworked farmhands were chopping wood and piling it a good six feet south of where it's piled now. Ted may have seen me giving her pickup the once-over. She's a smart gal and might have figured that I'd tumbled to the tire change. Maybe she did a little tire changing herself after I left. Believe I'd see what's under that woodpile if I were looking for a set of guilty tires."

"It'll be done in half the time it took you to say it," declared Ostrom. "Tie into the woodpile, Jack, while I do the heavy work on those old plates."

After examining a few of the plates on the garage wall, he took out his pocket knife and pried one loose. "Here she is!" he called out. "A nice, clean Nineteen Forty-six plate nailed under an old one!"

Teddy Baker refused to meet Johnny's eyes.

A moment later, Jack Henderson spoke up, "Plenty good rubber under this wood, Bob. I'll have it out in three shakes."

The woman whirled on Smoky, her fists clenched, her eyes blazing through narrowed lids. "Smart guy!" she raged hoarsely. "Grin like a moron! You think you've got me licked. You—a dumb cop with no better sense than to buck half a million dollars! There's just one thing I'm sorry for."

Johnny's grin turned down at one corner. "You sorry for something? What *could* that be, honey?"

"When I beat this rap you won't get the good news unless they're peddling papers in hell!"

Meanwhile, the deputies were checking four tires against a cast they had taken from their car and matching them with the pickup's wheels. Presently, Bob Ostrom said, "That settles it, Jack. This is the baby we want."

He strode over to where Smoky and the others were now standing. "Good job, Ranger. We've got the tire that made the track where the hijackers' car was parked and we found the wheel that it was taken from. Tire iron scratches on the wheel and the rubber match exactly. We'll take the tire and pickup down and let the scientific boys work 'em over. Never can tell what those bloodhounds will smell out."

To Teddy, he said, "Mrs. Baker, will you oblige me by coming peaceably to the Sheriff's Office for questioning, or will I have to arrest you and take you down?"

She shrugged carelessly, "Oh, I'll go. But I want to do some telephoning before we leave here."

Ostrom glanced at Smoky. The Guard shook his head.

"Sorry," said the big Deputy, "but you can't do that. The Sheriff has a phone and he'll let you use it. He's nice that way."

"You're a fool, but you ain't funny," snapped Teddy. "Will you let me go in the house to get some clothes and things?"

Bob Ostrom folded his arms, teetered back on his heels and grinned down at her. "Lady, among my souvenirs I carry two scars—knife and bullet. Got them from women and neither of 'em was my wife. So I'll just tag along while you go to the door and tell your cook to pack a bag with whatever you want to take. You won't have to change here. The weather is warm and I'll let you ride with me in that outfit. Where you're going, the county keeps a ladies' maid."

Smoky Jones laughed. She flung an oath at him that blistered where it touched the skin.

Turning to the Baker ranch men, Ostrom said, "Now, if you'll hold your little paddies out at the ends of your arms like this, my pardner will frisk you gently."

Before the search began, Smoky spoke up, "Wait a minute, will you, Sheriff? I've got something on my mind."

They moved aside out of hearing, and Johnny told him, "I don't think Fred Winthrop is in this mess. When you showed up with that gun he was more surprised than I was. But he no doubt has seen and heard things here that we'd like to know about. What d'you think of letting him go now? If we handle him easy I may be able to get something out of him later on."

"Fine idea," agreed the Deputy. "You'd ought to get the credit in his mind for taking him away from us. Do the talking."

WHEN they returned to the others, Smoky said, "Mr. Winthrop, we don't think you're mixed up in this business at all and we're sorry that you were here to get shoved around when we came." The Guard grinned, and added, "Next time I meet you at the lodge, the drinks are on me."

"Thank you, Ranger," said Winthrop. "No hard feelings far as I'm concerned. Shall I go on about my work, Mrs. Baker?"

"Oh, sure," she answered carelessly. "You and May hold down the ranch. The boys and I will be back before dark."

As the Deputies were preparing to leave with their prisoners, Smoky called Ostrom aside.

"Keep that damned woman and those thugs down there as long as you can, will you, Sheriff. Don't let 'em get back here before ten o'clock tonight if you can help it. I've got an idea that I'd like to try out this evening and if she were here, she might gum the works."

The old Deputy put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't you worry, Ranger. You've done a fine job here and we're with you all the way. That dame and her men-servants will sleep in jail tonight, no matter how much money she's got or how slick her mouthpiece happens to be. I'll betcha the boss gets the Feds in on this deal on account of that Tommy gun."

SMOKY JONES checked in from the Suppression Camp. "Everything okay, Tex," he told the dispatcher. "They're on their way with a woman and two men for questioning and stuff, also one Tommy gun, a hot forty-six license plate, a tire that fits a certain cast and a car that's been running around nights. Man—is that a load off my mind!"

"Good work, fella" said Mather. "I'll tell the boss and he'll phone the Supervisor. They're both in a sweat about that business. Bill Manners has called us three times since noon, asking for news."

"Thanks, Tex. Now, here's something."

"What? More misery?"

"It may turn out to be misery for somebody," said Smoky grimly. "I'm going to a certain house at nine o'clock tonight. I intend to interrupt the game that's running there and deal cards in a game of my own. When the play starts I'll be more or less bluffing, Tex, and I may get called. Charley Reagan and the Sheriff have the names of the players and the addresses they gave me, just in case."

"Just in case—what?"

"Just in case."

"Oh—I see." A moment's silence, then, "You hadn't ought to set in a game like that alone, boy. I'll get you some help, plenty help."

"Much obliged, Tex, but that would spoil everything," declared Jones. "If I had help the other guys wouldn't play. I'll eat here at camp and phone the office after my game busts up tonight."

"We-l-l—all right. I'll tell the boss when he comes in. Good hunting, Smoky, damn your lucky hide!"

Poor Old Tex, thought the Guard, *tied down to a desk and a phone and a radio that way.*

At nine o'clock the Roberts' house was lighted up as usual and the only car missing at the parking place was Teddy Baker's Cad sedan. Smoky went around to the east door and knocked. While waiting for the wicket to open he slipped a hand into his shirt to make certain that his thirty-eight was riding properly in its clip holster under his arm.

"Why, good evening, Ranger," said Bill Roberts. "Won't you come in."

"Don't mind if I do," said Smoky. "Got a little matter to talk over with you and the

other gentlemen, if you can spare a few minutes."

"Of course. Come in—come in."

THE gamblers were sitting in their usual places. Whitey Thomas was seated at the head of the long table, Ralph M. Mason next on his right and then Fred Drake. Across from Drake sat Harry Sanders and Bill Roberts' stack of chips was at Sanders' left. Everyone spoke cordially to the Guard and otherwise behaved as if he were welcome. Smoky walked around behind Whitey and sat down at his left, on Sanders' right, directly across the table from Mason. Drake had the deck.

Mason went to counting chips from his stack. "Fred," he said, "deal the Ranger in. I'll back him to the tune of ten thousand, stand his losses and take the short end of a sixty-forty split of his winnings."

Smoky objected, "Thanks, Mr. Mason, but I wouldn't—"

"Stow it, Ranger," said RM. "I'm not exactly a sucker. I'm making a good investment. I know a poker player when I see one. In a square game you'll do all right by yourself."

Long, lean, hawk-beaked Harry Sanders laughed, and said, "Yeah, he'll do all right in a square game, RM, and I'd hate to have him catch me in a crooked game. Better watch yourself, Whitey."

A cold grin flitted across the little gambler's pale face and the ice in his eyes turned a shade lighter. "I always watch myself, Harry," he said quietly, "and I make it a point to watch the other fellow, too."

Hub-oh! thought Smoky. *Something has happened in this game and the heat is on. Maybe I got here just in time.*

Aloud, he said, "Mighty sorry, Mr. Mason, but I'll have to stand pat. I haven't got the money to buy into a game like this and I won't let you back me. You *can* do something for me, though."

"Sure," said Mason. "What is it?"

"Listen to what I'm about to say," the big Guard quietly remarked. "I mean all of you, gentlemen, then do what I'm going to ask you to do."

Ralph M. Mason chuckled. "I'll listen, but I won't bet 'em blind. No promises now."

In effect, the others said the same thing.

So this is it, thought Smoky Jones. He sat with his left elbow on the table and shoulder thrown forward just enough to cause his khaki shirt to gap open where he had left it unbuttoned, a perfectly natural posture which no one would particularly notice, and it brought his automatic a lot closer to his right hand in point of time—when time was measured in split-seconds. Monkeying with a cobra *might* be worse than monkeying with Whitey Thomas, but you'd have to prove it to Johnny. Moreover, there wasn't a man in the room who'd testify against another of those present. If Whitey or Bill Roberts should kill a man in here, as far as witnesses were concerned the killer would be perfectly safe. Each of the other men might hate him enough to shoot him or have him shot, but to testify against him in a court of law—not once in a lifetime!

Smoky Jones spoke calmly, politely, earnestly. "I'm talking principally to you—Mr. Mason, Mr. Drake and Mr. Sanders—but I want Whitey and Mr. Roberts to hear what I've got to say, otherwise I'd do my talking somewhere else."

He paused, looked Ralph M. Mason squarely in the eye, and continued, "From the night I stumbled onto it, I've known that this is a dangerous game, a menace to the peace of my division in the forest, and the game is dangerous because you are a dangerous man, Mr. Mason. Although I don't know them, from what little I've seen of Mr. Sanders and Mr. Drake I'd say that it isn't safe to cross them either. But, speaking of you, Mr. Mason, I know of only two people who'd have the gall to try to put something over on you—Teddy Baker and Whitey Thomas."

He looked at Whitey and there was a challenge in his glance.

The gambler's level voice was as colorless as his delicate hands and thin face. "Go on, Jones. I promised to listen."

Smoky grinned with one side of his mouth. Shifting his eyes from Whitey to Mason, he continued, "Teddy Baker is backing Thomas. They plan to take you to a trimming, Mr. Mason, you and your friends here and others who will come later. I made Ted mad and she admitted it—bragged that she'd already banked fifty

grand of your dough and wasn't through with you yet. I tried to get her to stop it, warned her to lay off. I told her that you're big-league stuff and she's strictly bush league and I prophesied that she'd take a beating if she tangled with you, but the woman wouldn't listen to me. What happens to her or to you and your money, Mr. Mason, isn't my headache; but what you do to the slickers here in the forest who get caught trying to take you, *is* my business. When anyone does you dirt, sir, you're dynamite and it's my job to keep you from exploding."

Mason, Drake and Sanders laughed heartily. The faces of Roberts and Thomas were set hard, utterly cold. Their eyes often met while the Guard was talking, their hands lay still on the table.

"Now, this is the favor I'm asking of you, gentlemen," Smoky went on. "Move this game out of the forest. Take it to one of your yachts or country places and match wits with Whitey Thomas all you damned please, then blast him to hell whenever you feel like it. Old RM, as they call him in L A, is known to be a man of his word—if you can get him to give you his word—and I'll gamble that you, Mr. Drake and Mr. Sanders, are built along the same lines. Promise to move out of here. I'll take your word for it and report to my boss that we've got nothing further to worry about as far as you're concerned. Will you?"

Plainly, Ralph M. Mason and his two friends were getting a big kick out of this. While the Guard was talking they watched Thomas and Roberts like hawks, but none of the three showed either surprise or anger—just an absorbing interest and amusement.

BEFORE anyone had a chance to answer Smoky's question, Whitey Thomas spoke up. His voice was low and impersonal, "You've made some cracks, Jones. Have you got what it takes to back them up?"

"You should know, Whitey," answered the big Guard calmly. "Remember the time in L A when you took a ride with me—a ride that you didn't want to take?"

Mason's heavy eyebrows lifted ever so slightly. He and his two friends exchanged glances. Afterwards, he said, "Before we make any promises, Ranger, tell us more. We like to hear you talk."

Smoky Jones mentally tightened his belt. He had hoped to avoid what he was about to say, feeling that it would almost certainly touch off the fireworks. Looking past Sanders on his left, he met Bill Roberts' eye and discovered both a warning and a challenge there. Then he glanced at Whitey Thomas and found nothing at all in the gambler's marble face.

Johnny looked at Mason and his two friends, grinned dryly, and said, "Now, *you're* taking *me* for a ride, Mr. Mason. Okay, I'll go along with you. Have you been wondering why Teddy Baker hasn't showed up tonight? Well, I'll tell you. At my request, Deputies came and took her and two of her men down this afternoon. That's why Ted isn't here."

A twitch came to the corner of Whitey's eye, a muscle rolled in Roberts' jaw, Drake and Sanders looked at Mason with a sort of humorous inquiry in their faces.

Old RM himself was frankly amused by developments. "Please, Ranger, don't stop there. Tell us more."

All eyes were now fixed on the Forest Officer—keen eyes with brains behind them. Smoky Jones could imagine how a suspect felt in a police lineup. "That's a fact, gentlemen," he went on to say. "They took her and the Swede and the Wop down for questioning after they found a Tommy gun, a hot license plate and a hijackers' car on the ranch. The car belongs to Ted. It looks as if we'll be able to prove that she masterminded the operations in which Swenson and Martello sprung the three holdup men from those Lansdowne Deputies the other night. We're not sure, of course, but it looks that way now."

He paused, glanced at Drake and Sanders and back to Mason, adding casually, "Of course, you suspected that she engineered that stickup herself. Those three mugs were members of Snuffy Baker's mob—Suds Carter, Tom Mendoza and Barney Roush. You'll recall that Mendoza knew Whitey."

All traces of humor or amusement vanished from the faces of the three big-time gamblers. Ralph M. Mason looked to be exactly what his reputation said he was—one tough baby.

"See what I mean, Mr. Mason?" asked Smoky. "She hasn't got any better sense than to pull something like that on you and

your friends. Naturally, you won't take it—then I'll have a war on my hands."

RM nodded, and said quietly, "We understand your position, Ranger, and don't blame you for doing your job. Go ahead, please. I don't think you've told it all."

Smoky Jones placed his feet squarely on the floor and otherwise set himself for trouble. "No, not quite all," he admitted casually. "Whitey Thomas and Bill Roberts are taking their cut here and they were in on that stickup deal, so—"

Johnny couldn't say that he saw Whitey's hand dart for the little automatic in the waistband of his trousers. It moved too fast. But he did catch the first jerk of the gambler's arm and instantly whipped a backhanded blow with his right. The side—the heel of his big hand cut Thomas across the jaw like the edge of a board swung by a strong man. Whitey got his gun out. He fired, perhaps at the precise instant that the blow knocked him unconscious. The bullet missed Smoky and shattered a window. Thomas and his chair fell sidewise to the floor. The big Guard flung himself down onto the frail gambler and snatched away the automatic, not realizing that the man was out.

As Johnny went down another gun roared, a bullet bit at the end of the table top and glanced off. Without looking he knew that Bill Roberts had taken a snap shot at him. He didn't return the shot. He didn't want to do any shooting if he could help himself. Instead, he lunged upward under the heavy mahogany table and sent it crashing over onto Sanders and Roberts. They were pinned to the window seat with the table across their thighs and only their legs in sight. Crushed back against the wall and windows, they had no leverage to push the weighty thing away.

Holding the table with head, shoulder and one arm, Smoky pulled his thirty-eight with his free hand. He jabbed Roberts in the thigh, and growled, "Quick! Give Sanders your gun! Give it to him or I'll bust your knees with bullets and cripple you for life, damn your dirty soul!"

A moment later, Sanders grunted, "I've—ugh—I've got it."

Moving back, Smoky let the table down and released them. "Mighty sorry, Mr. Sanders. Are you hurt?"

"No—but you sure dumped a load into my lap."

AFTER searching Bill Roberts and ordering him to sit in a chair against the wall, Johnny brought Whitey Thomas to with the assistance of Mason and a wet towel. He then formally arrested the two men for assault upon a Federal Officer with dangerous weapons.

Turning to Mason, Drake and Sanders, he grinned, and said, "Gentlemen, I'm sorry that I had to behave like a bull in a china shop and break up your game this way."

Ralph M. Mason slapped him on the shoulder, and declared, "No apologies are in order, Ranger. After hearing what you had to tell us, in our own minds we had already busted up this damned game. We owe you plenty and you've got my solemn promise that I'll never cause you any trouble in your forest. You're in this pot, aren't you boys?"

Drake and Sanders assured him that they were.

Old RM looked across the room at Whitey and Roberts, two bedraggled and crestfallen crooks. He chuckled softly, and went on to say, "Johnny Jones, if you ever get bored with your life inside the law and want to take a flyer outside, come to see me before you go to anybody else. I'd hate like hell to have you working for one of my competitors!"

Smoky Jones took his prisoners to the Suppression Camp and phoned the District Ranger's office from there.

Charley Reagan answered, "Damned glad to hear from you, Smoky. What's new?"

"I've just arrested Bill Roberts and Whitey Thomas for assaulting a Federal Officer with dangerous weapons, Charley, and that game is busted up for keeps, I'm sure."

"Did you get hurt?"

"Not a scratch. Shall I have the Lansdowne Deputies come and get 'em?"

"Yes," said the Ranger, "and have 'em bring Tommy guns of their own this time. Good for you, Smoky! Wait until I tell Bill Manners that our troubles are over up there."

Smoky Jones hung up the receiver, thinking, *Troubles are over, he says. My troubles haven't started yet. Teddy and her thugs will be out on bail by tomorrow.*

WHEN Smoky stepped onto the Guard Station porch the next morning, he muttered an oath to himself. The wind had changed, the sky wasn't the sky of yesterday, even the air he breathed was different and upon all sides he saw the effects of this change in the weather. Gone was the bluish haze which men of the forest liked to see hanging in mountain valleys and canyons, for it consisted of dust and moisture particles and indicated that atmospheric humidity had not fallen to a high fire danger point. Whiteoak Canyon was clear as a crystal now. A northeast wind had raced across hundreds of miles of desert that blazed by day and smoldered by night and even now, so early in the morning, the wind was rushing through trees and chaparral on the steep slopes of the canyon walls with a sound like the labored breathing of a giant. By ten o'clock this giant would be hurling its weight against the mountains. In place of the bluish haze another would appear then—yellowish or dull copper, dust without moisture particles, and at their stations throughout the forest men would moisten dry lips and mutter oaths as Smoky had done. Fire weather—*red weather*—now held the forest in its searing grasp. This infernal wind would suck moisture from every living thing and soon the chaparral itself, tortured by heat and drought, would emit a pungent odor like creosote—Nature's fire warning to men and wild life. Old-timers would catch the scent, shake their heads and watch the skyline for smoke.

Wild things that made their homes beneath the canopies of the forest would be tormented by the dry atmosphere and the acrid stench of the brush, and they'd share the anxiety of the men who guarded it. Birds would feed by fits and starts and quarrel among themselves. Deer would quit playing games on firebreaks, truck trails and mountain-meadows, frequently stop grazing to test the air apprehensively and they'd move about as if fearful that some unknown danger would strike at them from an unknown hiding place.

High on the summit of Coyote Mountain the Lookout's tomcat awoke, yawned, stretched and left his bed in the garage this morning. He had to be locked in there each night, otherwise bobcats or coyotes would get him. He stopped at the open door, sniffed

the air, then howled in the most forlorn fashion. Maybe he, too, was oppressed by the feel of danger that permeated the forest, or perhaps he knew that hunting would be poor today, and, much against his will he'd have to eat the food that his master gave him.

Gophers would block their doors and haunt the tunnels of their burrows. Quail would feed deep in the brush where he dare not go. Ground squirrels would not be in a mood for play in the open, never venturing far from their holes. The huge crows that tormented mountain life would be even more quarrelsome and pugnacious than usual and they'd dive-bomb him whenever he showed himself. Tree squirrels would scent the danger that rode the wind and cling to the middle and higher levels of the forest, far beyond the tomcat's reach, and from there they'd cough profanity down at him. In fact, the only creatures who seemed to like this weather were horned toads, but he couldn't eat the things. Lashing his tail the big tomcat surveyed the sky and the world around him, then slowly climbed the twenty-one steps to the lookout cab where his master lived, howling at every step.

At headquarters of the San Fernando National Forest anxious men would keep their fingers on the pulse of the weather today. The Supervisor and members of his staff, especially his Fire Control Officer and the Central Dispatcher, would gather data from many sources for use in a study called The Fire Danger Rating System and if the weather soon didn't take a turn for the better—like the General of an army and his staff, they would be moving or preparing to move reinforcements of men and equipment to weak points in the line—forest areas where fire danger was greatest. Meanwhile the Supervisor would have alerted the forest. The old order, ONE HUNDRED PERCENT. STANDBY, had lately been discontinued, but the alert would get practically the same results by holding men at their headquarters ready to roll to a fire at an instant's notice. Throughout the forest the uppermost thought and the foremost topic of conversation would be FIRE!

Daily Suppression Crew drills would be longer and harder. Foremen would hold watches on their crews and smile proudly to

themselves at the way their boys were cutting seconds from their time in the execution of an order—for example, like this, "Give me a siamese lay two hundred feet up that slope. Let's go!" And after the drill was over, the rubber-covered hose reeled in and the cotton-jacketed hose accordion-pleated in its baskets, the big green pumper cleaned and slicked up and parked in the garage with its nose pointed out and all other chores around the Suppression Camp completed, the boys might flop on their cots in the barracks tired but keyed up, anxious to roll. A kid would lie there with eyes closed, while on a shelf near his head a small radio softly broadcasted, a hot platter. The kid would be daydreaming. In his dream, however, he wouldn't be cutting a rug with the girl friend. He'd be on the fire line, making a hero of himself with a nozzle.

WHEN Smoky Jones checked in to the Dispatcher and made his morning weather report, he concluded, "Wind out of the northeast about fifteen in the canyon and judging by the way the trees and brush are behaving on top of the ridge, I'd say it's anyhow thirty up there. Looks bad, doesn't it, Tex?"

"We-l-l it ain't good," answered Mather. "Haven't heard anything yet from the Central Dispatcher, but I'll gamble that we're on the alert before noon. You've got things to do at headquarters, haven't you?"

"Yep, plenty to do."

"Well, shine your boots, boy, and put a keen edge on your fire clothes."

This was one of those tough days that come in the life of every Forest Guard. Forced to remain at headquarters where he could be quickly contacted by phone, trying to find something to do, just waiting for something to happen and almost wishing it would. Smoky had always made it a practice to keep up with his work around the Guard Station. Today—after routine house cleaning, raking, sweeping and watering—he couldn't find a single thing to keep his hands busy; no repairs, window washing, sharpening, painting—every fire tool in his care recently having had the bright red band on its handle touched up—lawn cut short and edged, no shrubbery to prune and not a weed in his flower beds. Aw, hell! Why

didn't Teddy Baker send her thugs along to beat him up, if they could?

At ten o'clock that night the phone lifted him out of his chair. It was Big Mike Moran, Fire Control Assistant at the Placerite Ranger Station. "Howdy, Smoky. Old Harry Parsons on Coyote Mountain Lookout is putting in a little overtime on his own tonight. He's picking up a glow on the south slope of Pine Ridge near the crest and his reading places it about due north of you. Go outside and take a look, will you."

Smoky hurried out to the porch, looked up the north slope of Whiteoak Canyon, then right back to the phone. "Good for Old Eagle-eyed Harry! There's a blaze up there about the size of a big campfire. I know the spot. It's left of the Benson Trail as you go up, a shelf with bare rocks above it and heavy cover below it. Not much fuel where the fire is burning and it's sheltered from the wind. A shoulder juts out so as to hide the flames from Harry and he's catching the glow on the rocks above. I'm on my way, Mike!"

"Attaboy, Smoky," said Moran. "I'll put Harry on radio standby. Call him if you need help and I'll roll Maple Lake. We're so damned hot tonight I don't want to roll 'em unless I have to, but don't you take any chances—either with the fire or your own tough hide. Good luck, fella."

With his green pickup in second and its accelerator on the floor, Smoky Jones took the winding truck trail up the south slope of Pine Ridge at a speed that often had one rear wheel hanging over empty space on hairpin turns. He stopped opposite the shelf, the fire fifty yards distant on his left. With two quick jerks he unstrapped his backpack pump from its bracket on the runningboard, slipped his arms through its shoulder harness and got up with it, then snatched his shovel from its clamps on the body of the car and headed for the fire over an animal trail that wound through brush to the shelf. He now had no thought for any danger other than the fire and its threat to the forest. From a point behind him, the moon lighted his way.

THE chaparral thinned to a few dwarf bushes and there was practically no grass on the shelf at the base of the naked cliff where the fire was burning. A small

campfire here would be safe if properly tended. This one, however, was definitely dangerous because of its size and vigor with which it was throwing sparks that might spot into the heavy cover on the steep slope below it. Should that happen, the fire would go booming back up the ridge to its summit a thousand feet above. By the time the head got there in this thick and highly inflammable fuel, flames would be leaping fifty feet or more into the air, they'd meet the wind at the crest and the collision would fling them even higher and backward and burning embers would be thrown unbelievable distances to start new fires where they fell. Smoky had seen spot fires break more than half a mile ahead of the main fire in wind and weather no worse than this. After hastily thinking the situation over he got the idea that someone had planned to camp here, then ran off when his lights showed on the trail.

Smoky walked clear of the chaparral when he passed between the bare cliff on his right and a huge boulder buried in eight-foot brush on his left. Five yards ahead, the fire hissed and crackled less than twenty feet from the outside edge of the shelf. Tiny flames were creeping through sparse grass in all directions, one finger of fire reaching feebly for the lip of the shelf. If it were allowed to get there small particles of burning fuel would undoubtedly fall into the dense brush below, then nothing less than a miracle or superhuman work on Smoky's part would prevent a major catastrophe. Water was the thing here. Spray the grass to stop the creeping fire, then cool down the campfire with a spray—no solid water for fear of knocking burning embers off the shelf. Afterwards, dirt and scraping would finish the job. Smoky dropped his shovel. He reached up and over his shoulder with his right hand to lift the hose and nozzle of the backpack pump from its clamps on top of the five-gallon tank.

A shadow fell suddenly on the open ground before him! A man's shadow! Instinctively he hunched his shoulders and threw his head forward and down. A terrific blow clanged on the metallic tank, a blow that would've knocked him out had it found its mark—his head. The force of the blow together with the sixty-pound weight on his back threw him off balance, drove him to

one knee. Unarmed tonight, he grabbed the shovel with his right hand as he went down. Again his assailant's weapon brushed his head, crashed onto the tank before he could make a move to avoid it. From a crouching position, Smoky sprang forward and whirled as quickly as he could with the cumbersome pump on his back. The Swede towered over him swinging a club and at his heels came Martello!

Johnny Jones threw up the shovel and caught Swenson's next blow on its handle. Instantly thereafter he whirled the blade in a short, lightning slash that laid the big thug's jaw and cheek open to the bone. Had it caught his throat it would have killed the man. In the hands of a Forest Guard—a strong man trained to use it for many purposes—this long-handled shovel was a terrible weapon, ground sharp from its point up both sides to within four inches of the top of the blade and designed to be used as a cutting tool in an emergency. The Swede staggered and stumbled backward into the lumbering Martello who saw what had happened to his partner. He swore and retreated a step. Meanwhile, Smoky took full advantage of this momentary delay in the attack. He dropped the shovel, shed the backpack, snatched up the shovel again.

Swenson and Martello were lunging at him now—the former brandishing his club, the latter swinging a blackjack. It appeared that they had no firearms. Teddy Baker's orders no doubt—cripple and disfigure an enemy for life, but avoid a murder rap. Smoky swung the shovel with all his strength, aiming at Martello, striking with the back of the blade rather than its cutting edge. The Wop ducked. The tall Swede took the full force of the blow on the side of his head. It flung him to one side, staggering, out on his feet, then he plunged headlong off the shelf into a manzanita bush.

The Wop's blackjack missed Johnny's head, crunched down onto his shoulder. The Guard's left arm and hand went dead, paralyzed, and fear laid hold of him—fear of the horrible beating that he might have to take.

Lighter and faster on his feet than Martello, he faded away from the whistling blackjack and rode out a wild left that the Wop aimed at his chin. The blow on the

shoulder had sickened him, sapped his strength for a moment. Though he hung onto it, he could scarcely lift the heavy shovel and avoided Martello's lumbering rushes by footwork alone—kept the big crook from landing a crippling blow until the shock to his nerves wore off. His left arm was still useless, but presently he could swing the shovel with his right. A red, fighting rage made it feel no heavier than a walking cane. The Wop paused to gulp in air, growl profanity and threats. Smoky Jones stalked him now, cursed him, told him that he'd wear him down then kick his face in. Martello charged again, striking with the blackjack, his left cocked and ready. Johnny stood his ground, gauged distance, flipped the shovel straight ahead point first—not so hard as to kill, but with force enough to bury its blade to the bone wherever it landed. The thug halted, gasped, tore at his shirt with both hands, then looked down at an eight-inch gash across his hairy chest. In a frenzy of fear he cried out that he was dying and commanded Jones to do something for him. Johnny did. He laid the crook out with the flat of the shovel: had to do it—had a fire to fight.

TEN minutes later Smoky Jones had his portable radio on the shelf, and was calling, "O One Three . . . S Seven Three calling O One Three . . . Come in, please."

"O One Three back to S Seven Three. Go ahead, Smoky."

"Thanks for the fire, Harry. Tell Mike that we've got it down. Tell him that I'll talk from the Guard Station pretty soon. Busy now, sitting on a brace of crooks. Phone the county at Maple Lake, will you, and ask 'em to send a man with a first aid kit. Three guys up here need it. Over."

"O One Three back. Can do Smoky. Congratulations! Over."

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

Swenson was up and around now, but he had bled so much he was plumb tame. Martello was just coming to.

Standing over him with the shovel, Smoky Jones said to himself, *The Wop is yellow, showed it when he caved at sight of his wishbone. He'll sing before I finish with him. Good-bye, Teddy Baker!*

As a Matter of Fact, There Was Small Difference Between Gods and Devils; and in Both Power Lay, Not in Themselves, But in the Fervor of Their Worshippers



THE WHITE GODDESS OF THE KHIVA

By SEABURY QUINN

CAPTAIN SIR HADDINGWAY INGRAHAM JAMESON INGRAHAM of His Majesty's Royal Frontier Houssa Police—less formally known as Hiji from Largos to Bathurst—was engaged in the

pleasing and harmless pastime of shooting crocks.

A grinning Krooboy, naked save for a breech-clout and a blue celluloid comb thrust in his kinky hair, squatted on the river bank with a long pole in his hand. At-

tached to the pole was a length of strong, stout string, and at the string's far end there dangled the remains of a deceased cooking-dog which swished slowly through the muddy waters of the Luabala with a motion counterfeiting swimming. Crocks are always hungry and ever guilty of the sin of gluttony, and the appetizing scent of the defunct dog was a lure no crock, no matter how inhibited, could withstand. So presently there showed a long, triangular ripple on the surface of the water, and at its apex was the pointed armored snout and knob-set eyes of a voracious saurian. The Krooboy was an old hand at the game and played the crocodile skillfully. Without appearing to do so, the bait increased its rate of speed, and the crock paddled faster, caution lost in appetite. The dog came closer to the shore, the crocodile in hot pursuit. Then Hiji raised his 9.5-mm. Mannlicher-Schoenauer, took quick aim, and fired.

Your African crocodile is a tough customer. From ten to twenty feet in length, and armored like a tank, his skull is thick and hard as metal, his brain pan small, his vitality enormous. You can shoot him full of holes as a fly-net yet cause him little more than temporary inconvenience till you hit a vital spot, and vital spots are few and far between. But Hiji was no duffer with a rifle. He could put a bullet through the trefoil of the ace of clubs at thirty paces, and the lone pip on the ace of clubs is considerably smaller than a crocodile's eye. Also a 9.5-mm. Mannlicher-Schoenauer fires a bullet weighing 261.7 grams with a muzzle velocity of 2,600 feet per second and strikes with a power of 4,200 foot pounds. The crock lashed once or twice with his long tail, then sank beneath the surface or turned belly-up, webbed feet and short legs pointing to the sky. Post-mortems were invariably the same. The newly deceased crock's cousins, aunts, sisters and brothers swarmed to devour him, and Hiji potted one or two of them before they dragged him under or swam out of range.

His sport was interrupted by the advent of a Houssa trooper with a delegation of four Iliki warriors in tow. The trooper halted at six paces, made a precise salute and announced, "These crave audience with you, O Hiji." His tone implied complete dissociation with the visit, as if he would

say, "Don't blame *me* for the sort of guests you entertain." The Iliki were not in favor with the Houssas, for they had the unpleasant habit of lurking in the bush beside a narrow trail and cutting down the last man in a file instead of standing up to fight like men.

"Aye?" Hiji laid his rifle on his knees and stared at the callers. "What brings thee hither, countenances of misfortune?"

"O Hiji, thou art our father and our mother," the leader of the delegation answered as he squatted in the shade of a pepper tree and rubbed his hands in the sand before him. "We come to thee for justice."

Hiji eyed him somberly. When a native came three hundred miles downriver, even though he floated with the stream most of the way, and talked of getting justice it meant something was up. Something quite unpleasant, probably. There had almost certainly been a killing palaver on the callers' home grounds, and just as certainly they had come off second best, otherwise they would not be asking justice. "Hast thou been making war on thy neighbors, man?"

The callers nodded vigorously, which among the jungle people was a sign of denial. "We are peaceful people, Hiji," said their spokesman. "We keep the law and pay the tax—"

"Quite so. A full compendium of all the Christian virtues bound in black morocco; but I don't think that you came all the way downriver just to tell me how ruddy good you are. The victor does not ask for justice from the vanquished."

"Ahee!"

"Exactly. Now we're gettin' somewhere. Who's been givin' you a shellackin'?"

"The cursed Khiva, Lord. Their new white goddess bids them make war on us, and we suffer grievous things at their hands. Our goats are stolen, and our grain. Our women have been borne away, and some of us"—he thrust the knuckles of one hand against his hips—"some of us have been taken to be goats without horns!"

"My Aunt Mehitabel's best Sunday-go-to-meetin' bustle!" This was really serious. Little tribal wars were things to be expected, sometimes to be condoned if the provocation had been great, but slave-trading and man-eating were cardinal sins, not to be indulged in or forgiven. "When did

this happen, O bearer of great tidings of misfortune?"

THE messenger took thought and finally held up both hands and spread the toes of one foot. "As many days ago as these, O Hiji. Six moons ago there came to the chief village of the Khiva a most potent goddess, white and beautiful as thou, my lord, and for her they built a great house and paid her honor with much dancing and feasting. It is said that at their feasts they 'chopped' men and ate them, but as to that I cannot say, for I was not there. This only do I know: Since she came to them the Khiva have prospered. Their crops have flourished as in no year before, their young men found much game, their women bore men-children, and the sickness that makes the skin burn and the teeth chatter does not trouble them. Then when the crops were in and the grain harvested the goddess bade them go to war, and they went out against the K'ita and took their salt and rods, their cooking-dogs, their women and their goats. Also some fine and stalwart young men"—once more his fist came up to his mouth—"whom they chopped and ate."

"Why was I not told of this? I would have come with my soldiers—"

"O-ko. The dead bird sings no songs, nor does the dead lion go hunting. The K'ita are a little people, Hiji. They have wealth but few spears, and when the Khiva came on them those who were not killed ran to the forest seeking sanctuary and are still in hiding. They could not come to thee and beg protection."

"U'm." Hiji nodded. The plight of little nations was no better in West Central Africa than elsewhere. Those with wealth but no means of protecting it were bound to be preyed on by their more powerful neighbors. "And thou? Thine is not a little tribe, O man. Did the Khiva also drive ye to the forest?"

"Only for a little while, my lord. We could not stand against them, for their goddess is a powerful ju-ju and gives victory to her worshippers, but when the fighting ended we came back to our villages, and I am come with my companions to ask justice from your greatness."

Hiji brushed his little, black mustache

with the knuckle of a bent forefinger. So there *was* something to it? Vague rumors of the new white goddess of the Khiva had come to him, but he had discounted them. Tales of white women gone jungle-mad and officiating as priestess at Voodoo rites or reigning as queen or goddess of some savage tribe were all old hat, with no more real foundation than the Loch Ness Monster of the Jersey Devil. Outside of books, white women didn't do such things. For one thing, no white woman could survive native living conditions any length of time. If beriberi didn't get her, malaria would; and if she sidestepped them there were cholera and sleeping sickness. The stories were fantastic as the tales of Jack the Giant Killer or the Sleeping Beauty, but—any blooming thing could happen in Africa, and sooner or later, usually did. "Hast thou seen this white goddess, man?"

"Not I, my lord." The messenger was plainly nervous at the mere mention of the deity, and spoke slowly, pausing now and then to spit to right and left or thrust the knuckles of his hand against his mouth. "Few not of the Khiva have seen her and lived to tell it, but N'kimi, son of M'kuno, who was taken in a Khiva raid, saw her for a moment. He was made to stand before her temple-hut with other prisoners and the witch-doctor made a long palaver, giving them to the ju-ju. Then men with knives and killing spears came up behind them and three of those who stood in line were chopped. N'kimi and two others were put into a prison pen to wait until the time for chopping them had come, but in the night he dug a hole beneath his bars and escaped. His two companions were retaken, but he won through to his village."

"Aye? What did he say of her?"

The messenger was at a loss for words. "He saw her only for a moment, Hiji. She is very white and beautiful, with long hair colored like the ripened corn, and a blue gown with golden stars upon it. On her arms are bracelets, and on her head a crown of gold. She lay upon a bed and held her hands before her as one who cries, 'Give, give!' but no word did she say when they addressed her. Once every night they bear her round the village that she may overlook the people and give luck. Then she is borne back to the temple, where four vir-

gins skilled in dancing keep watch before her day and night. These things N'kimi, son of M'kuno saw with his own eyes while he was in the prison pen, but that is all he saw and all that he could tell."

Hiji studied the sand at his feet. This matter of the natives' gods was ticklish business, and annoying. The native Pantheon was in a constant state of flux, with new gods coming in and old ones going out in a continuous procession.

Usually a new god moved in when the crops were gathered and before the rains began, for with a practicality greater than might have been expected the people preferred to test the potency of the new deity before installing him in a temple and bowing down to him in worship. Nothing ever just happened in the bush. Misfortune, whether personal or tribal, was the result of malign influence. The individual or family might suffer as the result of a curse laid by a powerful magician; when tribe or village suffered it was because some god was offended and took this means of showing his displeasure. Similarly, if good fortune came it was the result of divine beneficence, and if the people had no god, or if their present one had not been noted for his kindness in the past, they looked about for the strange god to whom they owed their present state of well-being. When they found him he was suitably installed, either as superior to their former deity, or as his successor, and thereafter the new god held office like members of the judiciary, during good behavior. Gods failing to produce results got the sack.

The qualities of gods were quite as numerous as their quantity. Almost anything could be the outward manifestation of inward spiritual power. Not only carven idols—though these were by far the most popular—were representatives of divinity. Some animal, especially one that differed from its fellows in shape, size of coloring, an odd-appearing stone, a tree that grew in an unusual shape, all or any of these might lay hold on native imagination, be taken as the dwelling-place of a spirit and accorded the reverence due a god. Qualitatively, too, there was small difference between gods and devils. Both were powerful and able to work mischief, both demanded offerings from their worshippers. Usually gods were good, but sometimes they were definitely

bad, demanding human sacrifice and urging those who worshipped them to take the warpath, especially if their worshippers had been cannibals in the old days, or if they had a grudge against some neighboring tribe, or coveted its goods and chattels—which in Africa as elsewhere amounted to the same thing in international relations.

SO WHEN a god roused his people to war or to commit murder and cannibalism, it was part of Hiji's duty to become a missionary and discourage heathen practices with such powerful persuaders as Enfield rifles, bayonets and machine guns. Apparently the time had come to preach the gospel of good-will and forbearance to the Khiva, to dispossess their new white goddess from her temple, perhaps to hang a self-appointed priest or two, and re-establish peace and tranquility.

What puzzled him was the new deity's gender. Women were of small account in the jungle, and feminine things much less important than masculine. Gods there were in embarrassing plenty, but goddesses were new to him. He knew the unreliability of native testimony. The goddess might have been a picture of a woman which had come into the Khiva's hands in some mysterious way. Of course, N'kimi, son of M'kuno, claimed to have seen her, but N'kimi had the fear of death upon him when he stood before her temple-hut. That, plus the vivid imagination all natives had, might account for his story. At any rate he was a far from satisfactory witness, and the only thing to do was go see for himself.

"And if it's a real live woman setting the Khiva up to devilment she'll be wishin' she'd died when she was a baby," he told himself grimly. In times gone by he'd had to hang a white man or two for high crimes and misdemeanors, and several native kings and witch-doctors had felt the noose tighten round their necks when he had given judgment; thus far he'd never hanged a woman or even ordered one to be flogged. But if it turned out that a woman was behind this killing and man-eating, his duty was plain, and he knew as well as he knew that he sat there that he would not shirk it. The law knew no distinctions of sex, race or color, and chivalry had no place in a court of justice, even though the judge's bench

was only a camp stool and the lord justice an uncomfortable young man in a soiled khaki uniform.

"Get ye to the cookhouse and bid my cook man feed thee," he told the visitors. "The palaver is ended."

THE *Wilhelmina*, Hiji's little Diesel-driven utility boat, had bucked the shifting currents of the Luabala for five days, now she had reached the confluence of the Luabala and the Mendi-Mendi, which should have been the turning to take toward the Khiva country, but instead of turning she kept on, her "blue" spread proudly to the breeze, her double engines purring merrily. Beside her as she made her way upstream the *lo-kali*—the jungle telegraph—had kept up a continuous thrumming gossip: "Hiji comes! Hiji comes!" Now the burden of the message changed to, "Hiji passes!" and six tall Khiva warriors with faces smeared skull-white with clay and vulture feathers in their hair rose from their vantage point upon the bank that overlooked the river and ran toward the Khiva capital.

"He passed?" asked King Hefela as the outpost made their report. "Of this thou art sure? By *ewa*, if thou speakest with a crooked tongue there will be work for those who skin men!"

Kimiri, captain of the king's guard and leader of the scouts, spoke for them all. "By the fat of my heart, O King, we saw him go upon his way with our own eyes. Is it not so, my brothers?" he turned for confirmation to the other five. All shook their heads from side to side in solemn affirmation of their leader's statement. "We saw the big canoe that says *br-r-r-rr!* *br-r-r-rr!* and hurls the lightnings from its nose pass on its way, nor did it pause a moment where the big and little rivers meet."

King Hefela smiled in happy incredulity. The power of the white goddess was greater than he had dared hope. The gods were very strong, but so was Hiji. *Cala-cala*, which in Bomongo means long ago, there had been a great new god among the Olaka people, a god whom they had joyed to serve because he spoke with a great brazen voice that could be heard for miles, and summoned men to go out and do battle. Then Hiji came and hanged the king of

the Olaka and their chief witch-doctor to tall trees and took much captured booty from them and returned it to their beaten enemies. Worst of all, he took their lovely god—which was a cracked locomotive bell bought from a half-caste Arab trader for ten times its weight in monkey skins—and threw it in the river. Since then the Olaka had been "little people," unable to make war upon their neighbors and feared by none.

Behold, how much greater was his white goddess than the Olaka's brass god. True, she had not his fine, clanging voice, indeed, she had no voice at all that ordinary men could hear, and made her decrees and her wishes known only to Hiksoka the witch-doctor who in the stillness of the night when others slept communed with her in mystic silence. But all the same she was a powerful ju-ju. Had not her presence brought fat crops and a great plentitude of game; had not her benediction sent his soldiers out to victory, even over the Iliki, who were no mean antagonists? Had they not captured much rich spoil, and last of all, but by no means the least important, had she not diverted Hiji when he came upriver? The king smiled satisfiedly. Assuredly the good old days were come once more, the days when men went out to war when it seemed good to them and ate their captured enemies, as was right and proper; the days before there was a Hiji with his red-capped soldiers to enforce the law of the King-Emperor? It might be, even, Hiji feared to come against a people under the protection of the White Goddess.

Hefela stroked the bulging abdomen which was as much a sign of his kingship as was the cloak of leopard skin and the copper kettle with no bottom that he wore on his head. "O man," he beckoned to a counsellor, "I have a thought in my belly that we should go against the Amsuka. They have much wealth, and though their spears are many we shall surely triumph, for who can fail in battle when he has the White Goddess for a ju-ju?"

LIKE politicians everywhere the councilman had reached his present high position by knowing what to say and when to say it. "O King thy thought is very good," he agreed, "but would it not be well to have the counsel of the goddess in this matter?"

I am but a man, and as a man prone to mistakes, but if the goddess speaks—"Having thus transferred the burden of responsibility from his shoulders to those of the goddess, he lapsed into silence.

Hefela took a draught of mealie beer and wiped his mouth on his arm. "What says the goddess of this business, Hiksoka?" he asked the witch-doctor. "Does she not smile upon our enterprise?"

"How should I know, O King?" the witch-doctor disclaimed responsibility. "The goddess does not chatter like a monkey or a woman, but in the stillness of the night when all is quiet and the very bats sleep she deigns to make her wishes known to me, her servant. Tonight I shall lay this high matter before her, and if she consents we shall make war against the Amsuka."

"That is good talk," Hefela assented, but frowned as the witch-doctor continued.

"Her word cannot be false, O King, but first she must have offerings worthy of her greatness. Twice two times two she must have bars of salt, and half as many more iron rods—"

"*Abee*, the goddess is like all females," interrupted King Hefela. "The more she has the more she wants. Who told thee that she asks these things, O man? Thou has not been into her temple-hut to consult her."

A grin went around the council circle, for Hiksoka the witch-doctor was not popular among the lay officials of the court, and for a moment it seemed his cupidity had overreached itself. But only for a moment. "O King," he answered readily, "last night when I communed with the great one she made it plain that she desired these things. I did not know at the time you proposed to ask her weighty questions, but the gods know everything, and she could look into the future and hear you before you formed the words on your tongue, so she bade her servant demand salt and rods."

The king looked doubtful. He had not thought of making war on the Amsuka till he heard that Hiji had been diverted by the goddess. Was this foreknowledge of his purpose a sign of her great power, or—The look he bent upon Hiksoka was far from amiable. Deep in his mind he meditated the advantages of having a new witch-doctor, one who would not be so greedy in demanding tribute for the goddess. He

would have been surprised if he had known Hiksoka was debating whether it were not about time for a new king. This great mountain of fat had become niggardly of late. Perhaps a new king would be more liberal, and a little skillfully-compounded poison dropped into the royal soup. King and high priest glared at each other, then the stalemate was broken. "The gifts that thou has asked shall be sent to the temple," Hefela promised.

"That is a good word, King. The mighty one will give her answer to thy question ere the moon has set, and in the morning I shall tell her word to thee," the witch-doctor assured his majesty.

A FIRE blazed on the hard-packed earth before the palace-hut of King Hefela, a roaring holocaust that cracked its orange whip-lashes full twenty feet in air and sent out wave on wave of rosy light to make the compound almost bright as day. The heat of it was terrific, and sweat gleamed on the bodies of the king and his counsellors till they shone like freshly varnished statues carved in ebony. In the gloom that waited just beyond the moving edge of the firelight, shadowed till no more than the highlights of their eyes showed, crouched rank on rank of the king's people, gazing in hypnotic silence at the circle of young men who danced before the throne—and at the lone form lashed to a stake at the far side of the fire.

Round and round the dancers circled, the pounded earth beneath their shuffling feet sent up little clouds of dust like smoke, and the great ceremonial tom-toms boomed and throbbed and pulsated like living things in anguish. There was magic—black and evil magic—in the sound. There was insistence and abandon in the hollow booming of the beaten skins, and now Hiksoka the witch-doctor came into the zone of fire-brightness and danced a shuffling rigadon about the fire, about the young men stamping out the measures of the war dance, around the tall man fastened to the stake.

He was gorgeous, but he was not pretty. His face was smeared with yellow pigment and his kilt of monkey fur was appliqued with skins of bright-hued jungle birds. Upon his head he wore a crown of vulture feathers, ornaments of bone and brass and gleaming glass beads shone upon his wrists and arms

and ankles, and round his throat was hung a necklace of bleached human toe—and fingers-bones. Through the septum of his nose was thrust a long white skewer cut from a man's thigh-bone. He flourished a small copper-headed spear like a drum major flourishing his baton as he danced, and all the people drew back at the sight of it, for with that spear he pointed out convicted witches when he "smelt them out," and he who felt the tap of it laid on his shoulder was not long for this world.

"She comes! She comes!" he shrieked. "The great White Goddess of the Khiva! She who giveth victory approaches!" and at his words four temple virgins danced into the firelight, bearing on their shoulders a litter piled high with flowers on which reposed a supine form.

The people hid their faces in the crooks of their bent elbows, for it was death for common men to look upon the goddess, but everyone had a quick glimpse of the form on the litter—a blue-robed woman with fair hair and a white face and slender white arms raised as if in benediction.

Twice around the circle of the firelight marched the virgins with Hiksoka dancing at their head, and finally came to a halt before the man tied to the stake. Hiksoka turned to the goddess, dropped to his knees and bent his feather-crowned head to the ground.

"O Mighty One, O Bringer-of-Sure-Victory, O Eater-up of Other Gods," he invoked, "we give thee this life as an offering." He rose, swung around to face the man lashed to the stake, and drove his light spear deep into the captive's breast. "Speak well of me to all ghosts and devils," he commanded as was customary, withdrew the spear and thrust it hand-deep back into the quivering flesh.

The bound man shook and trembled as if with an electric shock. His neck stretched till the cords showed like taut ropes against his skin, tide on quaking tide of little ripples seemed to flow across his flesh, and from his gaping mouth there issued short, sharp, yelping coughs like those of a hurt animal. Then the blood came rushing in a ruddy torrent from his wounds, his knees went limp and he sagged drunkenly against the ropes that held him to the stake.

"For the honor of the goddess!" screamed

Hiksoka as he waved the red spear in the red firelight.

"For the honor of the goddess!" bellowed back the congregation of the people.

Amid the tumult of the invocation no one heard the bitter sobbing of a woman at the outer fringe of the crowd, Usulka mourning for her newly wedded husband who had that day been selected by Hiksoka as a fitting sacrifice to the White Goddess.

A KNIFE was brought and young men cut the ropes that held the dying man to the stake, but even as they worked there came a pattering of panic-stricken feet and a man rush into the firelight and threw himself face-downward before King Hefela. "He comes! He comes, O King!" he panted.

"O fool," Hefela took a killing-spear from a guardsman, "what meanest thou by this intrusion on the sacrificial ceremonies? Knew ye not that he must die the death who comes into the presence of the goddess unbidden?"

"He comes, O King!" the messenger repeated in a breathless sob. "Hiji and his soldiers march against us!"

"Thou speakest with a crooked tongue, O liar. Hiji has gone up the river in his canoe that moves without paddles—"

"Nay, King, he was not in it. Truly, the canoe went up the river, but Hiji left it down stream, and even now is marching overland to take us by surprise. *Wah*, there will be much killing—"

"And thine shall be the first, O bearer of calamitous tidings!" Hefela thrust with the long killing-spear.

"The thought comes to my belly that we should not wait for Hiji like a bird charmed by the serpent," he said to a counsellor as they dragged away the body of the messenger. "There is but one trail leading from the lands below the joining of the rivers, and that one he will surely take. He cannot wait to cut a way through the jungle."

"Thou sayest it, O King," the counsellor agreed, "but he has soldiers with him, and the sticks that bellow death—"

"Be silent, fool," his majesty cut in. "Do I not know these things? Yet the thought comes to me that before tomorrow's sun has risen Hiji shall be offered as a sacrifice to the White Goddess, and with him all his soldiers."

"*Abee-e-e-ee!*" An awestruck murmur went around the circle of the council. Never in the memory of man had any dared stand against Hiji, for he, like Fate, was inexorable. If you fought him you were killed, and if you ran away he followed till he caught you. It was easier to yield without a struggle. "The barking sticks, O King," the counsellor objected. "Can spearmen stand against their flame-tongued death?"

Hefela struck him on the mouth. "Can the snared lion bite, or a bound man use a barking stick, O thou of little wit?"

"A bound man? Who can put a fetter upon Hiji?"

"*O-ko.* Who can put a fetter on a lion, fool and son and grandson of a line of witless fools? Hear my words and say if they be not good: At such and such a place the trail that Hiji takes makes a sharp bend, and it is very dark there, for tall trees grow on each side and spread their branches overhead. Is it not so?"

"Yea, it is so, O King."

"Then hear me. Hiji will lead his soldiers, as his custom is, and they will keep close at his heels, like the dogs they are. If twenty men with lion nets lurk in the branches overhead and drop them upon Hiji and his soldiers, while fifty more hide in the bush beside the trail and rush forth when the nets have fallen—"

"*Abee—akool!* Thy wisdom is as the wisdom of the crocodile, O King." Delighted laughter swept around the circle of the council like fire in dry grass. "Who has subtlety and wisdom like to thine—"

"Silence!" roared Hefela. "While we sit here talking Hiji comes. Let men who understand the snaring of a lion—with nets and spears—be sent to the place I have named, and with them fifty members of my guard. Let the word of the great King become action. The palaver is ended."

HIJI was pleased as Punch with himself. The strategy he had used was old as war, but it had worked before and there was no reason why it should not work this time. Ten miles below the confluence of the rivers he had nosed the *Wilhelmina* to the shore and landed with ten Houssas. There was a fairly good trail leading to the Khiva capital from the landing point, and with luck he should reach the village shortly after night-

fall. Meantime, he had sent the boat up-river with Sergeant Major Bendigo and the remainder of the troopers to make a secret landing beyond the confluence, circle round and take the village from the rear. Thus he'd have Hefela in a pincers with no choice but to fight or surrender. If he chose to make a stand—Bendigo had two machine guns and Hiji four hand grenades strapped to his belt. It would not be much of a shindy.

Already he could hear the booming of the tom-toms and recognized the rhythm of the war dance. So the boys were up to devilment, eh? He'd give 'em other music to dance to in half an hour. He hummed a snatch of music hall tune:

Around the corner and under the tree
The gallant major said, "Walk with me. . . ."

Plop! Something like a giant spider-web fell on him from the darkness overhead, he struggled futilely as a strong net of grass rope weighted with great blocks of iron-wood enmeshed his arms and legs and held him helpless. With an effort he drew the machete that hung beneath his left armpit and sawed at the ropes. He felt a strand give way beneath the steel, thrust a free hand out, felt a spear-haft thud against his head. After that he felt no more for a long time.

Water sluiced upon him from a wide-mouthed jar brought him to consciousness,



and his first thought was that he had died and his sins had caught up with him, for a monster fire was blazing twenty feet away, and he could see the steam rise from his sodden garments in the heat. Then across the fire he saw the fat face of King Hefela and the grinning, mocking faces of his counsellors and soldiers, and for a moment wished his first impression had been correct. He wasn't dead, yet, but between him and the grave there stretched an interval of tor-

ment that would be a serious competitor of the best hell had to offer.

"I see you, Hiji," Hefela greeted jeeringly. "I see you on the ground with ropes about your arms and legs, and all your soldiers helpless with you. I see you like a lion taken in the toils. A very sorry lion without teeth or claws. I do not think that you will hang me to a tree, Hiji. Indeed, I do not think that you will ever hang anyone again. The White Goddess who gave us victory demands a sacrifice, and you and all your people shall be offered—"

"Thou art a fool and a fool's son and grandson, Hefela," Hiji cut in. "For this night's business thou wilt surely die the death thou and—"

"*Ko-ko!* The goat makes threats against the butcher and the deer speaks boldly to the lion! Thy words are big and brave, O Hiji, but they will be both small and faint when those who skin men have their way with thee. Will your liver still be hard when they have stripped the hide from you to make a drum for my young men to dance to?"

Hiji made no answer. From the jungle to the north he'd heard the faint *spang!* of a rifle. That meant one of two things: Either Bendigo had been ambushed as he was, but, not taken wholly by surprise, was fighting it out, or he had seen a runner hastening to the king with news of his coming, and had shot at him. Pray heaven he'd not missed.

Hefela was relishing his triumph. "You came against us with the sticks that say bang-bang! Hiji, but by the might of the White Goddess we overcame you. Now see how we regard your barking sticks, we who have the protection of the great white ju-ju." He gave a signal and four warriors advanced with the Houssas' rifles in their arms. One after another they threw the weapons into the fire at the king's feet, last of all they tossed in Hiji's Browning and machete and pistol belt—with the grenades still hooked to it.

Hefela sat within six feet of the burnt offerings.

"O foolish one!" cried Hiji. "O silly fool who thinks to set himself against the law of the King-Emperor, know that thy time has come, for now I work my magic on thee. I summon fire from hell to blast thee, Hefela,

and with thee all thy councilmen and soldiers." He contrived a mocking laugh, and, "Speak well of me to all ghosts and devils," he cried as he started to roll from the fire and called to the Houssas to do likewise.

The detonation of the first grenade was like a clap of thunder, and for just an instant Hiji saw Hefela's fat face, its grin wiped off, a look of shocked surprise on it. Then the second grenade burst, and where the king and his council had sat were only empty stools with mangled things that had been men strewn round them. The third grenade had been forced from the fire by the discharge of the first two, and it burst fairly in the midst of the king's guard, and those not struck down by it fell before the deafening blast of the fourth one. Bits of fiery debris hurtled through the air, but after straw-thatched hut took fire, Hefela's palace was a blazing ruin in less than a minute. When Bendigo and his troopers charged into the village there was none to stand against them. The king, Hiksoka, all the royal council and the palace guard had been wiped out as cleanly as a group of chalk-drawn figures may be sponged from a child's slate.

"Lend me your rifle, Sergeant Major," he told Bendigo. "I've some unfinished business to attend to." He rushed among the blazing huts to the big beehive-shaped temple which had somehow escaped destruction and kicked back the curtain at its door.

The temple virgins crouched against the earth floor of the hut in mortal terror, but Hiji paid them no attention. His gaze was centered on the altar where, stretched on a mound of heaped-up flowers, lay a figure draped in a blue robe. "Get up from there, my gel," he ordered harshly. "You've some explainin' to do, and if you can't tell a straight story—my sainted Aunt Samantha's second-best bonnet!"

He stood like a man in a daze, looking down incredulously. The blue eyes staring into his were fixed and lifeless as those of a doll, the pink-and-white face with its set, simpering smile was void of all expression, the long, fair hair that flowed across the narrow shoulders had obviously begun life on a horse, the slim hands stretched up to him were certainly not human. The thing, in fine, was a bisque dummy, a lay-figure, a

form made for shop-window display of feminine frippery. How it came there, by what devious routes it had traveled to the heart of the jungle only heaven and Ramsay MacDonald could say, and neither of them was communicative. "Well—" he took a long breath, swallowed twice, then let it out with a chuckle—"I'll be damned. I surely will!" His chuckle thinned to a high nickering laugh, and rose and rose until he thought he'd never be done laughing. This was the White Goddess of the Khiva, the thing that gave 'em victory! "Thus gods are made," he quoted Kipling, "and whoso makes 'em otherwise shall die." And yet, he sobered in reflection, what was the difference—the real difference—between these savages adoring something made for mercantile display and the cultured Greeks worshipping Pallas Athena? The power of the gods lay not in the gods themselves, but in the fervor of their worshippers. And were Englishmen so very different? Didn't they follow an oblong of red, white and blue bunting through hell and high water—oh, the devil with this philosophic rot. He had work to do.

WITH morning the Khiva crept back to their village. Their curiosity was stronger than their fear, and experience had taught them Hiji did not visit vengeance for rulers' indiscretions on their subjects.

"Hear me, ye people of the Khiva," Hiji ordered. "Because he was a wicked man and disobeyed the law of the King-Emperor your king has been dealt with according to my magic. Hiksoka the witch-doctor has suffered the same fate for his sins, and so have all the councilmen and the king's guards. You are now a tribe without a ruler; it is my command that you straight-


away choose one who shall rule you, and so long as he obeys the law he shall be safe in his high place, but if he leads ye forth to war or suffers ye to eat men I shall come with my soldiers and put him in an even higher one"—he pointed significantly to a tall tree that would do admirably for a gallows—"for I am Hiji, eater-up of little kings, and destroyer of bad gods."

Two Houssas emerged from the temple-hut with the White Goddess on her litter, and at Hiji's signal set her down upon the blackened, pitted earth where the great fire had burned the night before. "Look on this thing," he commanded. "She was no god, but a devil, and I shall deal with her according to her deserts. Her temple shall be burned, and all her offerings with it, and as for her—come ye to the river bank and see what fate befalls a god who leads a people to make war upon their neighbor and defy the law."

METHODICALLY they chopped the tailor's dummy up and dropped the pieces in the river from the *Wilhelmina's* rail, and the Khiva stood in stunned silence as the remnants of the deity who had promised victory and triumph over all their neighbors sank one by one beneath the muddy waters. The head and limbs had been tossed in the river, now only the torso remained.

Hiji punched a hole in it that it might sink more readily, and as he turned it over he saw stenciled on the back beneath the shoulders one word: DEUTSCHLAND.

"Made in Germany, was she?" he muttered. "H'm, some day some bloke's goin' to find a way to turn hell upside down, and when he does I'm bettin' they'll find 'Made in Germany' stamped on its bottom."



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“ . . . Making Time in Any Cargo Job Is Secondary to Making Port in Condition to Go Out Again.”



LAST CHANCE

By B. E. COOK

TAM O' SHANTER tunes played among the stays and ventilators. A fierce westerly wind and sea challenged every thrust of the *Otiskan's* screw.

At times she did well to log three knots and occasional squalls fought her to a standstill on even terms.

Her master was a driver. When 1943 cargoes had been extremely urgent, he risked damage to hull, breakdown and worse to beat time to destinations. Now, unlike older men, he persisted in the drive. He had yet to acquire the feel of a vessel; perhaps he lacked that inexplicable sense of when to quarter the weather, when to heave to or even to turn tail to it for the ship's sake.

Young Captain Boynton should have read the signs. Once he had made port with strained bulkheads, once with slightly distorted frames, but he had docked on another occasion eight full hours ahead of the *Oswegan* and on still another he had beaten the *Onondagan* home by forty-three minutes. Beating his own father forty-three minutes to dock had meant something. Plenty!

For his father, it had indicated far more, however, than a petty defeat.

Cap'n Charles had dined ashore with Captain John, that trip in, selecting a restaurant and a table where nobody else in their calling would be likely to observe the meeting and invent conjectures. Young John needed some timely advice, a warning while there was yet time.

The older man ate with measured deliberation born of his doctor's advice, but John knew nothing about that. To him this was but a stage setting trick; his father was keeping him in suspense for a breezing. Which John endured as long as he could while his lingering strands of war tension quickened his pulse. Then his temper took over and he exploded, "Okay. Let's have it!"

The gray eyes twinkled; John's mother behaved this way whenever she'd heard ill of the *Onondagan*. "What's the matter?"

John brought up the race. Captain Charles had not raced him. They jockeyed through the dessert until John said, "You'd have docked ahead of us if the doc-

tor had cleared you in time. What the hell?"

"Son, I wouldn't drive the *Onondagan* like that for a five hundred bonus."

A crooked smile.

"You've learned exactly half your job as a master. A vessel is a container in the world's business of moving things and she can't be discarded like a carton."

"Who's discarding the *Otiskan*? Not me!"

"Those sprung frames—John, making time in any cargo job is secondary to making port in condition to go out again. You'd better measure yours and your vessel's future in her carefully before she has to drydock and you're beached."

"Hell," John protested, "in the war—"

"No comparison."

"I could get the same out of your *Onondagan*."

A hurt look crossed Cap'n Charles's face and the eyes softened. John recalled it all too vividly tonight and the lump swelled in his throat. At the time, he had called it foolish sentimentality for the *Onondagan*; not so sure tonight with the yellow wireless message in his pocketed fist. That day ashore, Cap'n Charles had been—to him—a relic of bygone days and ways, a pure sentimentalist under the influence of mother's strange love for the ship that shared her man with her.

Tonight it all looked different.

And there was a garnish of irony, too, in that he had taken his father's advice, had heeded it—until tonight when his father himself became the reason for crowding on steam and more steam.

SLOWLY, contemplatively, we went inside to the chart room. Under a light over No. 1000 he spread the wrinkled radiogram and again read: "YOUR FATHER VERY ILL STOP COME DIRECTLY YOU DOCK." His mother's signature must have been shaky . . . at the phone to the chief engineer, he said, "Doing her best, eh? . . . Never mind weather, that's my headache. Drive her. I've got to get to a hospital."

He turned away and his helmsman's ears seemed winged out farther and the smell of damp varnish staler and the mate in a window more alert. This, thought John Boynton, was his realm, his headquarters, his

life. Here others waited on his judgment and his orders.

The peculiar sounds down forward came at daybreak and the Second at a window hesitated to wake the skipper asleep on the settee. But the First came above within five minutes, spoke the captain and the two went directly below. Boynton inspected the break at the bulwarks just forward of the bridge and the blood drained from his face, for he had committed the very sin for which his father had taken him to task. The *Otiskan* threatened to break in two with small openings at either side, not yet serious but condemning.

An oath sprang to John Boynton's blue lips as he and the mate ran for shelter from a boarding sea. Inside, the mate said, "No use, Cap'n, these war-made vessels are no stronger than any others."

"But I have to get—" He did not finish it because the radiogram was, by his own injunction, strictly a secret known only by himself and the operator. Reluctantly he ordered the course altered, still fighting into the heavy seas a-quartering. He must get to that hospital, to his father's bedside; the radio message has been urgent without revealing how ill Cap'n Charles was.

By 10 a.m. only forty-some miles east of Highland Light, he had to yield to the relentless pound and drive of the windstorm. He turned the ship's tail to it, watched the breaks down forward grow slowly and paced the bridge in his rage. Everything militated against him. The wind drove him away from port, his mates showed their resentment against his driving and the chief engineer came growling about hot bearings and undue fuel consumption. "We're already doomed to weeks in drydock," he shouted against the wind. "I for one shall look for another ship."

"What's wrong with this one?" Boynton shouted back at him.

"Nothing—until you took to driving the guts out of her. Deck plates one trip, frames another. Lately we men aft thought you'd come to your damned senses, Cap'n, but you're racing against time—or some other vessel—again?"

As though satisfied that it had delayed the skipper, the wind went down with the sun that night and through a soft rain came another wireless just as the battered *Otiskan*

passed in by Cape Cod. Captain John jammed it into a pocket and warned Sparks to keep his tongue. Going directly to his cabin, he locked the door in anger and fear and impatience. He read the message, only four little words, then flung himself onto the bed.

Captain Charles Boynton was dead.

TWO officials of the Redman Line disagreed on a matter of policy. As the authority in personnel matters, Mr. Snow represented interference. Said he, "True, I do expect these younger captains to make fast runs and quick turnarounds, but that gives this man Boynton no license to force the *Otiskan* into drydock on account of his father's illness."

Mr. Thompson said gently, "If we let Captain John Boynton go, our nearest competitor will certainly hire him. There is some promise of another Cap'n Charles in son John and you know, if anybody does, Snow, that fine masters are not for free."

Snow's too close eyes gleamed and his long nose reddened and the wart on his cheek seemed to swell. Fiercely he threw up his hands and cried, "All right, you're a stockholder looking for dividends. Speed makes money—within reason. What would you suggest we do about Captain Boynton?"

"I've talked it over with others. I'd put John Boynton in command of the *Onondagan*."

"O good Lord! His father's vessel?"

"Where else, Snow?"

"She'll not stand up to his ways, she's twenty years old—and the idol of you men who pulled through the depression on her earnings. Ridiculous!"

"It's his last chance with us," Thompson declared. "Recent—ah, recent events might temper his 'ways'. They'd better."

Craftily Snow suggested, "Aren't you being cruel to that man?"

"Could be. Men of John Boynton's stamp learn the hard way."

Snow made a mental search for some deeper motive and came up with the ship's advanced age. Cap'n Charles had handled her so expertly that it had not become a serious matter until now. Cap'n Charles was a skipper in a million with her. Could it be that in her peculiar assignment of picking up tag ends of cargoes Mr. Thompson

coveted the accumulated insurance on her? Snow did not, of course, risk mention of such a thing, but he'd surely look into it.

Days later, Captain Boynton boarded the *Onondagan* at Staten Island. Her mixed cargo was stowed, her hatches closing. He paused on the bridge, apparently to look her over but actually for another reason; he had an uneasy sensation that inside that wheelhouse something of his father still lingered.

Half an hour later, he sat in the cabin his father had called his second home, on the bed his father had slept in last. He was flabbergasted by several things—the *Otiskan* in drydock, censure for it, arrival too late at hospital or home, this strange and cruel appointment, the prospect of handling a crew too accustomed to this father's softer ways, an old ship—

"I'll handle her and them in my own way," he murmured defiantly, "and she shall not be beaten to dock forty-three minutes by anybody again. Snow wanted to jack me, they say, and Snow gets fat on quick trips."

But the very sound of his declaration seemed alien in this cabin. He sprang off the bed to an open porthole, intense and determined. Yet, he soon faced into the cabin again; something in the atmosphere here challenged him and there stood his father's shaving things in the rack over the washbowl, a necktie he had given the Old Man nearby, a gift pen. Everything pulled at his heart, defied his interpretation of command. He had to get away, get out of here!

In the wheelhouse he sized up the oldstyle wheel, the sounding equipment in its black box, the ancient type of radio-direction apparatus. This after the modern *Otiskan*? But it wasn't things, not the wood and steel here; it was the silent voice, the meticulous hand no longer visible, the way Cap'n Charles had had of emerging from this chart room with one finger against his nose to share a mate's opinion of the day's run or the weather.

Suddenly the stark truth hit him hard: Father is here, I can feel his presence. I don't want it. I'll fit my times just as he fitted his through the lively 1920's and those dour 1930's. John almost shouted it aloud, then Fearon, the aged first mate stood in the open portside doorway, peering into his

eyes, speculating on what Cap'n Charles's son would be, his attitude, his temper, his grief.

Irrked by the silent estimate, John rumbled hoarsely, "What's wanted, mister?"

Fearon couldn't frame words of condolence nor did those severe, black eyes encourage his halting tongue. He took a big breath and hardened his spirit sufficiently to say, "Tug's 'longside in a minute, Cap'n."

"Bosun on the fo'castle head and Second aft?"

"All ready to get the lines," and there was a hurt look in the old eyes.

"Get them. Swing on the stern line." The severity in his own voice revived John's spirits.

Of course he was alone here. Then, however, without realizing it, he turned toward the chart room doorway as though Cap'n Charles were coming out, finger to nose and smiling in the prospect of sailing again.

John Boynton wiped perspiration off his forehead. He'd have to shed this silliness after he got the ship to sea.

CAPTAIN JOHN BOYNTON came wide awake within two hours of turning in. To get to sleep had been difficult enough in this bed ever since he'd come aboard his father's vessel; now he faced a problem—he had read the manifest and in its details had discovered that the ship he had taken over to deliver cargo to Rotterdam had not a full cargo. Snow's policy, he well knew, was to send all ships out well down to their plimsols. Something was wrong. Was it Snow's distrust of him with a full cargo in the older ship? Was the man framing a plausible reason for discharging him from command of this vessel when there was no other in sight for him? Did Mr. Thompson know, by an chance, about this detail?

Captain John got no more rest that night. Impatiently he waited for the hour when Snow would reach his desk, then to send a wireless informing him of the cargo situation. Incidentally, he didn't intend to become the victim of Snow's devious devices for having his own way with masters and mates by subterfuge. A wireless message to him would go into the files, on the record, and air the situation. Hadn't John Boynton

enough on his mind and heart without battling it out with thwarted Snow?

The ship stood east of Nantucket Lightship when her master was interrupted at early breakfast by a wireless order; the *Onondagan* had been ordered to sail, not for Rotterdam yet, but for Boston to pick up more cargo. Captain John did not know it but the order had been missent or mishandled in the confusion of changing commanders.

He took her into Boston fully expecting Snow to come aboard and deliver an edict on "you're not running the *Otiskan* on a single, simple route now" and so on. He waited in vain for the lecture but the lecturer did not arrive. Nor did he send definite sailing orders directly or through the local agent. John waited for them. He sent for them. He telephoned New York and at least learned the status of the *Onondagan*; her function in the foreign trade phase of the owners was to pick up odd remnants of cargoes at different ports.

"Then do we make other calls before crossing?" John demanded.

Mr. Snow was not available, but his next in line of authority replied with some asperity, "Don't you know you've got your full cargo? Clear for Rotterdam."

John headed her out Massachusetts Bay, relieved to get away from contact with landsmen who directed ships without entering a cargo space often enough to comprehend, he said, the difference between the capacity of one ship's hold from another's. He and Fearon both knew that she wasn't yet full down to her marks, but they had their orders, and old Fearon remarked, "Cap'n Charles took these things as they came and sailed just as soon as he could worm orders out of any of those smart fellers to start across the Atlantic."

Meantime, Snow had returned from an important trip west, was apprised of the "nagging by that new skipper in the *Onondagan*" and he looked into it. Far be it from him to put his own oversights on record; he should have informed Boynton of his itinerary at the outset. But he had been too deep in his personal venture of sounding out higher-ups regarding the matter of the ship's present value as insurance when he had to start west on an hour's notice. This morning he sent a radio message to

Boynton to call at Portland for "the rest of the consignment to Germany via Rotterdam."

Captain John hardly knew what to expect next. In a moment of uneasiness over the possible motives of the man who would have discharged him, he wirelessly for confirmation of the order and asked if he was due to sail directly from Portland to Holland.

He received no answer.

Chagrin mixed with uncertainty now were added to his grief and that strange sensation of his father's influence aboard with him. He stood a long time in a wing of the bridge, viewing the future. Must he go on in this ship, collecting tag-end cargoes, receiving confused orders? In this old ship when so many newer vessels were at large in which he could make up crews to his better liking than Fearon and the others with whom his father had dealt so peculiarly?

Fearon stood in the lee of the wheelhouse watching him. He, too, had questions and uncertainties to be answered. He had given some of his best years in the service of Cap'n Charles and today he doubted whether he could accept his son. He could not venture opinions or judgment, he felt, where they were not allowed at least a hearing. Now, however, the orders to load more machinery in Portland forced his hand. He had to speak.

Characteristically, he took a deep breath, swayed to the ship's roll and so went out into the wing. "Cap'n," he declared with an effort, "we're up against a problem in Portland. We have textile machinery in the bottom with general cargo over it and—"

The captain turned sharply. "Not much can come aboard there," he said.

"But stowage. Do we hoist and shift that general stuff to stow this paper-mill heavy stuff low down where it belongs?"

John gave the question a bitter laugh. "No. Too expensive in time lost. Snow himself wouldn't stand for it. Use plenty of dunnage, lash and trig; you've been in this vessel a long time, you ought to know how you've done it."

Fearon, however, was only being circuitous in this matter. He wanted for safety's sake to hoist out and rearrange the entire

cargo; incidentally, he wanted to make a thorough inspection down below because of what he had come upon while loading at Staten Island. As earnestly, he didn't want to appear to find serious fault with the Third, who was to blame for the situation.

But he had trouble finding words to put it over, so he just stood there, not accepting the captain's edict and yet not arguing about it.

"What else is on your mind, mister?" John demanded. "I said stow the mill machinery the best you can."

Fearon's mouth opened and the words simply came out: "I'm tryin' to think just how Cap'n Charles would've—"

His father again! Always these men, this bridge, the wheelhouse, everything reeked with his father's influence. In a rage he thundered, "I'm in command now and the sooner you and all hands get onto yourselves to face it, the better it will be. I say stow instead of lying to a pier for days twice handling old machinery American mills have junked." He turned away abruptly and paced slowly to the other wing, collecting poise, trying to cool down, yet feeling that Cap'n Charles wouldn't have managed it thus.

Head low and hands clasped firmly behind him, he turned and came back—and be cursed if Fearon wasn't still standing there! He walked up close to the man. He made Fearon look him in the eye and almost regretted it, for the same sad, haunting look appeared in those gray depths and the entire face seemed to speak without opening the lips or voicing a sound.

"Well?" John thundered.

"Cap'n, the textile machines're as old as—as me. Sat'rated with oil, so is the cratin' on them." Old Fearon spoke so slowly, with so conscious effort. "If they was to take fire—"

John Boynton could endure it no longer. "Spontaneous combustion, I suppose," he exploded and he laughed in the man's face. "It's too cold down there below the water-line for that," he added with a slight show of patience. Then, relieved no doubt, he spoofed, "Sometime, mister, hang a thermometer overside and see how cold the sea can be in this latitude. Ever been in the tropics?"

Fearon's mouth opened to tell the rest,

the ominous climax of his report, but the words wouldn't come out. Never in all the years had Cap'n Charles belittled his opinions or judgment, never had he scorned. The laugh rang in the old man's ears so he turned and went below, thinking about smoking stevedores at the Staten Island dock in the *Onondagan's* deep hold under number five hatch, smelling again the oily rags and waste, seeing the oil-soaked cratings and the 'careless Third closing his eyes to infringement of rules.

In his room below, Fearon muttered, "Dam' stuff ain't worth shippin' anyhow. Come a fire b'low—We've had too many fires. Why in tarnation is it so hard to speak to Cap'n Charles's own son!"

Meantime, on the bridge, John Boynton began to understand what his father had accomplished with these mates, this crew. They were totally different from any seamen he had ever captained and he scarcely knew how to get the best out of them. Only some fierce experience could bridge the gap, but he neither realized that nor foresaw it in the mate's justified anxiety.

WHAT do you mean, all your money?" the skipper exclaimed while the lower bridge outside his door filled with unlicensed men. "This is Portland, an out port; you've a right to half your money."

Nobody knew it better than the seamen's spokesman but he was here with all hands at his back and the real objective was not money. They wanted an issue with this hard-boiled new skipper, this young feller who didn't know how to use a guy the way his father had. Somebody from behind poked the spokesman and he came to the point. "Cap'n," he said boldly, "us guys don't like the ship no more. We're quittin', see, so we claim our money."

John Boynton couldn't afford this crisis. Report to Snow that the ship was tied up by the desertion of the crew his father had so carefully won over, trained and retained for long months? After that verbal impasse with the old mate? Ten days ago he would have let all hands go and assembled a new crowd to mold it to his sterner style; now he realized the folly of such a move he did not welcome the risk of taking this old, peculiar vessel across the ocean with men unaccustomed to her.

For once in his executive experience he had no immediate solution. Never had he made an appeal to malcontents or needed to. He looked the spokesman up and down. He heard the mounting impatience outside. It was his move. He closed the ship's safe, whirled the dial, rose, looked the men in the face and chose his words as he'd never done before; the influence of Cap'n Charles had begun to seep into him.

Said he slowly and without heat, "You lads have converged on the master of this vessel with an impossible demand that your union would not support. What you're doing is getting me to order you off the ship."

They exchanged triumphant glances; that would mean full pay, they had him on the run. But the skipper surprised them. "Nobody is ordered ashore," he declared in the same cool, slow fashion without temper. "Any who want half their money due can get it after you knock off at five."

Before they could think up a reaction to that move, he stepped among them, closed his door behind him and went on to the mate's room.

Fearon's eyes glittered, but with the approval of an older man for a young officer's resourcefulness. "Cap'n, that was smart—"

"Never mind. Get to the phone on the wharf and report it to the union rooms, then tell them to send replacements just as fast as these men go on the list there. We have to leave ten-thirty on the flood tide tonight."

Captain John felt the best in weeks; no malcontents were going to crowd him.

But the uncertainties came up gradually. What if the union should have no replacements or these men went on to Boston? Then, too, came the inevitable query within himself: How would Cap'n Charles have met the situation? As he weighted it all in the long, succeeding hours of suspense, it grew upon him that his former ways must be tempered—at least in this vessel.

The men turned to after dinner, intensifying the uncertainty as to what they would do. The paper mill machinery came aboard and old Fearon stowed it higher than he liked but cleverly. Captain John left the steward in a conference aft and went forward. He entered his cabin and there sat Snow on the settee.

The little eyes looked up from his cigar.

"Well, Captain?" he remarked without enthusiasm.

Sweat itched its way down over John's ribs at thought of those men leaving while this apparition would be aboard and he decided not to give the story unless Snow, appraised of the mess, brought it up.

"Mr. Fearon's pretty clever at stowing machinery with and on mixed stuff. I see," Snow said. "Looks smart."

"It is smart. Should be, he's spent a lifetime at it, I hear."

Snow waved his smoke aside to look the skipper straight in the black eyes and declared incisively, "It is not. This one is a different and older design from the vessels you've had and she requires a very special compromise between deadweight and measurement cargo. Whose idea was it to load ship this way?"

So this was his reason for coming? Had Fearon informed him in a complaint behind the skipper's back? Or had Snow just happened onto it in coming for a different purpose? John replied firmly, "The calendar decided it, sir."

"Calendar what?"

"Time. Time lost in putting back to Boston. We'd lose days, maybe, and spend too much money if we restowed her."

The cigar end glowed brightly. "Then you ordered it."

"But the *Otiskan* and the *Canandaiguan* allowed that weight at the waterline."

"You've got a different proposition in this vessel."

"Very well, Mr. Snow, your sayso goes. We'll rehandle the cargo."

"Sit down, Captain; there's more than this. Few masters could get out of this vessel the dividends she has paid or the clever management; Cap'n Charles was one man in thousands. Now that he's gone, she's old enough to be—to end her services." He paused reflectively and John Boynton had never seen him in the mood. What lurked behind those dilating eyes? What plan had he for the *Onondagan* and where would it land her present master?

The silence irked John Boynton. He thought of the insurance the vessel had cost and made a wild guess at what she'd bring if lost. By crapes if this scheming scamp intended to propose—.

Snow, watching his eloquent eyes,

chuckled softly. "You think too hard," he said speculatively.

"I don't like what I think."

"Captain Boynton, you don't begin to know the *Onondagan's* rating among the top-flight men in the Redman Line. I know, you think your father was too sentimental about her but those who own her made him that way years ago. Why, Mr. Phineas Redman held the company together with this ship and her earnings when the ocean became almost bare of shipping and Redman stock reached down to a few cents on the dollar.

"So this vessel is a symbol with men like Mr. Thompson. That is part of his reason for putting you aboard her, expecting you to develop into a second Cap'n Charles in her. I can guess your thoughts a moment ago. Huh! Man, you are expected to bring this ship through hell, if need be. She's had two or three almost disastrous fires in her for some reason nobody ever managed to understand and your father brought her through them. In fact she's been equipped with extra pump capacity."

John recalled what the mate had said to him on the bridge about the cargo. Could it be that Fearon had had this in mind then? He wished now that he had listened to the mate instead of laughing at him.

Snow resumed unhurriedly. "Frankly, Boynton, I had no place for you after you landed the *Otiskan* in drydock; certainly I'd never have considered you for this one. But somebody else did, and why? He said, in effect, that this would be your last chance with us, that you learn the hard way. So he made me put you directly into your father's place, grief and associations and all."

John Boynton bit his lips. "So I'm to become a second somebody else, not myself," he said and it was the old challenge that his father had launched at him in the restaurant in a gentler fashion.

SNOW'S eyes narrowed, his thin lips tightened across his teeth. "John Boynton," said he, "whether you tone down or don't, you're to preserve this ship, this company symbol of survival, at any cost. If you should get her into a blow or fire or anything else, you're to save her; if she lost both masts, her funnel, even her wheelhouse, and the hull still remained, get her in, in some—

where where she can be found and towed and kept afloat." He leaned away forward and demanded intensely, "Do you comprehend?"

John did.

"You'd better!"

Snow rose abruptly, traveling bag in hand; he had completed his mission.

"Then," said John thoughtfully, "I'll have the cargo restowed in her."

Snow's eyes narrowed unpleasantly again. He snapped his fingers. "No you won't. What you've done is done, young man. I'm the one who keeps the clock and calendar on these ships and my business is dividends. Time is money and my orders to you are: Sail before you're fired for losing time. When are you due to leave here?"

"Flood tide tonight," John admitted and the crew question rose to haunt his committal.

"Right!" Snow barked at him and went ashore.

Came darkness and no sailors. The chief reported two stokers and one oiler short. Nor could the skipper raise the union or any shipping offices at that hour. He and the chief went ashore after eight on an aimless hunt for the crew—and the men all returned while they searched theatres, bars and corners uptown. When the two returned and checked bunks occupied, the chief said, "Well, I s'pose they saved their faces and had their revenge."

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

"No? You're the skipper who beat this one to dock by twenty-three minutes or aren't you? And you're—or have been—a bit different from Cap'n Charles. Never mind, Cap'n; get into a jam and you'll find them okay."

THE *Onondagan* left Portland with orders to stop in at Halifax for several carboys of acid to be stowed forward on deck. As soon as the mate had everything snuggled down in sea fashion to suit him, Captain Boynton could wait no longer to draw from him the rest of the story. He sent for him.

"No use reportin' it now, Cap'n," Fearon said.

"Let's have it."

"Well, loadin' that cotton machinery at Staten Island I went below in number five. I caught stevedores smokin'. Two butts

smoked where a couple had throwed them seeing me come. The hold reeked of machine oil and oily waste and rags. I had 'em collect the stuff and heave it overside but there must've been plenty more down there they couldn't git to by then. Me, I'm afeared o' fires ever since—well, Cap'n, we've had three awful fires inside a few years and I can't account f'r 'em yet. Maybe her hold's a perfect funnel or maybe the dead air down below makes for spontaneous combustion."

"So you fear a fourth fire," John said and this time he didn't laugh.

"Aye, I do. And they all start in that five hold next to the fireroom as though maybe the bulkhead gets too warm. But the engineers won't listen to that theory, so I dunno."

"Better go below there often, mister, and watch it yourself. But I don't anticipate fire; what'll keep us on our toes is getting this crazy cargo across the Atlantic to Rotterdam—and with acid on deck for'd. Look at that Fundy fog come rolling in on us!"

That night the accumulation of ugly incidents caught up with Cap'n Charles's son. Loss of his father, of command of the *Otiskan*; hectic ducking into port after port for cargoes; crew troubles over with but not forgotten; Fearon's talk about the ship's propensity for fires; Snow's long dissertation on what was expected of the *Onondagan's* commanders, climaxing with a sharp order to sail regardless of the cargo's condition—it all now culminated in reaction.

The captain paced outside and the fog closed around him, cold and dank. He drank black coffee without relief, he sent mates into both wings of the bridge. But the throb in his temples forbade his listening. Outside, therefore, he was of little value so he sent Fearon out, ordered the Third to snatch some sleep and himself sank to the settee inside, troubled by dizziness and worry. Why in hell hadn't he taken a month ashore to comfort his mother and get a new grip on himself?

While he lay there waiting for a fresh shot of coffee, his thoughts moved again to Cap'n Charles and it really seemed to him then that his father must emerge from the chart room with one finger to his nose, poised to speak. And what would the Old Man have said tonight? Trying to answer

the question, he fell sound asleep and his deep chest rose and subsided so impressively that it startled one mate after the other as they looked in on the course and around for him.

"FIRE! I knew it!" Fearon came in stumbling, roused the captain and pointed out an after window to a round column of smoke rising off number five hatch.

"Get aft," John ordered curtly and when the mate had gone he murmured, "The fool, he left that booby hatch open like a stove-pipe." He sounded the alarm.

What the chief had promised about crew efficiency came to life. They had hose lines out and water pouring down the hatch before its cover was halfway up. A jet mass of oily smoke reached up into the fog and hung there as the ship lost way. Cargo lamps flashed on and their light came and went among the dark swirls beneath which the ship rocked and rolled as though trying to be rid of it all.

Five streams played into the fire and blackness without appreciable effort and fir dunnage crackled like fireplace logs on Christmas Eve. The flames must have gained a fearsome start before the smoke had been discovered.

Captain John shouted an order. The thick fog seemed to muffle his voice, but men heard and ran forward past the end of the bridge and on. Soon they came dragging the big deck hose. Somebody overanxious turned it on before anybody believed it could be coupled yet. Sixty pounds of white snake came to sudden life and kicked one man all the way from the top of number three to the bulwarks.

Captain John saw it coming and took a hand, yanked the string of power to the fire and aimed it in until the upended man came back into action. Then he went on the hot coaming and looked in. The entire cargo in that hold seemed to be burning fiercely; nothing could save it. But the fire must be checked to save plates already hot underneath a deck steaming underfoot; it must be checked before it heated the forward bulkhead enough to set the next hold's contents ablaze.

They played two smaller lines on that bulkhead, the others directly into the smoke and smoke-concealed cargo. Already the

volume and weight of water going into the ship was a growing factor to be reckoned with if the fire should persist. Never had the skipper seen such a fire below decks, such perfect draught, such persistent and uncheckable heat.

When a blast of torrid smoke caught him too close to the coaming, he fell back for breath, rubbed singed eyebrows, rubbed at water-filled eyes and saw with stark alarm what this could mean to him, to the ship and to those who held her in the peculiar esteem which Snow had emphasized. Gasping in the outer rim of smoke and heat and falling bits of wood, he faced the worst crisis he had ever encountered. Before boarding this vessel he had often planned what he'd do in just such an extreme; tonight his former plans were gone, erased by that speech Snow had made to him at dock. Neither he nor his crew could abandon the old *Onondagan* tonight if they should decide it was the thing to do. She had to be saved or else—

Suddenly the men shouted. Flames showed in the smoke above the hatch. Balls of fire came up, were lost in the black column, then reappeared over the ship, bursting and expanding. The fire was not coming under control at all, it was gaining.

The captain shouted to Fearon, "Get out all the hose lines for'd. Couple them end to end for length and let her have it, all we can muster."

Half an hour later, the volume of water going down that hatch bespoke the extra pump capacity Cap'n Charles had managed to have installed. This should gain the mastery. Old Fearon came across with his arm fending the heat from his blackened face and weeping eyes to say in a strained voice, "Five bells just rung. Been at it a long time, Cap'n, but we're lickin' it now. We'll save the rest o' the cargo. The ship's comin' through this one like she did the others."

Captain John scarcely heard him; he was one jump ahead of the man. Long hours ago, it seemed to him now, he had directed the fight, not so much to save the stuff in number five but to prevent that in four from going up. He left the mate standing there in the sooty fog, looking fore and aft over the ship with his usual devotion. John did his looking overside at the diminishing

freeboard and what he saw gave him no such feelings. For water now added to the threat to the ship. She was pumping herself full.

But he couldn't stand there off guard for long; back he went to keep his vigil over the adjoining hatch—and he came none too soon. The cover was lifting, straining at the battens. A fire must be raging underneath it, smoke and steam had piled up pressure and hatch covers are not always designed to anything like the weight they can sustain from above.

The skipper singled out the bosun and pointed to it. "Get your mall and work fast!" he shouted above the hiss of water, the dull roar of fire and the shuffling of hot feet.

Wedges flew. The battens came up and away. The cover gaped open enough to release a flat sheet of smoke that aimed toward the large column and joined it in the fog above. Fearon croaked, "Stand clear!" and the cover was hoisted. The cargo in number four was burning all the way up its after side.

Captain John had to compromise on hose lines. He ordered half the water into four and went to the rail again. Looking over and down her side he asked himself: how could water poured only into these two hatches load her so deeply? True, they were by far the largest hold in her, but—he looked aft and saw the chief coming off the poop.

Said the chief, "That's the worst one yet. Holy heavens and St. Peter!"

John asked him the question puzzling him and directed his gaze overside.

"Cap'n, that has been the sixty-four dollar question aboard here for many months; now it's you who gets the answer and it isn't a nice one. Cap'n Charles fought like a martyr for more pump capacity and he finally got it, but I fought for suck-pump capacity to match it and I didn't. Snow blocked me on the grounds he'd spent enough money on an old ship for the rare chance of another fire in her."

John pounded his fist on the guard rail and muttered, "Snow's hand again. That gump will be my ruin."

"Which is readily possible," the chief remarked inferentially.

"Hell, man," John growled, "If we ever

do get both fires under control we shall have the added danger of swamping her. I've got to keep her afloat."

The chief thought: you better had if I know the Redman Line grandees, but he said aloud, "What can you or anybody else do? It's either water or fire for her," and he looked up and aft to the lifeboats.

The skipper gripped his hairy arm on the rail and caught his eye in the uncertain half-light. "Listen, chief, forget the boats. We're not going to take to boats. That's final."

The chief looked away to ask ruminatively, "Oh no? Then by gawd you're going to get the best of those fires mighty soon and quit pouring it into her. What have you in mind for an answer to that?"

Captain John turned away to note whatever progress the fighters made. What he saw gave no encouragement; the chief's attitude was warranted. But no Boynton could be guilty of losing this vessel; the very thought of it brought back the throb in his temples. He'd never live it down.

But he had no answer for the chief. Why, he could not have said at the time, but he moved forward, pondering, groping for a solution, and through force of habit as much as anything else, he went above. Up there he at least could think.

ENTERING the wheelhouse he saw the helmsman still standing by; the Third must be away outside in a wing. Presently the helmsman turned, prompted by the abrupt silence behind him and he saw the skipper's eyes fixed on the chart room entrance at the far side. The man appeared to be frozen in thought. The lad faced forward to his wheel again with a prickly feeling up his back.

John Boynton was indeed frozen in that stance but not in thought alone, for all his past ideas about ghosts and spirits and mystery stories were belied in the sound that came to his ears—or was it pure imagination? He could have sworn that he heard Cap'n Charles, not in that chart room entrance, but beyond it and inside, and the kindly voice of former days said, "Old Harbor down home . . ." John did not get any more than that.

But that much shook him. During the tense incidents he had forgotten all this "silliness"; now it struck him in the hardest

moment of his life. He had to put it aside, he had to conjure some way to save this ship. No, he had not wirelessly Snow of her predicament and be damned if he would until the situation became impossible.

Impossible? He shrugged his broad shoulders and forced himself to enter that chart room whence the voice (?) had come. He went in—and of course nobody was there. From habit he rested his elbows on the chart, still trying to brush aside the strange experience, still trying to concentrate on his awful problem. Naturally he switched on the light swinging before his nose, closed his bloodshot eyes against its painful glare and drew a dirty hand across his dirtier forehead.

Then he pinched his eyes and the grit got into them. Tears came, ran down his cheeks and he heard them splat onto the chart. He dabbed his eyes with a handkerchief and looked down to blot them off the chart. One blotted away and revealed "Drake Island" and he recognized his father's boyhood home—and his own haunts when he murmured aimlessly, "Old Harbor."

That was precisely what the imagined voice of his father had seemed to say; he looked at the spot on the chart, wondering what reason the Second might have had for getting this one out. But the Second was helping the Third on his pilotage . . . Old Harbor . . . Crow Island in there and Fir Point across from Bernard's Point . . .

The idea struck him suddenly and he located the *Onondagan's* estimated position as of tonight, now, this hour. Soon, with the dividers, he walked off the sailing distance to Mt. Desert Rock and on in. "Between Crow Island and Bernard's Point, ten foot at low water slack . . . firm blue clay, rock ledge like a cradle under for'd with clay just beyond for the hooks . . ." He reached for the tide book and by and by said aloud, "She might make it in time!"

The exclamation startled the helmsman out in the wheelhouse. He was again startled when the skipper came out crying, "Nor'-west by west and nothing to the north'ard." At the phone as quickly, Captain John outlined his plan to the chief who scarcely believed his own ears, asking, "Think she'll get that far before her decks go under? I mean in time?"

"She better had. That's up to you."

A DAY'S old fog scaled off Old Harbor and the surrounding shore. A most unlikely, huge visitor rounded Fir Point off the black can buoy and crept in where only lobster boats and occasional yachts ever appeared. Startled gulls shrilled their warning and flapped off Crow's Island's half dozen spruces over the cadet blue shoals and azure depths of the snug cove. The half sunken ship turned slowly, cautiously around the far side of the tiny island and lined up for a sitdown berth between it and the nearby shore along Bernard's Point.

Whatever the *Onondagan's* crew had thought of Cap'n Charles's successor, they received a new estimate of him today, as Fearon said openly to them, "He's doin' next to the impossible when he fetches her through that thick fog and finds the Rock and sets her down in here where she can be saved. All these young skippers ain't pilots, y'know."

With infinite care John himself took her into that narrow slot, ordered the engine stopped, eased her along on momentum and caught her in time to poke her bows just beyond the granite bottom to a wide and deep hole where the hooks could bit in and hold.

Water sluiced on her decks, discharged water boiled along her sides and the lingering fire in number four spiralled a brown-black shaft of smudge up into the soft air. The anchors went out into the blue; one held, she swung away and the other repeated. Back she came and the chains pulled taut on short scope. When the tide would go out, she'd sit there.

Captain John had established himself as master of ship and crew. The old *Onondagan* would survive and he should have rejoiced inwardly, but the wireless he had sent to Snow had brought no answer. Presumably Snow's resentment over the fire overrated the saving of the vessel.

At dusk, a plane from Rock Harbor on the main came in low and a small boat brought two men from it to the settling ship. Mr. Thompson and the surveyor went all over her, judging the damage and her condition in so strange a berth. John Boynton watched them come and go from a wheelhouse window and he knew that both his future and the *Onondagan's* hung upon their decision.

All that night they kept him in suspense, waiting to see how she'd ride the tides. All night John Boynton watched her and her pumps and the dying fires and the lights of the village where he could name every home and the lobster boats in which he'd spent much of his boyhood—after days and nights without rest worth naming, he could not compose himself until he got the verdict.

IN mid-morning, Mr. Thompson led the way to the wheelhouse, came upon Cap'n Charles's son looking at the chart room entrance with a puzzled expression and little dreamed of what it had meant to him and this venture.

"Well, you've done it," Thompson declared judiciously.

John's weary eyes widened perceptibly; he

was condemned, the ship was too; he had saved her, he had failed. Which would it be, he wondered, but his tongue wouldn't frame a question. He stood there looking from one to the other.

"She'll come off here herself and the chief believes he can pump all that might come in on the way to Boston," Thompson said, turning to the surveyor for the nod.

"Drydock. Again." The words came out of John's mouth without volition.

Thompson laughed at him. "Never mind," he said. "You have done as well as Cap'n Charles himself could have done. Frankly, I doubt that he'd have thought of bringing her away in here."

The young skipper looked toward the chart room entrance again and said in a slow, meditative way, "I rather guess he did, sir."

Introducing to SHORT STORIES' readers a new detective of devious methods—Buchanan Sanborn—whose first case dealt with a young lady who was destined for mysterious disappearance . . . Part I

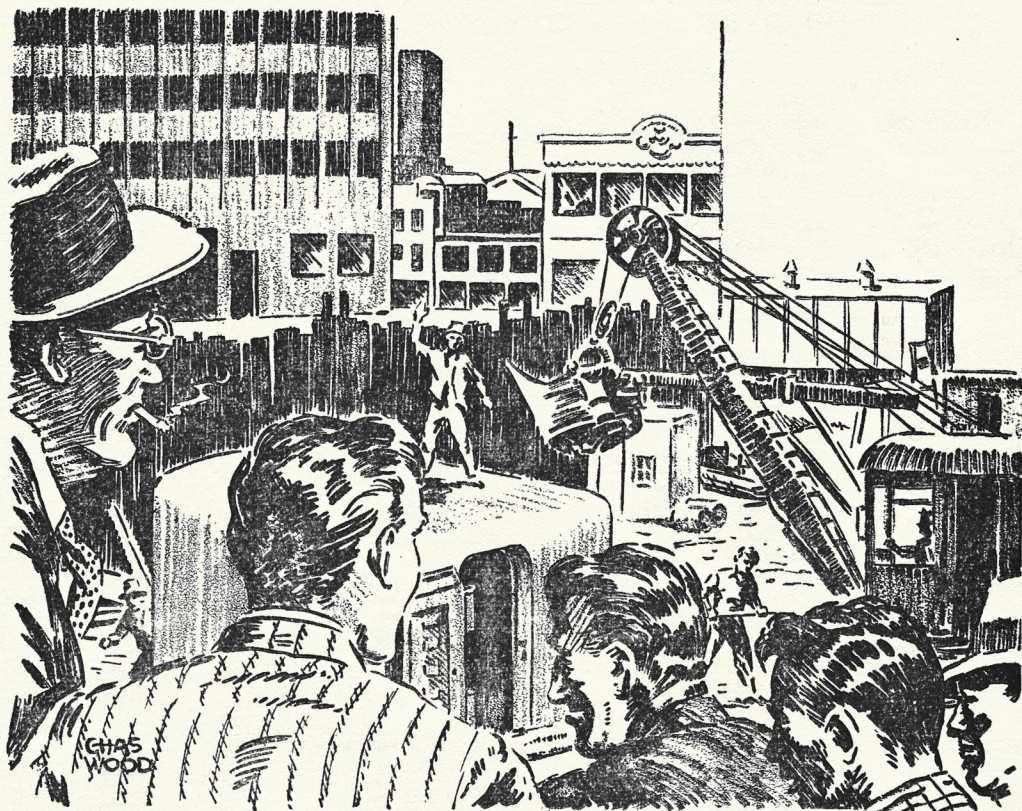
CROOKED SHADOWS

By
Gordon Ray Young



In the next SHORT STORIES

*The Contract Distinctly Said Everything Was to Be
Cleared from the Site*



NO VAULT OF OURS

By ROBERT H. LEITFRED

THE desk phone rings, and it's my secretary. She tells me that there is a Mr. O'Kelly waiting to see me. I don't know any Mr. O'Kelly, and I tell her so, and I ask what Mr. O'Kelly's line is. She says he won't tell her, but he's got the biggest suitcase she has ever seen in her life.

A big suitcase? That ends any possible doubt. He is a salesman, probably for vacuum cleaners, and my business don't need any vacuum cleaners, at least not the kind he's probably selling.

"Send him away!" I tell her firmly.

Which she does, and I start rechecking some cost sheets on the last job. They look

good. The firm is making money. There's a contract on my desk—the razing of an old bank building on Seventh Street. A flat twenty-five thousand for demolishing it and trucking away the pieces. It shouldn't give our wreckers any trouble.

I leave the office and go down to Seventh Street. One of the bank executives is there superintending the removal of desks and adding machines. After I tell him I'm Dave Riordan, President of the Mammoth Wrecking Company which has the contract for demolishing the building, he tells me that the bank equipment would be all out by the end of the day and that I could start operations in the morning.

I examine the building inside and out. Plastered brick walls reinforced with I-beam girders. The walls won't cause no trouble. The building is rectangular in shape and stands on a corner. There is an alley at the back, and a fairly quiet cross street for trucks to get in and out. Above the street level are two floors of office space. There are no elevators. Steps lead to the upper floors from the outside. One other item is in my contract—the bank vault. It will have to come out in pieces. That'll be routine for our acetylene torches. I figure the job will pay good dividends.

On my way back to the office I stop at the yard where our equipment is stored. Gus Spivak, my foreman, is in the timekeeper's office and I give him the go-ahead sign which means getting permits and contacting the utility companies, water, gas, light and the installation of a phone.

It's time for lunch after I finish these details. When I get back to the office my secretary is a little distressed.

"Mr. Riordan, Senior," she tells me, "phoned from Miami. 'He was anxious to know if the Mammoth Wrecking Company was still solvent.'"

Riordan, Senior, is my old man. The wrecking company was his baby until a week ago when he turned it over to me. "Son," he told me, "you've been away fighting a war. Now it's your turn to fight the world. And that means Diesel trucks, labor, building contractors and a million city ordinances. Your old man is going to Miami and lay in the sand. Instruct your accountant to send me a check for five hundred a week till times get better." And off he goes.

So here I am, taking over where the old man left off. My first contract—a razing job on an old bank building with ten days to complete it. I figure I am a smart operator. I will show the old man new angles to this wrecking business.

EVERYTHING goes smooth at the beginning. We fence off the building from the sidewalk, construct scaffolding, and build the chutes to slide mortar, brick and other debris into our trucks.

There is something about knocking down walls that gets into your blood. I can't stand it till I get hold of a sledge and start swinging it. The chutes rumble and shake. Trucks

roll away full and come back empty for more. You can just see those walls come down by the minute.

I don't get back to my office till late that first day. My secretary has gone home, but she leaves me a note saying that Mr. O'Kelly has made his usual call and would come again, that she is wholly ignorant of what he does for a living, and that he still carries his enormous suitcase.

And that is that. I have no interest in Mr. O'Kelly. My only interest is in wrecking a certain building. Early the next morning I am on the job again. The man who has the contract to put up a new building on the site comes down to check on how we are doing.

He does not seem impressed with what has already been done, and that don't excite me. His contract is his, and mine is mine. And I am doing all right and feeling all right till he observes, like he was glad it was there, that there is a penalty clause in my contract.

"Of course, Riordan, it stands to reason you know what you're doing. A thousand dollars a day penalty for every day you are here beyond the time limit set in the contract can run into big money. Our firm was awarded the contract for the new building on condition that we start and finish at a specified time."

"So what," I ask him, "am I supposed to do? I know all about the penalty clause. We never take contracts which don't pay off on the right side of the ledger. This one is no exception."

He's quiet for a few minutes as he examines the end of a cigar he's been chewing. But I can see he's got something on his mind.

"That vault, Riordan," he says, sinister like. "Have you given any thought to—well, it's got to come out, and it'll never come out in one piece. That's been my experience."

"I know it's got to come out," I tell him, either in one piece or a dozen. It's all the same to us. We've knocked down enough buildings, bridges, and——"

"But a vault," he cuts in, "is something different."

"All in a day's work," I assured him. "Get your surveying crew down here on the specified day and you will find the place as

level as a desert. I'll even have it swept with brooms."

"You're young," he accused me. "And I suppose you've got to learn the hard way like your old man."

But the chutes are making so much noise I can't listen any more. I circulate among my wreckers. Plaster dust smells good in my nose. The inside of the building is open now to the sky and the crew have rigged a boom and tackle to handle the steel girders after the cutting torches have sliced through them.

I take a casual look at the vault again. Except for its massive door which the bank people have closed, but not locked, I can't see any part of it which is not covered with cement. But it still don't bother me. Cement cracks easy.

ON THE fourth day I figure I can leave the wrecking part of the job to Gus Spivak and catch up on my office work. There's two new contracts I've got to figure and submit bids on.

I'm in the midst of this when the phone rings. It's my secretary. I sense by her tone that she is bored. She starts to explain that a Mr. Kelly is in the front office, and I have to cut her short.

"No," I tell her. "You explain to Mr. O'Kelly that I admire his persistence and technique in salesmanship, but that we already have four vacuum cleaners cluttering up the office. Tell him anything. But get rid of him. If it'll help any, have him leave his card."

With O'Kelly disposed of I go back to figuring thickness of walls, type of construction, size, location, hauling distances, and pretty soon I'm lost in figures and percentages.

During the afternoon the old man calls me long distance from Miami and blisters the insulation on the telephone wires for not keeping him informed on what's going on. I tell him to go back to his sand pile, and if the business is going to founder on the rocks of inept management, I'm the guy who is going to furnish the rocks. That seems to satisfy him so we part good friends.

By six o'clock all the force has gone home and I'm alone at my desk. The door opens and my foreman, Gus Spivak, comes in. I grin amiably for that's the way I feel.

"Well, Gus," I announce. "Four days of the ten are gone, and we've reached the street level. I'd say we were doing all right. It strikes me that even the old man couldn't have done better."

Gus helps himself to a cigar from a box on my desk. His rugged face don't show whether he's pleased or worried. He examines the cigar carefully to make certain no cheap cigars have been substituted, bites off the end, spits it out and says, "We did all right, Dave, up to two o'clock this afternoon."

Coming like this from Gus I knew something has gone wrong with our schedule, but I can't for the moment quite figure what it is.

"You mean, Gus, that maybe we won't make the time limit?"

"By about two weeks. Maybe a month. I don't know for sure."

Since I'm a guy who don't waste words I say right off, "Whadda you mean—two weeks or a month? You're crazy!"

"It's that vault, Dave. How come you signed a contract to destroy it without first checking with the people who installed it? We reached it at two o'clock. From then on till quitting time we gave it the works."

I try to pass this news off with a grin. "Tough, huh?"

"We used a dozen of our best hard-rock drills and enough torches to slice a hundred girders. All we kicked up was a shovel of dust."

"That's bad, Gus. Maybe the crews are getting tired."

Gus shakes his head. "Nope. I simply haven't got men who can chop up a vault that's wrapped in steel and concrete."

"It's no vault of ours," I wisecrack. This goes over Gus Spivak's head and misses his ears by a yard. Gus has no sense of humor. He's either boiling mad over something, or he isn't. I never know. "Cheer up," I counsel. "We still have six days. That should be plenty. It's got to be, or we pay a penalty of a thousand bucks a day for each day beyond the stipulated time limit. Figure it out."

"I can't figure that kind of a problem," says Gus. "All I know is that if we can't do better tomorrow than we did today, we'll be chipping away at that vault for at least another month."

Leaving me with that worry to chew on he goes home.

By noon of the fifth day all the walls are down and we have a clear space around the vault. I put crews with pneumatic drills on three sides of the concrete envelope that surrounds the vault's steel walls.

The drills start pounding. After an hour of this three-prong attack I am convinced that the vault problem is getting out of control, and understand better why Gus Spivak is in no mood to laugh at any wisecrack I might pull. The drills are not biting in like they should. The operators are being pushed around. We are not even getting started on the vault's destruction.

I examine the drill holes. They are mere depressions shiny with metallic dust. I don't like the looks of these depressions. I call to Gus Spivak. "Take over, Gus," I order, "I'm making a call on the president of the bank who had this vault installed."

After a long wait in an outer office I get to see the great man.

"Listen," I hurry to explain. "I am running into a little difficulty with the vault."

THE president is a paunchy man with white hair and pink cheeks. He looks like he has eaten well all his life. His clothes are immaculate while mine are covered with dust. I am not embarrassed, however. I'm only half-sick with a gnawing worry.

He laughs pleasantly as if I am asking for a loan which he is planning to turn down. "Ah," he nods. "A little difficulty. Of course, of course. That's quite natural."

"But it's not natural. That's why I'm here."

"I see. Quite so. I think I understand what you mean by difficulty, Mr. Riordan. Our bank, during the past twenty-five years, went through a trying period. I refer, of course, to robberies. Quite sensational robberies, if I may be permitted to observe. So much so in fact that after our vault had been blown open on three separate occasions, our board of directors felt that something must be done."

I tell myself that this is going to take time and that I mustn't try to rush this guy. "Naturally," I manage to say.

"Something *was* done, Mr. Riordan. We purchased the most modern, burglar-proof vault then available, and at the vault com-

pany's suggestion had it installed by a company who specialized in vault placement."

"Could you furnish me with a copy of the plans this company used in the installation?"

"Unfortunately, we cannot. The company asked for the return of all plans in our possession after the conclusion of their contract. Sort of a trade secret, perhaps." He smiles benevolently and disposes of me in one more sentence. "The firm has since gone out of business."

I STAGGER to the street. The company *would* be out of business. Well, there's other wrecking companies which might have ideas. I turn this treasonable thought down flat. The Mammouth Company never asks questions from its competitors—a matter of prestige. But we aren't above planting a few of our men on their payroll to keep abreast with any new techniques which haven't as yet come to our attention.

When I get back to the spot of our wrecking operations, I find more kibitzers than usual at fence openings. The rattle of the pneumatics is terrific, but not terrific enough to drown out their boisterous advice.

"Call out the artillery brigade!"

"Hey! How about moving in a pile driver?"

As I pass through the gate someone yells, "Here comes the big-shot professor with an atom bomb!"

Gus Spivak, working with a crowbar at the top of the vault dislodges a chunk of concrete the size of a coffee cup. A wild cheer goes up from the customers at the fence.

"Nuts!" growls my foreman.

I climb up beside him carrying the biggest sledge I can find. "Gimme room, Gus. I am going to crack the concrete at the front edge." Gus moves away. I swing the sledge a couple of times around my head to build up speed, then bring her down hard. Its hickory shaft stings my hands. I slam it down again in the same spot. A puff of lime dust spouts up. Now I am really worried.

"Get a chisel, Gus, and freeze on to it."

Gus gets a newly sharpened chisel and grips it with a pair of tongs. I go to work. The end I'm pounding on begins to flatten out and curl over the edge, then the chisel

slips from the tong's grip and clanks to the floor below.

A throaty cheer greets this display of wasted energy. This is something I am used to, so I don't get riled. I drops to my knees and examine the hole I have started. Out of the hole I pick a metal chip and hand it to Gus.

He examines it. And his eyes grow sad. "Openhearth steel, Dave."

With a pencil I mark off a square. "Have one of your men chip off the concrete with a diamond drill down to the metal. Then we'll see what can be done with a torch." That's all I can suggest at the moment so I climb down.

The ovation I get is tremendous. I grin and wave. Since it is impossible to work on a wrecking job without a crowd watching and commenting on every operation, I prefer they be friendly rather than hostile.

We work till quitting time. So far, we're liked.

We haven't made a single crack in the vault's outer defenses. I go back to our main office. For a time I think maybe I'd better call Riordan, Senior, from his sand pile in Miami. But then, I got some pride left and I decide not to worry the old buzzard.

WHEN I enter our outer office I see a man sitting in a chair near my secretary's desk. He isn't big like I am, just tall and rangy. He has long arms and hands. In fact, everything about him is long including his face. I have a hunch.

"You O'Kelly?"

He uncoils from the chair and stands up. His hand comes out like a piston. Mine meets it. For a moment my hand feels like it is being run over by the drivers of a locomotive.

"That's me, Riordan." His voice rumbles like a Diesel engine. "I'm O'Kelly. Dennis O'Kelly—the honest yeggman."

"That's fine," I tell him. "I am also honest, but I'm busy now, O'Kelly, and can't spare you much time. Let me see. Your line is—?"

"I left my card—"

"Here it is," says my secretary. She hands it to me.

I look at the piece of cardboard and can feel my eyes starting to pop out. Just then

Gus Spivak barges through the hall door.

"Hi-yah, Spivak," rumbles O'Kelly.

Gus tosses him a mean look and turns to me. "This guy has been hanging around the job ever since we started. He keeps telling me we are going at it the wrong way. I'm sick of his face. Kick him out."

I head for my private office. "Come in here, both of you. Either this firm learns to arbitrate or it goes out of business."

They follow me in. The firm has two safes, a big, modern one, and a smaller and more ancient edition which the old man had when he first started the business. It is the big one I go to. I open it and remove a square bottle of Ozark Dew and place it on my desk. The meanness goes out of Gus Spivak's eyes. O'Kelly is moistening his lips.

FROM the medicine cabinet I take out three paper cups. Spivak reaches for a cup, and O'Kelly's long fingers clamp around the Ozark Dew. I think for a moment that war will break out in the open.

O'Kelly grins and loosens his hold. I take over and fill three cups. After the third refill Gus Spivak relaxes and the tension eases. Gus helps himself to a cigar and I figure he is open to suggestions which is not often.

"Gus," I explain. "Mr. O'Kelly is our friend. I have treated him like dirt for almost a week. I thought he was a vacuum cleaner salesman. Naturally, he is resentful."

"Resentful, me eye," says O'Kelly. "I am burned up."

I nod like I was sorry. The technique I am using is not my own. I am borrowing from my old man beginning with the Ozark Dew. O'Kelly's card is on my desk. I read it again and turn to Spivak.

"Gus," I tell him. "This is Mr. O'Kelly's business card. I will read it for you. It says: DENNIS O'KELLY. SAFE-CRACKING. DEMOLITION. NO JOB TOO TOUGH."

"Okay," says Gus. "For two bucks I could have a hundred of the same kind of cards printed and no questions asked."

Gus has something there. I turn to O'Kelly for his rebuttal. He is contemplating the dregs in his paper cup. After a time he gets out of his chair and looks around like he was coming up for air. But

I can see that he is mentally casing the joint, the smaller of the two safes in particular.

His eyes have a purposeful glint in them as he crosses the room to the little safe. He twists its handle and opens the door. He closes it and spins the dial. When he tries the door again it is locked.

"Is this safe valuable to your company?" he asks.

Long ago the old man had told me to get rid of it. And besides I have three cups of Dew inside me and I am glowing with hospitality and recklessness. So I inform him the sky's the limit.

"I just wanted to be sure, Riordan. This forearm of yours thinks I'm a lily."

"Poison ivy," Gus corrects him.

O'Kelly remains genial. "Have it your own way, Spivak, same as I'm gonna have my own way with this accident from the iron foundry."

HE hauls the safe away from the wall with one hand like it was a kiddie car. He tips it over on its side, then upends it so that the safe's upside-down.

"Hmmm!" he grunts after tapping the bottom with his knuckles. "The dirty chisellers. I could cut that bottom out with a kitchen can-opener." The safe thumps twice and he has it erect.

You can see he has more respect for the door. He turns to me and remarks offhand, "I could do a nice torch job on this door, but I don't carry that equipment with me. It's in the car."

"Skip the torch job," I tell him.

"Okay. You'll be satisfied if I just take it apart, huh?"

"Just take it apart."

O'Kelly brings in his big suitcase from the front office, unlocks it and throws back the lid. Inside is the oddest collection of tools I've ever seen. He fishes out three lengths of inch-and-a-half rods which have been threaded so that they can be joined together. One of them is pointed and slightly curved at the end. He screws the three together with deft twists and makes a prying lever about five feet long. This lever is known as a jimmy.

He lays the jimmy one side and picks up a portable electric drill. It has a long rubber cord with a plug at the end which he shoves into a baseboard outlet. He takes

one more look at the safe door, then selects a half-inch drill and locks it into the chuck.

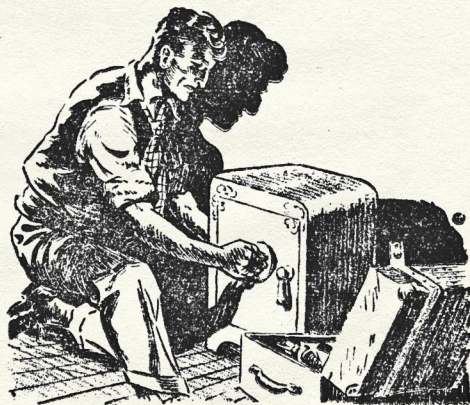
"The ripping job," he explains, "is simple enough even for Spivak to understand. First, I bore a hole in the upper left-hand corner of the door. Like this." The motor whines, the drill bites metal, and then sinks in like the door was made of cheese. "Special hardening process," he tells us. "You can't buy drills like mine. What I use are made to order."

He pushes the safe back against the wall, inserts tapered rubber blocks under the wheels so they won't roll, and picks the sectional jimmy from the floor.

At this point we all have another cup of Ozark Dew. Gus Spivak is relaxed and content. Gus likes good tools. I'm happy, too. I like to see a professional craftsman at work.

O'Kelly inserts the curved point of the jimmy into the hole he has bored, places one of his big feet against the safe, leans hard on the jimmy's other end and exerts a downward pressure. The metal protests under the shock and starts to peel off like it was made of plywood.

"Oh, oh!" O'Kelly lays off the pressure and runs his fingers over the face of the door. "This method isn't gonna work. There's bolts running through the door with the heads flush with the surface. Them lilies painted on the front keep me from seeing them."



He lays the sectional jimmy on the floor, goes to his suitcase and picks up an enormous hand sledge with a copper head. "We'll use the punch job. It's faster."

It takes four blows with the sledge and the dial knob is knocked clean from the

door and is rolling on the floor. O'Kelly selects a center punch and knocks back the spindle out of his way. Then, with another punch, he thoroughly wrecks small sockets which allow the full release of the lock. A turn and a pull on the handle and the door swings open.

"I can use a little powder on the inner door, or a can-opener," he states. "Take your choice."

"Leave it as it is," I tell him. "You're hired."

"No," says O'Kelly. "We ain't talked terms yet."

"I knew there was a catch in all this," says Gus Spivak. "How's twenty-five bucks a day sound?"

O'Kelly is starting to repack his tools. "You're not talking to a laborer, Spivak. I'm a specialist. Cracking safes like this cash box I just wrecked is just a sideline. I'm a demolition expert, and I take professional pride in my work."

"O'Kelly," I pronounce with dignity. "I like your attitude. I like the way you handle tools. You have something on your mind besides Ozark Dew. What are your terms?"

"I've got my own gang," he points out. "And I want them to pick up experience. We'll move in on the Seventh Street job tomorrow and take over. You will sublet the destruction and removal of the vault to me, and I will dispose of it cleanly and efficiently."

"How much?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"It's a deal, O'Kelly. But wait a minute. There's going to be tons of metal in that vault after it's been torn apart."

"Junk!" grunts Gus Spivak. "Let him have it, Dave, along with the concrete and reinforcement material. I'll get a big kick watching him work it over."

"Wait," I caution, "till I look at the contract. Here's the clause. It says: 'It is further stipulated that said contractor shall remove and dispose of, at his own expense, any and all parts of the building, including stationary fixtures, from foundation piers to and including roof, leaving the area clean and free of any and all obstructions and material.'"

"You see," O'Kelly reminds me. "Everything has to come out, including stationary fixtures which is the vault. That's the joker

in your contract that's gonna give you the headache, and I'm going to take it off your hands for the low figure of five hundred dollars. I may lose money, but I'm willing to take a chance."

I have a feeling that all this is too simple. But I can't see any flaw. And I still hesitate.

"Listen," argues O'Kelly. "Something I ain't told you yet. I worked on the installation of that vault years ago. Here's what's protecting it from the outside. There's a one-inch layer of openhearth steel. Inside that is a two-inch layer of torch-resisting metal. And next to that is a four-ply layer of tough chrome steel. All these layers are bound together with heavy cables wrapped around I-beams, and joined to huge angle irons imbedded in hard concrete. Your outfit, Riordan, could break through all that. But it would take time. A month at least. And out the window goes whatever you figured as your margin of profit. The old penalty clause."

That's the argument that ends all arguments. "The job's yours, O'Kelly," I promise him. "I'll have my secretary make out the contract in the morning."

"You do that," says O'Kelly. "And if you want to get rid of that cash box I used for a demonstration, I'll send a couple of my boys around to gather it up."

The safe is no good to the firm in its present condition so I tell him he can have his boys take it away.

"That I will attend to," says O'Kelly. "And I'll see you both in the morning on the job." So out the door he goes, swinging the big tool kit like it was a vanity case.

I'M a little late in getting down to Seventh Street the next morning owing to necessary dictation to my secretary of the sub-contract, and having the wrecked safe taken from my office and placed in the corridor. So when I do arrive everything is running smooth.

Gus Spivak and his crews are tearing up concrete floor at the front. In the back where the vault is, O'Kelly is making little cross marks with a piece of chalk around the base of the vault. He has a crew of about ten men and they are unloading oxygen tanks from a truck.

O'Kelly's crew don't need any orders.

They seem to know what they are doing. Lengths of high-pressure rubber hose are being tapped into the outlets of the oxygen tanks, and these in turn are being connected to the ends of wrought-iron pipes.

I prod O'Kelly on the shoulder. "Hey! What's the idea?"

O'Kelly grins. "Metallurgist's nightmare, the up-and-coming yeggman's secret weapon—the oxygen lance. Watch. You'll see action that will do things to your blood pressure."

One of the crew has pulled on asbestos gloves and is now lighting a blow-torch. He applies the flame to the end of the wrought-iron pipe. When the pipe reaches a burning temperature, he turns on the oxygen and pulls down the visor of his eye-shield.

The end of the iron pipe is pressing against the concrete. Sparks fly, and then, with the pipe serving as a fluxing-rod, everything in contact with it starts burning in an atmosphere of pure oxygen. The lance of flame eats through concrete and steel like it was white pine. Even as I watch, other oxygen lances flash on until the vault is surrounded by O'Kelly's ambitious crew.

I am called on the telephone about this time and have to leave for the office to argue some points about new contracts. It is long past the middle of the afternoon before I get back. Gus Spivak's crew has got the front part of the basement floor licked, and slabs of concrete are piled high. Before I can ask Spivak why our trucks haven't hauled the stuff away, I see what's happened. There is no room for our trucks.

On the side street, taking up all the space, is one of O'Kelly's trucks—a special job built low and wide with about two dozen wheels for it to roll on. On it is mounted a powerful winch with cable and drum. The fence on that side has been taken down, and a thick, steel cable runs back and is looped around the vault which now lies on its side. The jagged concrete base is riddled with inch-and-a-half holes made by the oxygen lances.

O'Kelly is shouting orders now. All ten of his crew, laboring as one man, are prying with long crowbars as they inch the vault onto metal rollers. The concrete and reinforced steel is still around it like an indestructible envelope. It hasn't been touched. The whole structure has been

wrenched loose at the base below the reinforcement material.

I can see that O'Kelly isn't planning to tear it apart here, but is going to truck it away intact. And that's all right by me. My crew has now moved back to where the vault had stood and concrete is breaking up in big sections.

There is no hitch to O'Kelly's system of snaking the vault out and onto the flat truck. There's only one argument and that's with the traffic cop at the corner. O'Kelly settles that in a completely satisfactory manner. And fast.

IN TWO days everything is cleaned up. Finished. I am tired, and all I can think of is my Ozark Dew. Gus Spivak comes to the office with me. O'Kelly is there ahead of us. He is just signing the sub-contract for a job already done. I give him his check for five hundred dollars which is the agreement.

"You have a big crew, O'Kelly," I tell him. "And you won't make much money. You set your price too low."

"I'll get by," he grins. "This five hundred will take care of my boys and equipment. And as soon as I finish installing a certain reinforced vault in a new brewery being built, I will collect ten thousand more iron men. I will then adjust the vault's locks with a combination that can be worked by hand, and everything will be jake. You will finish your contract on time which will save you plenty. And I will collect ten thousand for saving you from a heavy loss. What's wrong with the deal?"

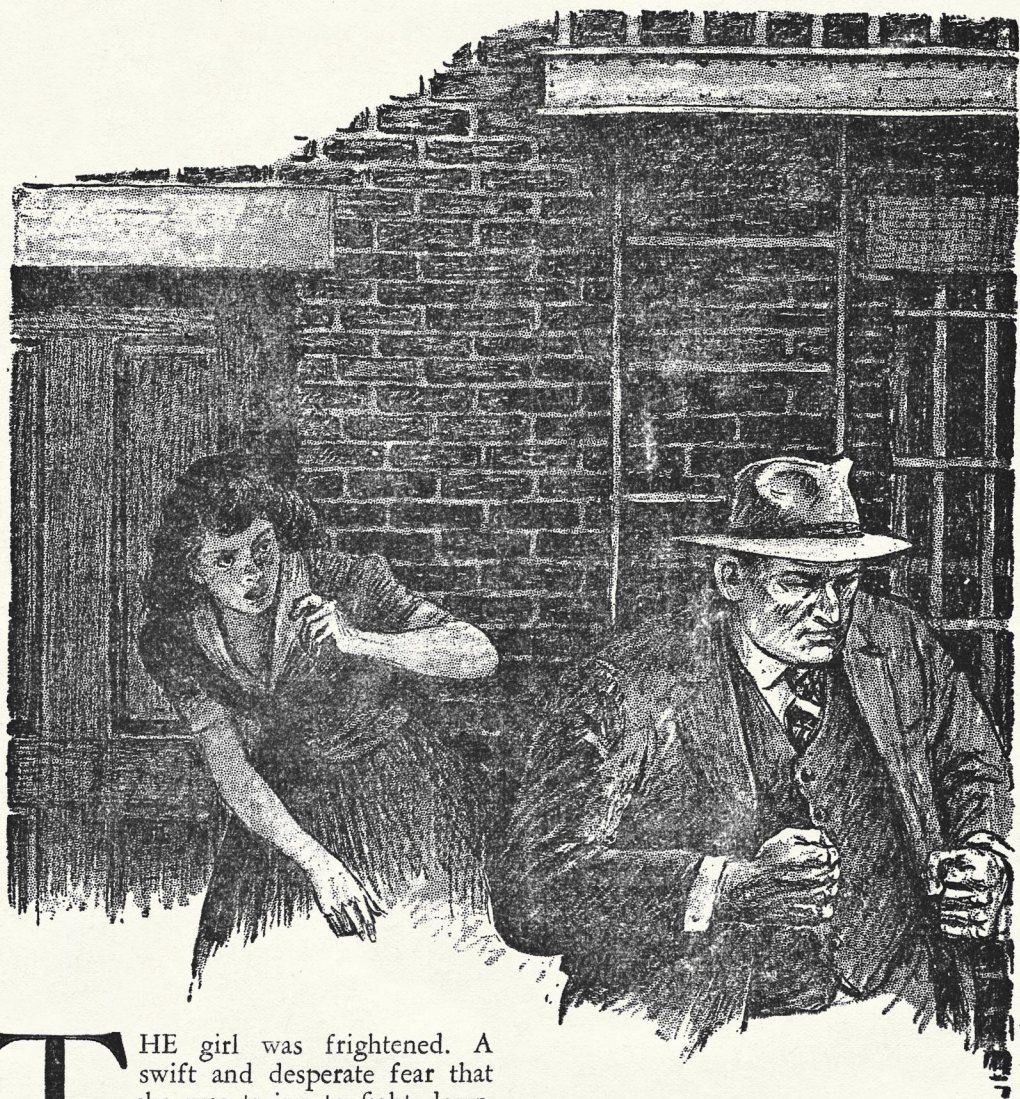
There is nothing I can say, so I say it. "Nothing."

After O'Kelly's gone I turn to Gus Spivak who hasn't said a word. "Gus," I complain, "I have learned the technique of using the oxygen lance, but I still think the company has been grossly cheated by that slicker O'Kelly. Why did we ever think it was necessary to destroy the vault. The guy high-pressured us out of a nice profit. And he probably had it sold before I gave him the contract which explains why he kept coming to my office when he learned we had the wrecking contract."

"Ummmm!" All Gus can do is grunt.

I open the door of our big safe. There is
(Continued on page 144)

*In the Backwash of War, You Never Could Tell Who Will
Go Sour in the Face of Appalling Temptation*



THE girl was frightened. A swift and desperate fear that she was trying to fight down showed in her small, oval face as she turned her head and looked behind her. From where he stood close to the alley wall, just inside its entrance not five yards away, Rush Guthrie caught the expression on the clear-cut features. Casually he had seen her coming along the pavement of this side-street in the East Fifties as, halting to light a suddenly wanted cigarette, on the way home from the movies, he had had his lighter go out twice in the night breeze that swept in from New York's East River and had stepped into the alley at his side to shelter the next try.

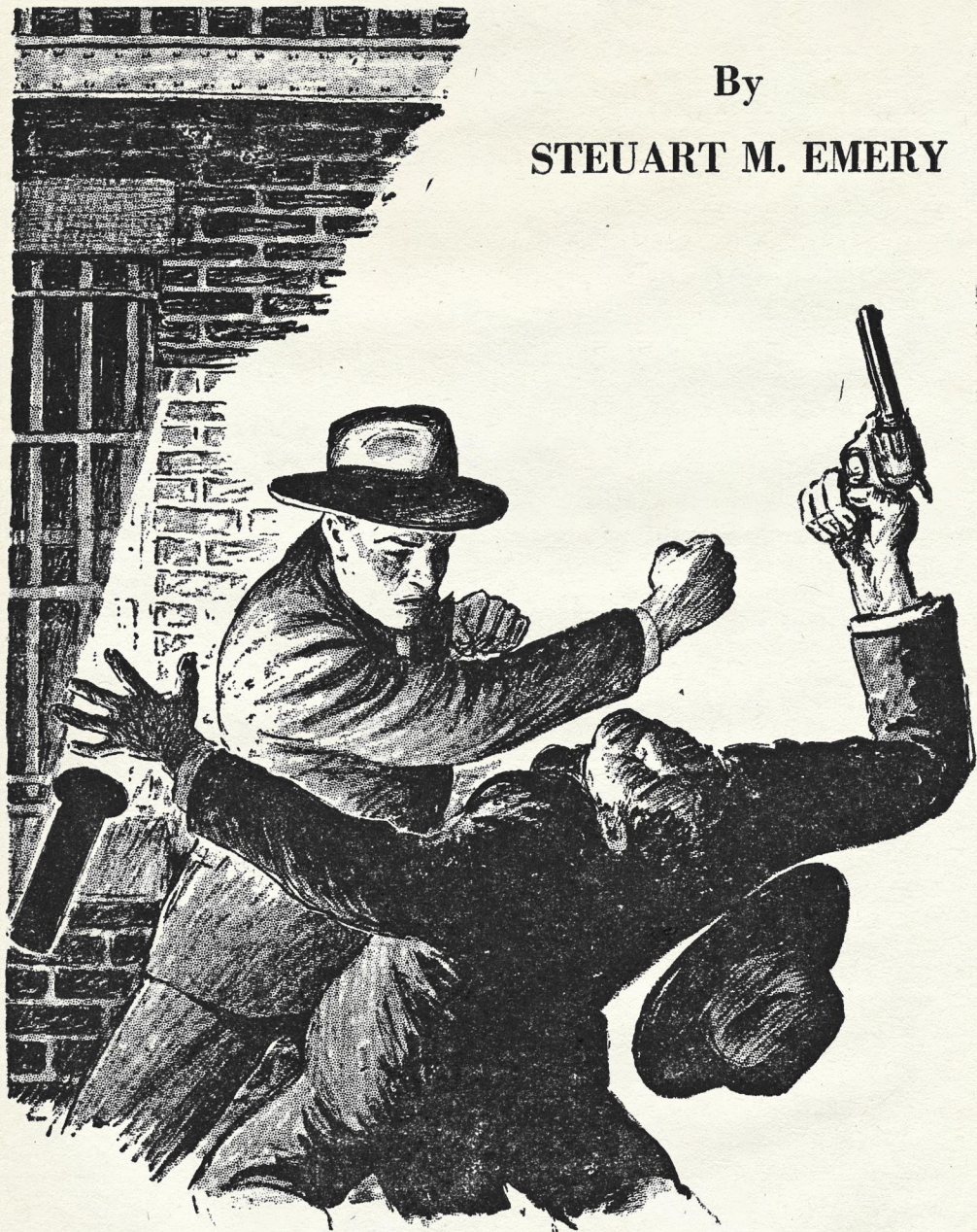
Now, silver cigarette case still in one hand and lighter in the other, cigarette dangling between his lips, he stared at the trim figure so close to him. He knew the sight of fear, he had seen too much of it in the past shattering years of war, he had known its gripping clutch himself too often to be mistaken. Danger and deadly danger was coming on this girl from the rear.

He stepped out of the alley's mouth and the girl gasped as his tall, wide-shouldered frame loomed up in front of her. "Okay," he said quietly. "You're all right now. I see them."

MURDER FOR A CIGARETTE

By

STEUART M. EMERY



"They—they're—" The words tumbled from her.

"Okay. I'm taking them."

It was a swift and expert rush he was looking at. The big black sedan with the drawn curtains had swung alongside the curb and braked soundlessly to a halt. The

two men who had sprung from it were coming soundlessly also in their sweep for the girl and they were almost on top of her, spread so as to come in on either side. Their eyes, darting under their hat-brims, caught sight of Guthrie and their hands went to their armpits in a motion he recognized.

"Into the alley!" he cast at the girl. "Quick! They're pulling!"

His lighter had gone into his pocket, his right hand now held the shining silver cigarette case gripped as though it were a weapon, only its top length showing. He levelled it and his voice rang with the harshness of a combat command.

"Drop those guns! Clear out of here, you, before I let go!"

In the next second he would know whether the bluff had worked. If it hadn't, lead would tear him. From his hand, he knew, something that looked like the barrel of a nickel-finished gun would be glinting in the murky street lights, men keyed for a rush would be over-tensed and their brains would run riot at an unexpected check. Behind him the girl's heels pattered on the concrete of the alley.

"Back, I said!" He saw the right hand man waver and halt. He swung his false weapon to cover him instantly, sensing the break. "All right," he said. "Then take it!"

"Scram!" blurted the man and broke for the car. The second man's hand fell away from his armpit and he leaped after him. They were through the sedan's door and swallowed by its curtained interior. The driver slammed on the power and the car went into a flying start that accelerated all the way to the corner. It rounded the turn and vanished.

"All wound up," Guthrie told himself. "All over. No," the sudden thought came, "it's just starting for me. I've walked into something."

He turned and stepped into the alley's mouth. "Coast's clear!" he called. "You can come on back."

The coast might be clear on the street but it was also clear in the alley. There was no one there, no sign anywhere of the slim figure to which he was calling. Under the uneasy glow of an electric light fixed on the wall the alley showed bare for its entire length. It was not even an alley, it was half or quarter of an alley, a blind cul-de-sac that ran back from the street and ended in a high brick wall. A heavy fire exit door stood open giving into the side wall and suddenly the lilting strains of an orchestra poured out from it.

Into Guthrie's mind flashed the recollection of the sign that hung over the

sidewalk only a few yards away—"Le Ciel Bleu." Too often he had run across mention of that celebrated *boîte* in the Broadway gossip columns not to be familiar with its mixed clientele in which cafe society, newspapermen, titled visitors and refugees rubbed elbows with a definite upper-class criminal stratum that wore its evening clothes well. It was no better, no worse than a score of similar nighteries, where jaded habitues crowded into a small place, the smoke-and-perfume-filled atmosphere of which was appalling, the prices equally so. Anything from a new company to a jewel robbery could be promoted on the premises. And it was into the Ciel Bleu that the girl had vanished, there was no other place she could have gone.

Guthrie stood motionless for a long moment. His wide-boned face, not softened yet by the ease of civilian living, grew thoughtful; his cool gray eyes narrowed and his chin with the clean rake of the jaw sweeping back from it set a little. He looked like a young man who had been through a good many tough situations and could go through more—ready of wits, coupled with fast action. Then he shrugged, mind made up. He had walked into something, all right, and he intended to keep on walking. It was hardly more than a glimpse he had had of the girl but there certainly had been something about her that called for future reference, a follow up. She had been in trouble those few moments ago, he sensed she would be in trouble still, that the real danger had been only postponed.

He tossed the half-smoked cigarette that had finally got lighted to the alley concrete and ground it with his shoe. Then he strode along the cul-de-sac to the open fire door and stepped through it into the crowded room with the blue-draped ceiling, spattered liberally with silver stars, the imitation palms scattered here and there, the deep blue leather lounges along the walls. A huge waiter stood in the aisle directly before him but his back was turned as he watched the dancers. Not a head turned toward him, no one had seen his entry.

The lighting was dim, the music coming from the orchestra was of the swing and sway variety. Little ripples of cigarette smoke drifted up under the decor of imitation blue sky, animated chatter, alcoholic laughter

filled the place. Guthrie sent his questioning glance from the bar, discerned at the far end off the dance floor, to the nearer tables. But the girl was nowhere. An inadvertent cough escaped him, his lungs were getting the pressure of the vitiated atmosphere and the waiter turned instantly. The stare of suspicion was in the garcon's beady eyes, his shoulders bulked apeline under his black jacket, his fists were like hams.

"That's all right, waiter," said Guthrie, "I just stepped out for a breath of air. I wasn't scrambling on the check."

"No stags allowed wanderin' among the tables," said the waiter gruffly. "We don't want no trouble here. It's orders."

"I'm not a stag," said Guthrie. "I'm with a party." In that last flick of a second he had looked just behind him to the right. There she was, sitting on the lounge beside the alley door. Even in the dim light the small oval face was clearly outlined, it was strained but cool. The girl had mastered her shock, she was a fighter. But against what? As Guthrie picked her out she turned and looked at him and the quick flash of recognition swept into her eyes. They seemed to beckon, to have in them an appeal to him. Her head bobbed in the tiniest of nods.

"Here is my party," said Guthrie casually. "Take an order will you, waiter?"

He moved to the lounge and slipped in beside the girl at the table for two. He made his voice casual for the waiter's benefit. The waiter was looming over them and in his eyes was a searching expression that Guthrie felt no waiter's eyes should have.

"Sorry I took so long. What's yours this time?"

"Scotch and soda," said the girl in a quiet, softly-modulated voice. Somehow Guthrie had known that was the kind of a voice she would have.

"Make it two, waiter."

The hulking-shouldered waiter dabbed at the table-top professionally although it was spotless and his beady eyes grew even more searching. "Okay," he grunted and shouldered off to the next table where a finger beckoned.

"Odd type for a high-class joint," remarked Guthrie in a conversational tone. "But then these days a nightery employer can't pick and choose. And now—"

"Thanks," breathed the girl. "Thanks for

what you did. If you hadn't been there and pulled your gun—"

Guthrie grinned and drew out his cigarette case. "It looked enough like a gun. I used this. I guess you can use a cigarette."

"I most certainly can." He flicked the case open and she reached for one of the cigarettes. On the inner side the engraving showed. "May I look?"

Her slender fingers took away the case and she leaned a little over it. Guthrie saw now that her shoulder-bobbed chestnut hair had a delightful sheen to it, that her profile and the column of her smooth neck were practically perfect.

"To Captain Rush Guthrie from the Men of A Company, 101st Airborne Infantry. So you were that kind of a captain? Your men gave you this at the end of the war?"

"Oh, lots of officers got things like that, the GIs were apt to get a bit sentimental within reach of a discharge back to mother's apple pies and forgot what they called us when the war was on. I've been out a year."

"As a permanent New Yorker?"

"Right, all fixed up with an apartment, a phone and a job at real estate. I'm one of the lucky ones. And you?"

"I'm Brenda Barnes. Originally from Iowa, you know—the corn belt from which everybody goes to sea. So I went for a Wave after college and business school. I'm a whiz on the typewriter and not so bad at shorthand. The perfect secretary, who knows all about the boss' business and keeps her mouth shut and doesn't try to marry him."

Guthrie leaned back as the first half of his downed Scotch and soda began to do its relaxing work. The girl Brenda Barnes too seemed to have slipped the mask of strain that had stiffened her face. He was glad that having walked into this strange adventure he had continued walking.

"Do you want to tell me what was behind that attempted snatch I barged into? Are the perfect secretarial lips shut or open on that?"

"They are definitely—"

She halted in mid-sentence, the old taut mask slipped back. Guthrie could see the tiny betraying pulsebeat in her cheek. Only a few yards away a peculiar-looking individual in an impeccable suit was walking casually along the ranks of tables. His face was of a dead-white pallor and his hair and

eyebrows were similarly bleached. He looked as though there were no blood in his angular frame at all and even his motions seemed mechanical. Guthrie waited for the ape-like waiter to pounce on him with the standard warning about stags, but the waiter stepped to the nearest table and began to clean up its ashtrays, ignoring him. The bleached man appeared to be ignoring everybody in a similar manner. He went on, eyes fixed glassily ahead of him, stiffly automatic, and passed by Guthrie and Brenda.

"Absolutely petrified," said Guthrie. "They ought to pour him back in the bottle. They should—why, what's the matter?"

Brenda was on her feet. She was opening her bag. "I've just had a look at my face in my hand-mirror," she said swiftly. "It certainly needs repairing. Keep this for me, will you, until I come back."

A tiny shiver ran over her. Suddenly she had the look of a hunted animal, desperately seeking shelter. She was holding out to Guthrie a glass tube in which something long and fat and red was contained. He stared at it, not quite grasping what it was, and his hand went up to take it. Three tables away the bleached man was turning, he was coming back.

"No, there!" breathed the girl. She thrust the tube into Guthrie's breast pocket and pulled his handkerchief over it. The bleached man had stopped in his tracks. "Order another drink, will you?"

Then she was gone, moving into the aisle and along it at a rapid pace. Guthrie's glance followed her to the front end of the room and saw her sweep in through the curtains that led into the ladies retiring room. He stubbed his cigarette into the ashtray and got ready for another. Instinctively he reached up and felt in his breast pocket, the cool smoothness of glass coming against his fingertips. What in blazes was it the girl had passed to him?

"I'll take that," said a flat, unemotional voice from beside him.

GUTHRIE had never seen the bleached man come up to his table and swerve. He hadn't seen him slide in at his right hand side on the leather seat, sitting close up against him. But there he was, his bloodless face even more unattractive at this range.

"Take what?" he demanded. He had never seen a person he liked less.

"That thing in your pocket. The thing the girl passed you when she ran out on you and left you holding the bag."

"No girl ran out on me. No girl passed me anything." A cold rage began to mount in Guthrie. "You get the hell out of here!"

"I'm staying. You hear that music?" In the flat voice was a ruthless purpose. The place was echoing to the deafening work of the drummer, sweating it out upon the orchestra platform. His boomings and thuddings were of a primitive and savage rhythm. "Nobody will hear this if it's turned loose with all that racket on."

A hard object pressed suddenly into Guthrie's side. "You were in the war, I take it. You know what this is. Soft nose, also notched. Pass over that thing, or get it."

Guthrie looked down, the pit of his stomach contracting. He knew what he would see. It was a small automatic with a silencer on it and what a soft-nosed, notched dum-dum bullet from it would do to his stomach—

"You must want it pretty bad," he managed.

"It's valuable. Pass it over. That drummer won't go on forever."

"Okay!" said Guthrie. "I'll reach for it."

He brought up his right arm and moved it across his chest, his hand out for his breast pocket. Then with every ounce of strength in his body he drove the arm and elbow back on its course and his elbow crashed full into the bleached man's chin. It was a terrific drive out of his almost forgotten commando course and it struck its target full. The bleached man's head rocked back, his glassy eyes bulged and he went clean off the edge of the leather seat onto the floor. Abruptly the drummer stopped, the lights that had dimmed for dancing came on.

Guthrie swung to his feet and jumped for the end of the lounge. Beyond it on the floor the bleached man sprawled with the gun still in his hand against his side, hidden from view from the room. But he could bring it up the instant his daze passed and it was passing. Go for it and rip it away was the only thing to do. In front of Guthrie there suddenly moved an obstacle, big and black-clad. The hulking waiter blocked him off, he was bending over the bleached man.

"Get up, you!" he rumbled. "On your way. No fallin' down drunk allowed around here."

A roar of laughter came from the nearest tables. The big waiter, with the motions of a trained bouncer hoisted the bleached man to his feet, pressed his wide chest against him and propelled him backward and out the door into the night. He stepped back inside, dusting his hands.



"And don't show up again!" he called. "You're barred here!"

Guthrie remained standing. He was thinking. Either he had seen a perfect act of bouncing a drunk or a perfect act of shielding the bleached man. "Good work," he said briefly. "That gent had a gun."

"The gent had no gun," growled the waiter. "Comin', sir." And he shouldered for a table close by.

There was a hook-up between them. Guthrie was sure of it now. And the Ciel Bleu, with its undercurrent of lawlessness that had mounted to the threat of murder was no place for him. Or for Brenda Barnes. When she came back to the table they were leaving. He raised his wrist and looked at the watch on it. He was surprised to see that a good deal more time than he had

thought had elapsed. She must have been through with her facial repairs long ago. He was going to pick her up out front and go. He tossed a bill on the table.

"That'll cover the drinks," he called to the waiter, who stood eying him a few yards away. "Change is yours."

At a fast pace he went up the aisle and out to the dense-packed bar, passed it and reached the curtains at the ladies room. "Maid!" he called and a trim, gray-uniformed young woman came to the curtains. "Miss Brenda Barnes is inside. Will you ask her to hurry, please?"

"You're Mr. Rush Guthrie?" Surprised, Guthrie nodded. "Miss Barnes gave me a message for you. She's left. She's gone home."

"And where is her—?"

The maid's eyebrows elevated humorously, Broadway-trained as she was. "Never mind," said Guthrie shortly. It was not exactly usual even in the Ciel Bleu for a gentleman not to know where the lady whom he escorted lived. Baffled he turned away. Brenda had come into his life in a flash and she had gone out of it in another one. So that was that.

II

GUTHRIE sat at the table in the small, floor-through apartment staring at the headlines of the early morning paper he had picked up at the corner newsstand on the way home. Now he knew who Brenda Barnes was. And she wasn't Brenda Barnes. The headlines announced.

COL. BRANDON CONVICTED, GETS 7 YEARS

Expert Army Appraiser Found Guilty in Theft of \$500,000 in Diamonds from Frankfurt Vault

DAUGHTER, WHO CONFESSED, STILL A FUGITIVE

There was a picture of the scholarly-looking man in uniform with its caption, "Col. Thomas Brandon." Alongside it was the photograph with the caption: "Mary B. B. Brandon," that was the portrait of the girl with the chestnut-bobbed hair. Convicted criminal and confessed criminal, there they

were. It was a shock but Guthrie was used to shocks. He read on, stray sentences catching his eye.

"One of New York's greatest jewel appraisers . . . commissioned shortly before surrender . . . in charge of appraising uncut diamonds removed from Amsterdam vaults by Nazis and traced down in Germany . . . sole possessor of key to vault . . . never left his person . . . worked with British, Dutch and Russian appraisers . . . loss of \$500,000 in uncut diamonds discovered while Col. Brandon, on leave, and daughter were flying back to United States . . . questioned at La Guardia Airport . . . \$30,000 in missing uncut diamonds found in false bottoms of his luggage and daughter's . . . stoutly maintained innocence . . . admitted to bail pending return to Frankfurt for trial . . . daughter jumped bail in New York and vanished . . . sent written confession of her guilt to Frankfurt authorities attempting to exonerate father . . . no trace of her as yet . . . her flight regarded as utterly damaging to Colonel's case . . . circumstantial evidence overwhelming . . . verdict regarded as certain from start of trial . . . case second in importance only to theft of Hesse crown jewels . . . officer and wife convicted in that . . . intensive search has failed to uncover remaining \$470,000 in loot."

A sinking sensation crept over Guthrie. You never could tell in the backwash of this war, with its infinite opportunities for criminal self-profit and betrayal of trust, who would go sour in the face of appalling temptation. Hadn't he read of just about this same thing happening in San Francisco, a fortune in diamonds from a Tokyo bank's vaults turning up in a high-ranking officer's luggage? Yet somehow he kept on fighting against the proof that Mary Brenda Brandon was a crook. But if she were one, she would know where the missing \$470,000 in diamonds was and it would be well worth the risk to snatch her and force her to give up its location. She was being hi-jacked, it came to him, there at the alley and the bleached man had come in after her. For what?

Guthrie reached up and drew the glass tube from his breast pocket, laying it on the table. This was what they were after, whoever they were, and in a thick, king's size cigarette something could be hidden. He

extracted the tube's cork and shook the cigarette out, studying it closely and running his fingers experimentally up and down its tightly-packed length.

"Got it!" he explained. His fingertips were sinking in a softer section at the cigarette's end. Tobacco had been taken out and repacked.

HE went into the bathroom and returned with a toothpick from a glass of them in the wall cabinet. Gently he began to work at the loosened tobacco in the cigarette's end and it came out with ease. Then he was tilting the cigarette and the tiny ball of fine tissue paper rolled out.

"So this is it!" He got the ball open and ironed out its wrinkles in the palm of his hand. The tissue was absolutely blank, not a word of writing was on it. "I had a ten day course in Counter-Intelligence rooming with those two Hawkshaws from G-2 on the transport back," he mused. "Let's try heat."

The match flared and he held it close to the tissue, moving it along. The fine brown writing began to appear.

The message stood out and it meant exactly nothing to him.

B R A N D O N
O W B B A R B
K I X J V I Z
237

"Brandon in clear. The rest in code. This little joker will have to have some higher brain level than mine."

He drew a cigarette from his case, lit and sat back, thinking hard and frowning while the idea that had begun to form in his mind took shape. Getting up he walked into the rear bedroom and took a pair of thin-bladed straight nail scissors off the bureau, then rummaged a sheet of tissue from around a new tie in a box in the top drawer. He inhaled a last drag from his almost-finished cigarette and, stepping to the window, parted its curtains and looked out, feeling the breeze cool on his forehead.

Outside the moon rode high over the rooftops of New York in a night of stars, the courtyard below with its alley running out to the street was a strange realm of silver and shadows. He was on the top rear floor of the old brownstone house re-

modeled into apartments. Leaning out over the fire-escape that ran up the back of the building, he flung the butt of his cigarette into space. Somewhere down there it struck and its sparks flew and a deeper shadow seemed to move.

"Missed the cat," he told himself. "Or was it a cat?"

He stared into the patchwork of moonbeams, seeing nothing. All was quiet in the apartment house, the other tenants long since in bed, and no lights gleamed out from the windows beneath him. He drew the window curtains together and went thoughtfully back into the living room. At the table he measured the tissue with the code on it on the sheet from the tie-box and cut out a similar shape. He took up a pencil and wrote at random:

B R A N D O N
Y I S S H X K
K R V M F L C
685

In a moment or so it was all over. The meaningless code he had written was packed into the top of the red cigarette, the tobacco tamped down with the pencil and the real code nested in his vest pocket. Whatever the chain was he had broken it. The cigarette in the tube showed no signs of having been monkeyed with. But what was it all about? Was Brenda Brandon delivering a secret code message she had written to someone, and if so, why? It was too tough to puzzle out and a little tiredly he closed his eyes.

He opened them almost immediately. Through the thin ceiling below he heard his neighbor's doorbell ringing, the thud of bare feet as the neighbor hoisted himself out of bed to answer it. For New York, after all, the time wasn't too late for callers and the tenant of the floor under him was a newspaperman, who kept weird hours and had visitors at any and all of them. He knew Pete Knowles casually and liked him.

"Now what?" he asked himself. "Another roaring party until dawn?"

He caught the sound a moment later, the low quick, rapping on his apartment door, the muted, musical voice that called: "Captain Guthrie, Captain Guthrie, are you there?"

Swiftly he went to the door and opened it. Through it, almost before it was wide, slipped the girl and beside her was a short, broad-shouldered individual with a massive forehead and jaw and a strong nose that had a pronounced hook in it. His eyes were of a soft brown and they were pleasant but they looked as though they could go granitic without warning. Definitely a citizen who could take care of himself.

"I rang the third floor," Brenda said. "If I'd rung you, you might not have answered. As it was a tousled gentleman filled with liquor opened his door and one eye and told us to keep on up a flight. He's back in slumberland by now. This is Mr. Max Salomon."

The stocky, hooked-nosed man bowed with surprising grace. "Sidewalk Maxie Salomon they call me, Mr. Guthrie. The honest diamond broker who walks around in the fresh air with a fortune in jewels in his pockets. Nothing too big, nothing too small for Sidewalk Maxie."

"Come in. Sit down." Guthrie closed the door and led the way back into the living room. On the table lay the red king's size cigarette in its tube. The girl's eyes gleamed as she saw it.

"Ah! It's safe! I knew you'd take care of it for me."

"And just how did you locate me?" inquired Guthrie. The moment of surprise had passed, it was enough that this chestnut-haired girl who had vanished into the night had come back.

"Phone book. You told me, remember, you were one of the lucky veterans who found an apartment and a phone. So now, Captain Rush Guthrie—"

"Yes, Miss Mary B. B. Brandon." He gestured toward the newspaper with its pictorial layout still spread on the table. "Yes, Miss Mary Brenda Barnes Brandon. I've had a gun in my ribs since I last saw you. Toted by that bleached gent you ran from. I think a slight explanation is due."

THE girl did not answer. Her hand had flown to her lips, her face had gone white and stricken, she was staring at the headlines.

"Convicted! Father's convicted, Maxie!"

"He never had a chance, Miss Brenda," said Sidewalk Maxie gravely. Pain was in

his brown eyes. "The evidence it was most circumstantial. But I did not think the court decision would arrive so soon. Convicted, yes, but we can still work to clear him. Do not give up hope."

The girl smiled wanly. There was courage in every line of her. "We'll never stop working, Maxie, you and I. Yes, Captain Guthrie I am Mary Barnes Brandon, arrested with my father at La Guardia Airport. I jumped the bail so that I could try to solve the mystery of who made away with the diamond treasure. It was Maxie who told me the loot was bound to show up in New York. It's the biggest jewel market in the world today and uncut diamonds in bulk would have to come here. I see now my confession was a mistake. I sent it on the spur of the moment trying to get the trial postponed while they hunted for me. I thought I could get months of clearance to work in with Maxie."

Guthrie let loose a little sigh of relief. The truth was in Brenda Brandon's words, the one thing he had wanted to hear from her he had heard. He turned to Sidewalk Maxie, her ally, looking at him curiously.

"Oh, I am Colonel Brandon's great friend," said Maxie. "Over many, many years I am his friend. I am the biggest operator on the Bowery Diamond Exchange and many is the favor of appraising he has done for me, Sidewalk Maxie, saving me thousands of dollars. He should not have gone into that damn army job, my friend, Brandon. Miss Brenda here, I had dandled her on my knee. To her I suggest the bail-jumping because it is Sidewalk Maxie's best opinion that those ice pieces will show up on the Bowery Exchange where they buy by the shovelful and some characters do not elevate the eyebrows as to where they come from. If anybody will know when a big new shovelful of ice is hitting the market, it will be Maxie and if it is the unsavory character who has them, there will be a little call to the police or the Customs or Treasury agents and there will be red-hot grilling. They will damn well find out who got them into New York. They will damn well turn up the clues that will clear the colonel. That is the way Sidewalk Maxie goes about his undercover detection. Do I make it clear?"

"You do. You're smart."

"Nobody ever sold Sidewalk Maxie an

ice cube out of the Kelvinator for the Kohinor. Yes, it may take a long long time, but I predict those pieces of ice will show up in New York."

"They may be here now."

Maxie's massive jaw clamped tight. He was shocked but he was a man who did not go lax in shock, he braced for action.

"Here? Why do you think that, Mr. Guthrie?"

"Because the red cigarette in the glass tube that Miss Brandon was entrusted with and that she was almost snatched for, and that a certain bleached gent was willing to kill me for, carried a message in code with the words at the top: 'Brandon.' Here it is." From his vest pocket he drew the original tissue, unfolded it and passed it to Maxie. "Hidden in the cigarette tip. I've repacked it with a phony I wrote myself."

Maxie stared at the code, his forehead wrinkling. He passed it to Brenda.

"Nothing to me, it means."

Her smooth forehead wrinkled also. "Nothing to me. But—but—" Hope flared in her eyes. "I think you're right, Rush. The stolen diamonds are here in New York, and this code is about them. There'd be no need for a message if they were still abroad. Brandon can mean only one thing, it's the name of the operation. By the break of the luck I was the person this code was given to to pass along."

"Who gave it to you?"

"Mynheer Willem Vanderdonck, the big international broker, who called for a stenographer from his suite in the Metropole-Park, late this afternoon. That's where I work as hotel steno. I was sent up to him just as I was finishing for the day. A square-headed, stiff-necked Dutchman with gray hair and the sharpest blue eyes I've ever seen. He dictated a dozen business letters to me to real estate firms and wholesale liquor distributors. He has chateaus in Holland, Belgium and France on his list for sale to American millionaires, and he has the sole agency for an old Holland gin house. He wanted appointments with the American firms to discuss prospects. A highclass, superbly able broker who apparently deals in anything on commission and mixes in the very best society. He wrote a personal letter to the head of the Netherlands United Nations delegation and to the Dutch Consul

in New York mentioning news of mutual acquaintances and inviting them to dinner as an old friend. And when we were through—"

"Yes?"

"He went into the bedroom and came back with the cigarette in the tube. He smiled and gave it to me, together with a ten dollar bonus. He asked me to write down my address and said a gentleman would call for it at my home at eleven; that it was a long-standing joke he had with an American friend. I thought it was most peculiar, to say the least, and looked reluctant, I know. Then he said he'd be very glad to recommend me as the most efficient hotel stenographer he had ever used and I knew what that could mean. If I didn't carry out his errand, he'd lodge a complaint on my work and I'd be fired. I need the money." She paused.

"And then?"

MAXIE stood a little aside, studying the code on the tissue he had taken from the girl's hand. Obviously she had told him all this on the way to Guthrie's.

"Just as I was leaving there was a knock on the door and Vanderdonck opened it and the bleached man you saw at the Ciel Bleu came in. I was putting the cigarette tube in my shoulder bag, he couldn't miss seeing it. Then as I picked up the slip on which I'd written my address and held it out to Vanderdonck the bleached man bowed in that stiff way of his, said, 'May I?' and took it from my hands, looked at it and passed it over. I went on home and had dinner, wondering about the whole thing.

"Around ten o'clock I ran out of cigarettes and left the apartment to get some at the nearest drugstore. I live in a one-room on the same sidestreet as the Ciel Bleu and about two blocks from it, the drugstore is on the next corner. Just as I was coming out the big black sedan pulled up across the street and someone who looked like the bleached man got out on its far side. I vaguely noticed the resemblance and went on. For the next two blocks, I remember now, there was a patrolman walking his beat ahead of me but he turned off at the avenue as you come to the Ciel Bleu. That was the first time I looked behind me, there at the

alley, and I saw the black car sweeping in."

"They held back until the cop turned off, then stepped on it fast," said Guthrie. "The bleached man was in command, hidden behind those drawn curtains. You had your shoulder bag on where the bleached man could figure the cigarette still would be. If it weren't, he'd squeeze the location out of you."

"That's what I reckoned. It wasn't any coincidence he had just pulled up outside my door when I came out. He was on my trail, he had my address. It wasn't any coincidence he came into the Ciel Bleu after me. He must have slipped out of the car around the corner and walked back. And so, Rush Guthrie—"

"You slipped it to me, a perfect stranger. How did you know you could trust me?"

Brenda looked at him steadily. "Any officer whose company gives him a cigarette case with the inscription yours had is trustworthy. I'd seen you in action, besides. You were in the phone book, what was simpler than to get rid of that cigarette and send whomever called for it, if they were legitimate, to you or look you up myself? I had to think fast in the Ciel Bleu, perhaps I made another spur of the moment mistake."

"I do not think that you did, Miss Brenda," put in Maxie. "You have thrown them completely off the track by stashing the big smoke with Mr. Guthrie and your strategic flight to me. You too are smart; we are all three of us smart people. Go ahead and tell how no watchers, if they were there, could have seen you slip out of the Ciel Bleu, that highclass gyp joint."

"I gave a dollar to the doorman and told him to bring me up a taxi and tell the driver to keep his engine running and his door open. In two minutes the party I'd spotted leaving came along, three couples all highly illuminated. Of course, they went straight out of the door and into the cab, and I went with them, hidden in the center. In the cab I explained I'd reserved it and offered to drop them off wherever they wanted. They were going to the Ibis Club, right on my route, and I let them out there and went on to Windy's on Broadway where I knew Maxie would show up or I could find out where to locate him."

"There am I as usual in the back room doing a business deal," said Sidewalk Maxie.

He thrust his hand into his coat pocket and pulled out a dozen gleaming diamonds. "Two like these I have sold for an excellent price before Miss Brenda comes along for my help. Could she go to the police? No."

"Not as a wanted jewel thief. My photograph is out. Whatever is threatening me—well, I've got to fight it out on the quiet with whatever help I can get on the side."

"You have got Maxie, Miss Brenda," said the diamond broker. "And by my reading of human character in which Sidewalk Maxie is never mistaken, you have got Mr. Guthrie, the able ex-captain who has a fast thinking brain, like mine."

"Thanks, Maxie," smiled Guthrie. "Yes, Brenda, I'm with you. You're well away from the bleached gent and his mob now. But what have we got to go on with?"

"That bit of luck on Operation Brandon, which it is not so surprising fell into Miss Brenda's hands as a Metropole-Park Hotel stenographer," offered Maxie. "All the big shot travelers from Europe stop at the Metropole-Park and Operation Brandon's is big hot stuff."

There was a queer hookup between this international broker and the bleached gentleman who is anxious to kidnap or kill, which is no bagatelle, for \$470,000 in ice which is also no mere bagatelle. This Vanderdonck should be tapped for what he knows."

"There was a Dutchman on the Allied board of appraisers, wasn't there, beside the British and Soviet experts?" asked Guthrie. "I skimmed that newspaper account, but of course it left out most of the background so I don't know the full story."

"Yes, there was a Dutchman, a topflight jeweler and a leader in the Dutch Underground," returned Brenda. "Mynheer Syckel was that man. He was very dignified and dressed exactly like Vanderdonck, cut-a-way coat, striped trousers and one of those square, heavily-built Dutch derbies, almost as tall as a plug hat. I saw Vanderdonck's on the hatrack in the foyer of his suite. Mynheer Syckel had the odd habit of never taking off his hat, in the office. We used to say he wore it and a cigar to bed with him. He lit one cigar from the end of another. I worked in the appraisal office as a civilian employe, joining my father in Frankfurt after I was discharged from the Waves. I

did the stenography and the cataloguing of the uncut jewels besides the set pieces."

"And the office?"

"The basement of a Frankfort bank, a big room with the strongroom and its vaults and safe-boxes opening off it. The five of us worked in there with an armed guard always outside on a chair in the hall and other guards upstairs."

"And your father had the only keys to the strongroom and the vaults? The paper says they never left his person."

As head of the appraisers board, yes. They never left his person is right. He kept the strongroom door key and the others on a ring with a couple of keys of his own and cigar cutter, fastened by a long chain to his belt and he put them under his pillow at night. When the strong room, a vault or a safe-box had to be opened my father opened it. That was a terrible point against him in the evidence. There was absolutely no way in which anyone could have got the key ring away from him. At night when the outer room was empty, the guard was doubled, both in the hall and upstairs."

"But the jewels vanished."

"They must have been stolen two or three days before we flew home. The uncut stones had all been appraised and listed and locked away in their small safe-box, like so many peas in a grocer's bin. They simply vanished into thin air. All except the \$30,000 worth found in the false bottoms of our luggage. We lived in a small house badly in need of repair, and any number of odd-job Germans worked on fixing it up. Anybody could have come in disguised as a workman, measured the luggage in our bedrooms, and put in the false bottoms and the jewels without our knowing anything about it."

"A most well-hatched scheme," observed Sidewalk Maxie. "Big shots, big brains in this. That Mynheer Vanderdonck becomes more and more a suspicious character to me."

"It's hard to believe," Brenda frowned. "Those personal letters to the head of the Netherlands United Nations Delegation and the Consul General in New York."

"Bluff," said Guthrie. "To win your confidence and get you to carry the red cigarette. Never mailed. Spies in the war, black-marketeers in it and afterwards, are always try-

ing to make use of an innocent person as a go-between. You were it. You were a message drop."

"So now we go call on this Mynheer and he had better talk."

An ominous storm was gathering in Maxie's eyes. He looked as hard as nails. He tapped his armpit where for the first time Guthrie saw the bulge. "Perhaps this against his fat Dutch stomach will make him voluble."

"You're armed?" asked Guthrie.

"You do not think Sidewalk Maxie walks around in the fresh night air with a fortune loose in his pockets without arms? There is a gun also in my waistband under my vest. Sidewalk Maxie is covered with arms from head to foot, where you do not see them, all on a legal permit, and he knows how to use them. Yes, I think I can make this Vanderdonck engage in useful conversation. We cannot call in the law without giving away Miss Brenda. We must be the tough private operatives for ourselves. Of course, it may turn out that this Vanderdonck is himself an innocent go-between."

A sudden surge of emotion ran through Guthrie.

However slight the lead, however dangerous it might be in this case, it had to be followed through. He had to get that shadow of sorrow out of Brenda's eyes, get that stigma of crime off her and her father.

"We'll have to take the chance," he said sharply. "And we'll need a reasonable pretext for calling on Vanderdonck at this hour. He won't allow admittance naturally to strangers." A plan was forming in his mind. "I've got it! Brenda, get on the phone and call him. Tell him who you are and that something has gone wrong with the delivery of the cigarette. Tell him it has disturbed you and you want to see him in his suite at once, as you don't want to explain over the phone. Expecting you, he'll get all three of us."

"Excellent," said Maxie.

Brenda nodded, her eyes shining with sudden hope and they clustered about the bedroom phone.

"Hold it a bit away from your ear so we can hear," advised Maxie. "It is often possible. Heads close, private eyes."

Brenda dialed and got the connection. "Suite 245, please."

"Yes, madam," replied the hotel switchboard operator.

There was a pause and then a heavily accented voice said: "Yess?"

"Mynheer Vanderdonck?"

"It iss Mynheerr Vanderdonck."

Brenda spoke rapidly. "This is Brenda Barnes, the hotel stenographer who did your letters for you late this afternoon and early evening, Mynheer Vanderdonck."

"Yess, Miss Barnes."

"Something has happened about that red cigarette. I can't tell you what it was over the phone, but it's very disturbing. Can I come to your suite right away and tell it to you? I know you'll think it's important."

"Something has happened? Where are you telephoning from?"

"The apartment of a friend of mine, Rush Guthrie, 160 East 57th. I can be at the Metropole-Park by taxi in fifteen minutes. Shall I come?"

"Come at once, Miss Barnes. Yess, please come at once as fast as you can. Do not waste a second."

There was a click at the other end of the line and Brenda too hung up. Her face glowed and so did Maxie's.

"Hook, line and sinker, he took it!" gloated Sidewalk Maxie. "We have got the squarehead! We have—"

A horrible blethering cut into his sentence and drowned it. It came from the floor below and it was appalling. A stenorian voice began to bellow. "News . . . every . . . hour . . . Station WXYC. . ."

"Cripes!" rapped Guthrie. "That drunk, Pete Knowles, the sports writer, hasn't been able to get to sleep since you waked him. He's gotten up, siphoned some more rye into himself and has slammed on the radio."

FROM across the courtyard a voice began to shout in the accents of an enraged citizen and taxpayer.

"Turn off the radio, you blasted drunk! Pip it down!"

An answer came promptly out of the window from the third floor.

"Awri, awri! Hold your pants, chum! Never wash hic-shoberer in my hic-life!"

The radio yelled on and cold shock stiffened Guthrie's spine. All too clearly he caught the words. "First item . . . Murder . . . Metropole-Park . . . wealthy Holland

business man . . . Willem Vanderdonck . . .” Abruptly the radio went down to nothing. “Radio quick!” panted Maxie. “Get it on! Miss Brenda, you have called a dead man and he answered!”

III

GUTHRIE darted into the living room and twitched at the dials of the radio in the corner. Almost instantly he had his station and it was in action. The clear, controlled voice of the newscaster was going on.

“Mr. Vanderdonck in the afternoon had ordered a special light supper sent to his suite at eleven o’clock and the waiter who brought it, finding there was no answer to his knocking, called the manager who entered with a passkey. The victim’s body was found sprawled on the couch in the living room with a thirty-eight caliber bullet through the head. According to the Medical Examiner he had been dead not more than three hours. Mr. Vanderdonck arrived this morning from Holland on the *Reendam* and came immediately to the hotel after passing the customs. He was well-known at the Metropole-Park, having stayed there at least twenty times on his business visits to New York, which were discontinued during the occupation of the Netherlands by the Nazis. No one could be found who had heard a shot or any other noise in his suite and there is no clue to the slayer. The police are working on what is the most baffling and sensational murder of the year. For our next news item. . . .”

Guthrie switched off the radio. “Not to us, it isn’t baffling. Time of death about eight o’clock. The bleached gent who came in just as you were leaving shot him, Brenda. It was a thirty-eight with a silencer he had in my ribs at the Ciel Bleu. Naturally there was no noise. And what he shot him for was the information in the cigarette you had just gone out with.”

“And who—who—”

“The police answered the phone. Of course they want to scoop you in. You’d be, by your admission, the last person to have seen him alive. It’s easy to imitate a Dutch or German accent. In any murder when a call comes in to the scene the police try to keep the caller talking until they can trace it and nab him or else lure him to the

scene. In your case, they’re waiting for you to show up. You’re due in fifteen minutes after which there will be a general alarm out for Miss Brenda Barnes, stenographer, whose home address they no doubt have off the personnel manager’s files by now if they haven’t found that slip you wrote.”

His eyebrows drew together and the rake of his jaw was grim. “You’re a fugitive now, Brenda. You can’t go back to your apartment. They’ll shoot the precinct detectives around there pronto to check up on your background while they’re waiting for you. You’re on the dodge with nothing but the clothes you stand up in.”

“So are you, Mr. Guthrie,” remarked Sidewalk Maxie, almost cheerfully. “So are you, Mr. Rush Guthrie of 160 East 57th Street where Miss Brenda said she was phoning from. Inside an hour you will be sitting on a red hot police griddle being asked what you know about Miss Mary Brenda Barnes Brandon, wanted for jewel theft and now in connection with a mysterious murder. Oh, yes, Miss Brenda, I have seen the silver-mounted autographed photograph of your father in uniform in your one-room apartment, besides plenty of other old identifications. There will be the quickest pounding of police you ever saw from your apartment to this one that you phoned from. We had better get the hell out.”

Guthrie’s mind was working at top pace. “We’ve got half an hour at least before they get suspicious over at the Metropole-Park and turn our way. Yes, I’m on the lam too, there’ll be a vacant desk at a certain real estate office tomorrow morning. And when we’re on the lam, just how do we keep on trying to get at the evidence that will clear the colonel?”

“We shall have to exercise our skulls to the best of our ability on that one,” said Sidewalk Maxie somberly. “Did you happen to notice a slight change and not for the better in the situation? You and Miss Brenda will be on the lam, yes, and the alarm for you will be on the teletype all over the place very rapidly but it will not be in connection with the jewels. Miss Brenda, identified as Mary Brandon by the stuff in her apartment was the last person to see Vanderdonck alive. If we try to get the police to hunt into the Vanderdonck-Brandon jewel angle, do you see what will happen? Vanderdonck

was linked with the theft, we think. If he was, what more logical than for Brandon's daughter to shoot him after Brandon's conviction? She will be wanted for the murder of the Dutchman and you as an accessory after the fact."

"Good God!" exclaimed Guthrie. He looked at Brenda who had gone white.

"It is just the kind of angle an ambitious District Attorney would love to develop and it is most hellishly circumstantial. Who would believe the tale about the bleached gent who came into the suite when nobody saw him? Is the bleached gent who shot Vanderdonck coming forward and assist in turning an electric switch on his own bottom? No, he has disappeared like paper profits in a Wall Street crash and we will never see him again."

He stopped, his eyes changing their expression to one of wariness.

"Maxie has exercised his skull. Have you got a gun, Mr. Guthrie?"

"My service Colt."

"Dress yourself with it."

"It's right here in the table," said Guthrie. There was something in Maxie's voice that made him pull the drawer out and produce the automatic forty-five.

"And for you, Miss Brenda, this little toy." Maxie lifted the flap of his vest and drew from his waistband the small, nicked twenty-eight. "Light but accurate. Most suitable for a lady if she can use one."

"We had firearms training in the Waves," said Brenda, taking it. "But what is this about?"

"We do not know what we are getting into. We have killers on one side of us, police on the other," said Sidewalk Maxie. His voice raised suddenly with authority in it. "I have exercised my skull well. You shall go into hiding at Maxie Salomon's office at 159 Bowery. Yes, 159 Bowery, Maxie Salomon's office, shall be your safe refuge. There is a most comfortable lounge in the rear office, which I have sumptuously fixed up. No, I never keep my stock there. It is all in my vault at the bank two blocks up street except for what I carry around loose in my pants. The experienced merchants on the Bowery Diamond Exchange only have their stock in their little coops of offices to show by appointment. And so—"

He lifted his head. From the near distance

drifted the sound of a siren. Guthrie heard it and jumped for the front window, looking out to the east. Racing along the next block were the red head lights, the car was blasting an obstruction of taxies out of its way with its siren.

"Police car, coming fast!"

"So we go like hell! Those are the police coming to pick up Guthrie. Miss Brenda is already wanted. We shall walk into their arms, if we go out the front door. By the fire-escape to the ground and even then I think they have got us."

"Not the fire-escape," said Guthrie. "Too slow for three people. Down the stairs to the basement and out the rear door into the courtyard, across it and into the rear door of the apartment house across the way. I've seen Pete Knowles go out that way over and over again for a short cut and come back from the tavern on the next street with an armload of beer."

"Quick! Pocket the cigarette and code paper. Do not put your lights out." Maxie had slipped to the window. "They are slowing down for the door."

IN a rush they went out of the apartment and down the flights of stairs, down the steps into the cellar and along the dim passage leading into the furnace room. They went through its murk and dust, reached the back door and opened it, stepping into the courtyard. Only that short distance across its span, Guthrie reflected, and they would be clear.

"It is a getaway," chuckled Maxie. "Miss Mary Brenda Barnes Brandon, Rush Guthrie and Maxie have made a smart lam."

"Stop right there!" the voice was hard and authoritative. The figure that had seemingly sprung from nowhere blocked their path. The glare of flashlight caught them full.

"Dick! Plainclothes dick!" gasped Maxie. "Slipped onto the back door!"

"Right, smart pants," said the officer. "No, Guthrie—"

The sentence choked off. Every muscle leaping into coordinated action Guthrie had jumped forward, swept aside the torch and flung his blow straight into the chin. The detective went "Aah!" on a broken note and fell over backward at full length.

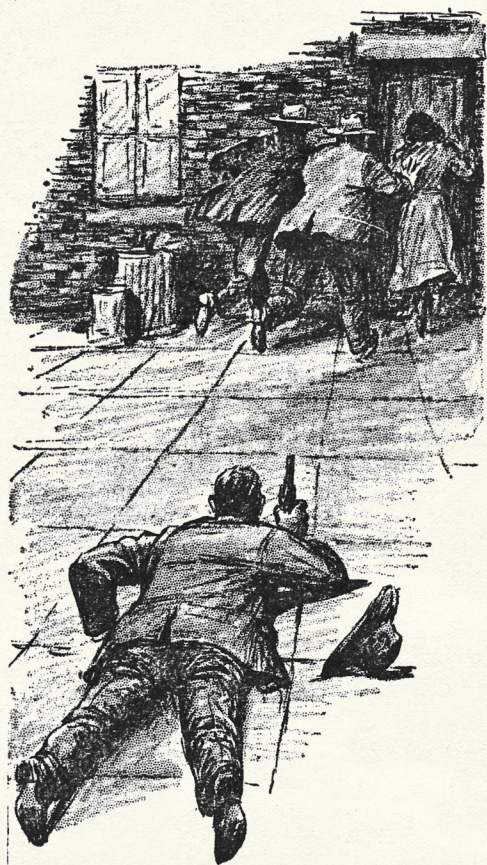
"Run for it!" flung out Guthrie. They

tore across the court for the rear wall of the building facing them.

"Stop!" came the command. It meant business. "Stop, or I fire!"

"You go to hell!" shouted Maxie.

The door confronted Guthrie. He yanked at its handle and it opened. Flame split the shadows of the court, bullet after bullet sang over it and slashed into the bricks, leg-high. The plainclothesman had been down but never out; he was lying on his stomach pumping lead. And then Guthrie was shoving Brenda through the door, Maxie plunged into it and he himself was on its other side, slamming it shut and shooting its bolt.



"Many is the time I have been grateful for the New York police's efficiency," wheezed Maxie. "This time I am not. I do not like to have holes shot in my pants leg. That was an experienced dick, firing to knock our pins out from under us."

"Keep going!" snapped Guthrie. They traversed a furnace room, dimly the dupli-

cate of the one on the other side of the court, reached the basement door and emerged onto the street. Across the way flashed the neon sign of the tavern, in front of it a pair of battered all night taxicabs were drawn up.

"Keep on going is correct," said Sidewalk Maxie. "Into one of those cans and out of this insalubrious neighborhood. At any instant that police radio car will come helling around the corner looking for us. Sidewalk Maxie, it would seem, is not as damn bright as he thinks he is. We switch cabs on the way to 159 Bowery. That is an all-night stand and easy to trace the three of us from."

They crossed the street and got into the cab. "Grand Central Station, Vanderbilt Avenue side," ordered Guthrie and the car rolled off. At the corner the red lights flashed violently into their faces, the siren tore the air. The radio car from in front of Guthrie's apartment house was wasting no time getting to their place of exit.

"No talking," said Maxie in a low voice. "I have already talked too much and taxi drivers have elastic ears as long as rabbits. They are continuously giving testimony in court as to what they heard going on in the back seat when they were supposed to be paying attention to their driving only."

"Okay," said Guthrie. Brenda said nothing. She was leaning back against the cushions, her face in the glow of the corner arc lights, worn but game. At Grand Central they got out and Guthrie paid off. They were going fast through the almost deserted cavern of the depot and there was no one near them.

Sidewalk Maxie's head was bent, his massive face glum.

"No, Maxie is not so damn bright. That experienced dick could not have missed hearing me yawp Miss Brendon's name and yours. Then you must feloniously bop the dick down and meantime I have pulled my gun, which of course he saw. There are some 20,000 police in New York City I have read of which about 15,000 will be looking for us. You see they now know who Miss Brenda is, your smash on that dick's jaw looked like an exhibition of guilt. So did our flight and I am listed as armed. That dick could not guess who I was so that leaves me as the only one of us who is not

fish for the police dragnet. Here, get in, we have broken the trail."

They had just come out on the Lexington Avenue side and Maxie's hand signaled the cruising taxi. They got in.

"Moe's Bowery Follies, the high-class Bowery nightery," he told the driver. "Know where it is?"

"Who doesn't?" remarked the driver and they were off. Midtown passed, the numbered streets drew to an end, the driver swung the cab off at Eighth Street and veered into the head of the Bowery. It was not far to go before they pulled up in front of the Bowery night club that had become the fashion for uptown cafe society parties. Its raucous din, the ululations of its singing waiters wafted out over the swing doors. Maxie freed the driver and they crossed the sidewalk and entered. Guthrie surveyed the mixture of raddled Boweryites, male and female, jostling elbows and steins at the bar with patrons in evening dress for only a moment and then Maxie's elbow poked his ribs.

"It was sufficient for the driver to see us go in. Now we go out. My office it is only a few blocks from here. We walk and once we get in there we hold a council of war and try to figure some way to smoke out that bleached gent."

In moments only they pulled up in the gloomy shadows before the narrow front that had "Max Salomon, Diamond Broker" on its plate glass windows behind the steel netting that also masked the door. Maxie produced a key and slipped it into the lock, twisting. The door opened and they went into an almost barren room with here and there a few chairs and showcases. A vague, eerie light seeped through the street windows.

"Not much of a front," remarked Maxie. "But it is all that is required. The real office is behind and here we are. As soon as I snap on the light you will see how magnificently it is appointed as to furnishings. Step in." He swung open the door and they entered. The window blinds were down, the place was pitch-black. "One moment while I find the switch. Oh, I did not do that!" There was a click and sudden light filled the room. "They are here!"

Three men faced Guthrie's group and each of them held a levelled gun. "Up!"

drove the savage command and Guthrie's hands went up, so did those of the others. Guthrie stared at two faces he had seen before, that of the bleached man, more threatening than ever as viewed over the barrel of the thirty-eight with its silencer and the apelike waiter now in loud, flaring-lapelled street clothes. The third man stood a trifle behind them.

Here was the leader, Guthrie knew in that single second, the big shot, the brains. The ultra-smooth, educated face with the narrow forehead and the contour that triangled down to a long, decisive chin was compelling, with its underlying craft smoothed over by the poise of experience and culture. The man's hair was blue-black, there was its blue-black tinge on the closely-shaven jaw. His eyes were dark slate and his superbly-cut double-breasted suit was of slate hue also. He was a symphony of subdued color and personality—subterranean, secret, secure.

He seemed completely in place in the luxurious office that the light disclosed. The big, carved flat-topped desk bulked in the center of the room, a wide leather-covered club lounge invited at one side, the carpet was of thick, soft pile and excellent etchings studded the walls. Back of the desk stood the heavy safe. That, a single filing cabinet, the typewriter on its stand by the desk and a scanty array of desk paraphernalia alone proclaimed the place of business, rather than the den of a man of means. Sidewalk Maxie had taste in decoration as well as in diamonds, it came to Guthrie.

AND then the apelike waiters' hands were wrenching the gun from his hip pocket, they were stripping Maxie of his arm-pit holster weapon, they had Brenda's tiny twenty-eight out of her handbag. The leader gestured and the waiter tossed the firearms into the silvered wastebasket that stood under the desk.

"So now we have here, Miss Mary Brenda Barnes Brandon, Rush Guthrie and Sidewalk Maxie Salomon," said the man with the blue-black hair.

"And whom have we got the surprise of meeting?" inquired Maxie. He had recovered his poise, his brown eyes were again alert.

"I am Henry Koppen, and these are

'Rake' Rowan, and his muscular aide 'Monk' Dowd." Koppen spoke almost mockingly, with an undertone of a thick accent. "No doubt but we have surprised you. But that is due to the quick ears of Rowan, who was on the fire-escape at Guthrie's apartment listening to practically all of your conversation."

"You traced me?" exclaimed Guthrie. "How?"

"Monk Dowd here who is an aide I put into the Ciel Bleu for various services heard you give your name and the information you were in the phone book to the young lady. I went back into the Ciel Bleu naturally," said Rake Rowan in his flat voice. "I have a pipeline into practically every high-class joint in town. She must have located you by the book, so did we. There's a narrow alley runs back into your rear courtyard, your name was listed in the vestibule as top floor. So by the fire-escape, with all the other tenants windows dark—" He shrugged stiffly. "The police? Simply a matter of traveling up the rest of the fire-escape to the roof and over the next three or four roofs to a skylight stairway and down to the street. The car with Koppen in it with Monk was around the corner and I heard Maxie give his address. We beat you here, that's all. And you know what we want."

"The red cigarette."

"Quite correct," said Koppen silkily. "We have been at great pains to get it."

"Including a nice little knock-off in the Hotel Metropole-Park," said Guthrie slowly. Out of the welter and the murk of this mystery bits and pieces were beginning to emerge that fitted together. "Vanderdonck was being eased out of the profits via the gun route, what? He brought the red cigarette in and once you had it he was to get his."

"Once more you think well," said Koppen. "He notified Rowan here when he contacted him that he had trusted the red cigarette, an old communications dodge of ours, to an innocent go-between and that he had telephoned me where to locate her at her home to pick it up. And then suddenly he became suspicious, in our business it is well not to trust people too much and——"

"He reached for his shoulder-holster," cut in Rake Rowan unemotionally. "We'd meant to rub him out anyhow. So I went

into action and plugged his head with no noise about it. Hell, he never had a shoulder holster! It was a cigar in his vest pocket he was after. He was dumb that way but not the other. He had never telephoned Koppen, I'd come in as he was going to. He just said he had."

"So you had my address and came for me," said Brenda quietly.

"And missed you. Due to this Guthrie poking his nose in. I tried for you, flopped at it, and notified Koppen, who took over. Now, whichever one of you has that cigarette, give with it."

GUTHRIE reached into his breast pocket and from behind the handkerchief took the tube with the king's size cigarette. "Here it is. What's in it?"

"You'll never find out," said Koppen. "Although it would be of particular interest to Miss Brandon, the colonel's daughter." He bowed. "I am in no mood for talk and I most certainly intend to see that none of you do."

Guthrie went taut in the same way that he had done in combat. This was a battlefield, the lighted office was as deadly a place as Omaha Beach or the plains of Belgium and the Rhine. Here the enemy was in well-cut civilian clothes, smooth, polished, but as ruthless as any begrimed machine-gunner of the Wehrmacht.

"Ever?" he inquired.

"Ever!" said Koppen. "You can pin the murder of Vanderdonck on Rowan. We all stand or fall together. And now—keep them covered, Rowan and Dowd." His eyes gleamed as he stepped to the big desk, drew the red cigarette from the tube and tore its end off. The tiny wad of tissue lay amid the shreds. He flattened it out, studied it, frowning. His teeth clicked a little. "Written in pencil, no heat required. 'Brandon' in clear as the key to the right code. There is what I want."

He tore the cover off the typewriter on its stand, next the desk, thrust a sheet of paper into it and began to tick off on the keys, decoding the message. He stood up, and his face was ghastly with its frustration. All the evil in the man had burst to the surface.

"Damnation! He has tricked us! This means nothing, absolutely nothing, it is

meaningless all except the word Brandon at the top!"

Guthrie's mind blazed. He struck and struck hard at this criminal in his moment of shock. "From which I gather that Vanderdonck brought the Brandon loot into New York for you to dispose of, on a pre-arranged plan, stashed it somewhere outside the Metropole-Park and now has sent you on a wild goose chase."

"Yes, damn him! Damn him to perdition! This is in our private special code for this job, but it is gibberish!"

"Ho, ho!" Sidewalk Maxie's chuckle was gigantic. "I have read the morning's papers all about Colonel Brandon and the case. So you are over here to sell the Brandon diamonds which Vanderdonck engineered the theft of somehow. You are a couple of damn smart worldwide crooks, operating in a big market with plenty of chances. Then Vanderdonck got too big for his boots or something so you decide to knock him off and pocket one hundred percent with no cut."

Koppen's features twisted. For the moment, at least, his guard was down. "Yes, damn him! I engineered this whole affair in London when I learned Syckel was on the Allied Board of Appraisers. Vanderdonck kept his collaboration with the Germans during their occupation secret, he obtained documentary evidence that Syckel, working in the Dutch Resistance, actually was selling out its leaders and he had mentioned it to me. Then we had Syckel, he had to steal the Brandon jewels or Vanderdonck would turn in the evidence which he kept in an Amsterdam bank box. That meant the firing squad for Syckel. It was easy, foolishly easy. With wax in his palm, and a cigar in his mouth, Syckel would ask Colonel Brandon for his cigar cutter, which he carried on the same ring as the vault and safe box keys. Brandon just passed him the ring; fastened to his belt on a long chain and there were the impressions. Syckel never took off his tall, square derby hat. It required just one minute when Syckel was left alone for him to enter the vault from the office with manufactured keys, dump the jewel box contents into the derby and slap it back on his head, lock up and walk out. To plant some of the jewels in Brandon's luggage and make a scapegoat was even simpler."

"I see," said Guthrie. "Mynheer Vanderdonck came into America in the same kind of derby. The jewels yesterday were in it on top of his head. The head which now has a hole in it."

"So now we have the background of a most important business deal," Sidewalk Maxie spoke pleasantly. "I assure you that business deals of very large proportions have been transacted in this office. I am a noted trader. Let us now begin to trade."

KOPPEN glared at him. "What are you talking about, you fool?"

"You are going to silence us by knocking us off? That is the first point I wish to take up."

"What else? Long ago I became a naturalized British subject operating as a broker in London and New York. Not only have I dealt with Vanderdonck for years but with other brokers on the Continent who are more interested in turning a big deal than in its legality and the profits in this field today are beyond the imagination. I still have many irons in the fire and a perfect, if small, organization in New York and one in London. Do I become a fugitive to let you three go? Murder is not a parlor charade in America."

"You are a splendid business man," complimented Maxie. "And we are very poor insurance risks unless I succeed in trading with you. We want out, Mister Koppen, with whole skins, particularly that of Miss Brenda Brandon. Now, what would you say if I told you that I know where the Brandon jewels are?"

"I'd say you are a damned liar!"

"Not Sidewalk Maxie. Listen, Mr. Koppen. You are not yourself the acme of honor among thieves. I notice that you intended to rub out your partner in the Brandon job, Vanderdonck, and thus scoop in the entire loot. What if this Vanderdonck, character also was not the acme of honor among thieves? What if he meant to stash the loot in a quiet spot after getting it past the Customs, arrange for its disposal, get himself a quick large payment and get out on this morning's Transatlantic plane after giving you a sweet run-a-round with a fake code message?"

Koppen's glare began to waver. A shade of uncertainty appeared on his face.

"Miss Brandon here was his stenographer up at the hotel. Miss Brandon, at what time did Vanderdonck phone for a reservation on this morning's plane to London?"

Brenda's eyes were bright. She spoke quietly.

"About half-past six o'clock."

"And he got it?"

"He did."

Guthrie leaned back, pulses pounding. Here in front of him Sidewalk Maxie was trading for the lives of the three of them, gambling on a tremendous bluff that was buying them time, at least, working toward some kind of an exit from their hopeless situation. And Brenda was backing him beautifully. There was nothing he could do himself for the moment but wait until Maxie slipped him his cue to act. Koppen's expression became appalling.

MAXIE administered a clincher. "In the course of time it will come out that this Vanderdonck had the sum of no less than \$200,000 in \$1,000 bills deposited in the Metropole-Park safe. That was his advance payment on the \$500,000 Brandon jewels. I know that."

"And how do you—?" Koppen was almost foaming.

"Because I gave it to him. Because he sold the Brandon jewels to me."

"Why, you—"

Sidewalk Maxie held up his hand. "Listen, Mr. Koppen, who could better dispose of a shovelful of hot ice like that than Sidewalk Maxie, the biggest diamond broker on the Bowery Exchange? This Brandon job it took many months to cook up and boil over. Long ago this Vanderdonck contacted me through one of his grapevines and I am passing up no such coin as he offered. Vanderdonck brought in the Brandon jewels in his hat, yes, he stashed them quietly and I paid him. He gets another \$70,000 when they are all sold. Maxie trousers \$200,000."

"And where are the jewels, blast you!" Koppen's face writhed. Suspicion had swept into belief, the crook's mind that trusts no one, it came to Guthrie, had been penetrated at its most vulnerable point.

"That I shall tell you when we three here are loose in the fresh air."

"Loose to talk if anything happens to you? Do you think I would take your

promise to shut up on this job with the police after you? You'll tell me this minute and you'll be glad to tell me. Monk, go to work on him!"

The huge, apelike man charged forward and yanked Maxie to his feet, he wrenched his right arm around behind his back and began to twist it upward. "Aah!" gasped Maxie and the cold sweat of pain burst on his forehead. Monk Dowd grinned the grin of a sadist.

"Keep it up," ordered Koppen. "Sidewalk Maxie we are no people to fool with. Talk!"

"N-no," gasped Maxie. "Only in fr-fresh air."

"Break it, Monk!"

There was a swift, cruel crack and Maxie's whole face went white, then a horrible gray. His broad body slumped, he was pitching to the floor.

"Fainted," said Koppen coldly. "Well, he learned. Put him on the lounge and throw a glass of ice water onto him. When he comes to he'll talk or there'll be more of it."

Guthrie sat aghast as the unconscious Maxie was slammed down beside him. He had tried and he had undergone excruciating agony and he had failed. Koppen was standing back behind the desk.

"He may have been telling the truth," he said, half aloud. "Then again he may not. In that case—" He picked up the substitute code message, staring at it. A tiny hiss escaped between his clenched teeth.

LEANING back on the lounge Guthrie hooked his thumbs casually into his lower vest pockets. Against his left thumb, crushed in the corner of the pocket, he could feel the tiny ball that was the original message. He sensed something was coming and coming fast.

"This is written in soft black lead. Vanderdonck in using our code, when not invisible, always wrote in red indelible pencil." Suddenly Koppen held the paper so the overhead light shone through it. "American make, American watermark, by God! Vanderdonck never wrote this! Guthrie had the cigarette a long while after it was passed to him. Either Brenda Brandon or Guthrie has taken out the real message and put this in! Strip them both to the hide and search them, Guthrie first!"

As Monk jumped forward Guthrie's finger and thumb brought up the paper pellule from his vest pocket and flashed it into his mouth. It was all he could do. He swallowed and felt it go down his throat.

"That was it," he said and sat back. "And don't ask me what it was on it. I don't know."

Koppen swerved and his face was feral. "So you've swallowed it! You switched the message! By God, you'll be ripped open for it before daylight. There's a disqualified doctor I know will open you up! Rowan, put a fast one through his head here and now! That'll be his anesthetic!"

Rake Rowan's gun came up and leveled on Guthrie's forehead.

"Okay, Koppen."

Guthrie braced hopelessly for the shock of the metal but it did not come. "No, no!" breathed Maxie from beside him. His face dripped from the water Monk Dowd had thrown into it and his senses were back. "I will talk, Koppen. Sidewalk Maxie will sing. The jewels are not six feet away from you."

"What is that?" crackled Koppen and Rowan's trigger finger eased.

"It was a very vague message to stall you off until he could hop the plane that Vanderdonck wrote, which is in Mr. Guthrie's stomach. It gave no clue to where the jewels are. Vanderdonck stopped here in his taxi from the boat and the business was done in this office. The most valuable goldfish bowl in the world is in that safe behind you. It is full of the Brandon jewels."

"You lie to me and—"

Maxie's head sank a little as pain wracked him, then he straightened.

"In minutes only you will know. Here is the combination, write it down. Aah!" a moan wrenched from him and he threw his body back on the lounge, bringing his left leg up across his knee. "Seven to the right, four back, six right, three back, seven right again, click and it opens."

Koppen was racing a pencil across a sheet of paper. He swung to the safe and knelt.

"You had better be right, Maxie," he called over his shoulder. "Or we waste no further time on any of you."

"Aah!" groaned Maxie again and his head sank onto his chest. The corner of his mouth moved. His expert whisper carried only to

Guthrie beside him. "Left pants' leg . . . gun . . . draw when safe opens . . . I can't . . . jewels there."

Guthrie sent his glance at the pants leg. There it was, the bulge of an automatic under the wide-cloth. Its butt was down, it was strapped where it could be pulled in a second. Sidewalk Maxie had made no idle boast when he had said that he was covered with arms from head to foot where you couldn't see them and this was one Koppen and his crew had missed. Broken-armed Maxie couldn't draw the ace in the hole he had been playing for all the time but Guthrie could. He had at last his cue for action.

". . . Three . . . seven . . ." came Koppen's voice from the safe. The handle clicked in the sudden tense silence, the door swung open. On the top shelf as the light poured into the safe's interior it was flung back dazzlingly by the myriad jewels that sparkled and coruscated with unbelievable lustre in the goldfish bowl.

"The jewels!" cried Maxie. "The Brandon haul, Rowan, Monk!"

Instinctively Rowan's head and Monk's turned to stare at the suddenly disclosed treasure.

"Guthrie!"

GUTHRIE'S hand shot in under Maxie's pants' leg, closed on the butt of the automatic and darted out. In that instant Rowan turned and tried to swerve his gun in time.

Guthrie snapshot, the report of the automatic slapped in the room and Rowan went backward, reeling under the shock of the slug, his right shoulder shattered, his weapon dropping from nerveless fingers. Maxie was up on his feet. Monk turned, snarling, just as Maxie's powerful foot, driving from the floor, took him full in the stomach. His jaw dropped, his mouth gaped and his yell of agony echoed as he went to his knees on the floor, clutching his stricken anatomy. Maxie grabbed the gun from his hand and Guthrie leaped for the desk where lay Koppen's automatic, discarded while he worked at the safe. Brenda had Rowan's thirty-eight up from the carpet.

"All right, Koppen," snapped Guthrie. "Get them up!"

"Three guns on you, Koppen." Maxie

managed a grin between twitches of pain. "The pleasure is now ours."

"Go sit on that lounge with your hands on top of your head," ordered Guthrie. "You too, Rowan," he cast at the raging man with the shattered right shoulder who leaned weakly against the wall. "As for Monk when he gets up—"

The apelike man had clawed to his hands and knees. He was rising and there was fight in his savage face. "He is mine," said Maxie grimly. "I have a slight score to settle with this baby who has made me temporarily left-handed." He stepped forward and the barrel of his gun slapped down hard on Monk's skull. "Baby lie down. Popper spank." Monk's breath expelled from his lungs and he went face down on the floor. The knife he had slipped from his waistband lay beside him. "One less to guard. He will stay out cold until the police get here."

ON the lounge Rowan huddled and Koppen sat, glaring viciously, both done for and they knew it. "You fell for a load of trader's talk, which you should know better, Koppen," said Maxie. "It is because you have a crooked mind you were ready to believe Sidewalk Maxie, the diamond broker, had gone crooked too. Those beautiful jewels in the safe? Zircons. Should any enterprising safe blower open up Maxie's box the laugh is on him. For a minute he would think he had a fortune like the Brandon jewels."

"You won't get those. You'll never find them," gasped Koppen. "The code to where they are is in Guthrie's stomach."

"We shall not open up Mr. Guthrie's insides for that paper, or take him to a doctor like a child which has swallowed a penny," said Maxie. "Sidewalk Maxie has a memory like an elephant. I memorized the code at your apartment, Mr. Guthrie."

"So what? You don't know what the code is," snarled Koppen. "You'll never break it. Only I know it, now Vanderdonck is out. It was invented for just this job."

Brenda spoke and her voice was cool and confident. "I know what it is."

"What?" exclaimed Guthrie.

"Maxie, dictate to me the message you memorized." Brenda stepped to the typewriter and ran a clean sheet into its roller. "Go!"

A string of letters and numbers rolled from Maxie and Brenda's fingers tapped them down. "Here it is," she cried. "The code,"

O W B B A R B
K I X J V I Z
2 3 7

"Now, watch me break it. Koppen, I could see your fingers on the keyboard as you decoded the Guthrie phony. As an expert stenographer, naturally, I can type blindfolded, I know where every letter is placed on the keyboard."

She tapped again and sat back. The smile of triumph was on her flushed, oval face.

"For the real letter of the Brandon code between you and Vanderdonck you hit the key to the right of the written letter. The typewriter keyboard is your master code book. Here we are,"

P E N N S T N
L O C K B O X
3 4 8

"He stopped off at the Pennsylvania Station in his taxi on the way from the dock to the hotel and cached the loot in Locker 348."

"Brenda!" shouted Guthrie and all his heart was in the shout.

"Good girl! Bullseye!"

"It is bullseye for one hundred percent!" gloated Maxie. "And here is where Maxie proceeds to clean up the remaining debris, now occupying the sofa and floor. In a most short period you will hear the yowl of the squad car bearing the blue uniforms from Headquarters which will take care of these gentry, after which we shall demand a squad car ourselves to be conveyed to the Metropole-Park where the now concluded case is still being investigated. Guthrie, my friend, will you dial Police Headquarters on that desk telephone, and I shall talk."

IV

"THERE you are, Mr. Salomon," said the doctor and stepped away. "Just keep it in that position, take it easy and it'll knit in no time. See your own medico."

Sidewalk Maxie with his right arm in splints and a sling grinned pleasantly. He

sat on the sofa in the ornate living room of the Metropole-Park suite, that was crowded with blue uniforms and plain clothes. The full machinery of the police and the District Attorney's office was in action, winding up this particular homicide. Guthrie sat confronting the keen-faced assistant D.A. and the stenographer's notebook had pages and pages of pothooks in it.

"I think that'll be about all, Mr. Guthrie," said the D.A. crisply.

"We've got the statements of the three of you and this case ought to be marked 'closed'. Ballistics should show that the bullet that killed Vanderdonck came from Rowan's thirty-eight and that'll mean the chair. Koppen will get his for planning the murder and Dowd to a lesser degree for participating. Rowen has long been suspected of selling narcotics through night club channels such as Dowd. As for clearing your father, Miss Brandon—"

"Ho, ho," roared Maxie. "When the Dutch authorities dig that collaboration evidence out of Vanderdonck's safe box in Amsterdam the Syckel character will yell his head off confessing the theft of the Brandon haul to get himself seven years in an American calaboose instead of a Holland firing squad funeral for selling out underground leaders, and who wouldn't? By tonight sometime Colonel Brandon should be free and there will be some very red faces amongst the court-martial brass hats."

Guthrie looked at Brenda. The weariness, the strain seemed to have dropped from her face and it was shining. The look she sent him in return made him tingle. "Also, it will be 'Come home, Miss Brandon, all that bail jumping is forgiven'" went on Maxie. "Is that not so, Mr. D.A. Harlow?"

District Attorney Harlow smiled. "Something like that. A few technical odds and ends to untangle."

"And here comes something that is no odds and ends," jubilated Maxie. Two plainclothesmen had entered the suite and one of them carried a paper bag under his arm. "Here we have the dicks who went down to the Penn Station with that locker key 348 that was found, okay, in Vanderdonck's case of keys."

Every face in the crowded room turned

to the detective with the bag. He stepped to a table at the wall and upended the bag. From it poured a mass of oranges. Despair swept Guthrie like a black cloud.

"It is double-crossed! It is sold out!" shouted Maxie.

"Huh?" inquired the detective. He plunged his hand into the bag, drew out the newspaper that wadded it near the bottom and tilted the bag again. There was a thud and the oiled-silk package struck the table. He untied it and began to pour. In a sparkling stream the diamonds cascaded out. Diamonds! Guthrie's brain seemed to go numb, looking at their radiant richness.

"The iceman cometh after all!" gurgled Maxie. "That Vanderdonck bought his California fruit in the station."

"The Brandon jewels, all right," said Harlow. "Everything fits in now." The crowd in the room thronged up to the table.

"They are," said Brenda quietly. "She touched several of the larger stones. 'I can swear to cataloguing these.'"

"Some people I could call by the names of Koppen and Rowan are going to be mighty sick down where they are in their jail coops," said Maxie. "Let them clam up all they want, Mr. John Law has the goods on them. And what goods these are!"

WITH his free hand Sidewalk Maxie picked up a fistful of the diamonds and trickled them through his fingers.

One of the stones, gleaming whitely, fell to the floor and rolled. Guthrie and Brenda bent down for it at the same time.

"Oh!" she cried as their heads met.

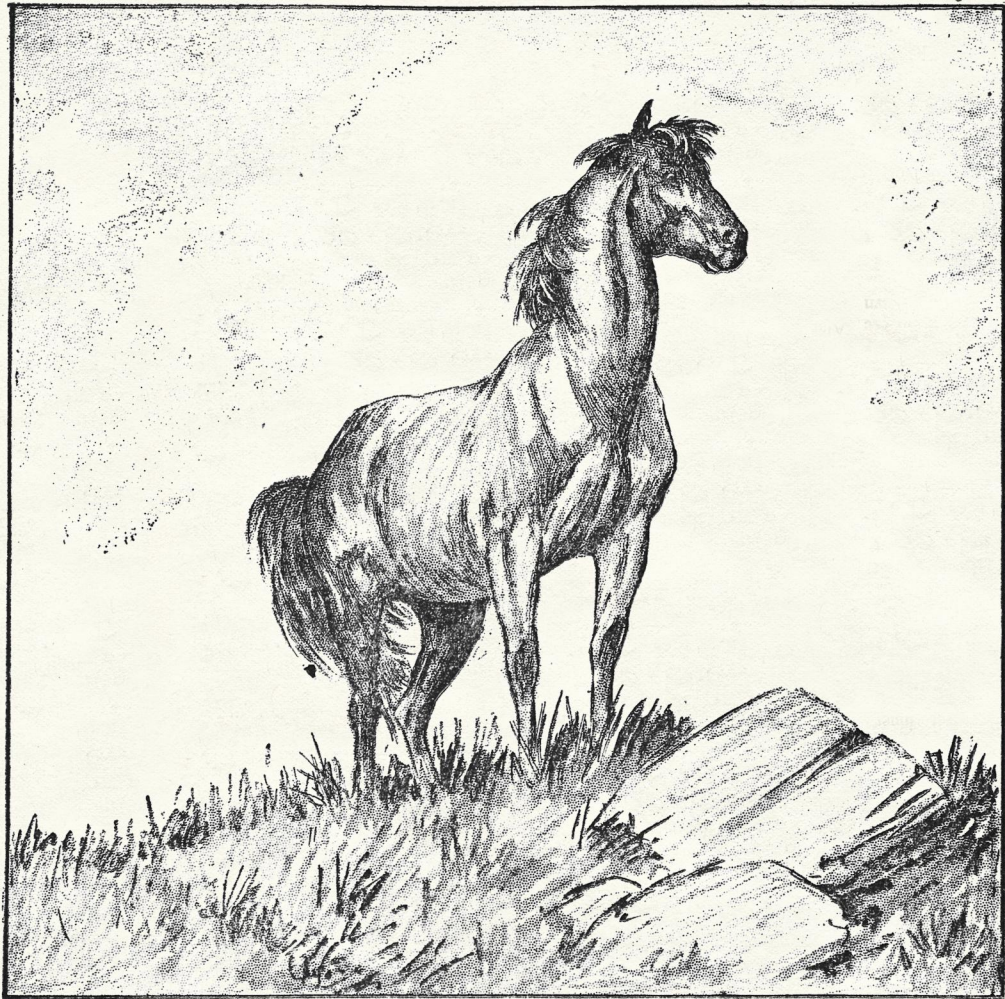
"Sorry," said Guthrie. Somehow he felt he was going to stutter. Her smooth cheek was next to his. Her eyes glowed.

"I've got it. And—and—er—" The small diamond gleamed in his palm. "Brenda—how about one like this for you—in a ring, third finger—yes?"

"Yes," she said softly and all along he had known she would.

"Ho, ho, ho, I heard you!" roared Sidewalk Maxie. "Legal Stenographer, take that down for evidence out of which my good friends Rush Guthrie and Miss Brandon cannot wriggle in front of any court. A roomful of police have heard his confession and hers!"

. . . and After That, Lodi Ranged the Quemado
Mountains, Free Once More



THE GREY STALLION

By PHILIP KETCHUM

THIS is the story of Lodi. It is a favorite story of the old timers around Camarillo. They tell it over and over again, with scarcely any variation in chronology or detail. There is no way in which I can vouch for the truth of the story, for it happened long ago and the people concerned have been long dead. I can, how-

ever, pass on this bit of advice. If you should ever hear the story of Lodi from one of these salty old men in the Camarillo country, don't question it and don't look skeptical. They take the story very seriously. For them, Lodi really lived.

Lodi, they will tell you, was born on the high, wind-swept plateaus of the Quemado Mountains. He was a grey, mustang stallion,

sixteen hands high. A solid grey color in a mustang was something rare and sixteen hands is almost giant size. Lodi was fast, too, they will tell you, fast, and with an endurance which was remarkable. For years wild horse hunters tried to trap him, but only a few of the best came even close. Most of the men around Camarillo were sure that Lodi would never be caught.

But he was caught, finally. Just how it was done, no man knows. There is no record of the name of the man who caught him. In telling the story they say it was a Yaqui Indian who roped and broke, the huge, grey stallion. They describe him as young, thin, haggard. They say he looked as though he had been to hell and back the morning he rode Lodi into town, and that he sold him to Will Noble for twelve dollars without quibbling at all over the price, sold him and disappeared. That seems to be all anyone knows of the Yaqui. It's certainly clear that he didn't stay around to boast of the way he had trapped Lodi. And it seemed amazing, at first that even an Indian would sell a horse like Lodi for twelve dollars.

Will Noble probably couldn't believe his good fortune. Even in those days the average mustang was worth from fifty to sixty dollars. Lodi might easily have brought a hundred. In fact Sam Dockweiler after only a brief glance at the grey stallion offered to buy him for a hundred dollars. Will Noble however wasn't selling. He was a man in the early twenties and was deeply involved in the courtship of Lydia Sprague, the banker's daughter. He was facing a good deal of competition from other young men and it undoubtedly occurred to him that he could cut quite a figure mounted on Lodi and dashing up to Banker Sprague's door. Lodi would certainly give him an advantage in impression over some of the other suitors.

Things didn't work out that way, however, Will rode Lodi home that night and the next afternoon, saddled the grey stallion for a trip back to town to see Lydia. Will was a good horseman, a good-broncpeeler, but he said later that he had never forked more dynamite in his life than on that afternoon. Lodi went wild when he swung into the saddle. Will couldn't hang on more than a few minutes. When they

picked him up he had a broken arm, a broken hip, and several cracked ribs.

Will spent the next six months flat on his back, getting well. During that time, Lydia Sprague married a man from Encino; Jim Purdy, who held a mortgage on Will's ranch, foreclosed it; and Sam Dockweiler acquired the ownership of Lodi at a public sale.

It seems strange, but from that time on, no one had any trouble in riding the grey stallion. Some men say Will Noble rode better than he thought, that he rode Lodi's fighting spirit to death. Others insist there was a burr under the saddle blanket the afternoon when Lodi acted up. I wouldn't know how to explain it but there is no other record of wildness on the part of the big grey.

THE day Sam Dockweiler bought Lodi, his barn burned down. Two days later his house caught on fire and went so swiftly that hardly any of the furniture could be saved. What had caused these two fires, Dockweiler didn't know. It only made him angry when his wife blamed Lodi. Thelma Dockweiler hadn't wanted him to buy the grey stallion. She had been afraid of Lodi because of what had happened to Will Noble.

"Lodi brought the fire, Sam," she insisted. "Just look in his eyes. If you ever saw evil, there it is."

Sam Dockweiler looked into Lodi's eyes. They did seem to have a flashing, fiery tinge which he hadn't noticed before. He told himself it was ridiculous to think that Lodi could have had anything to do with the fire, but he still felt a little uneasy. He had certainly never been troubled by fire before he bought the grey.

"Get rid of him, Sam," his wife begged. "Get rid of him before something terrible happens to us."

Sam Dockweiler almost agreed but after further thought he decided not to be influenced by the hysterical imagination of his wife. He kept Lodi two weeks longer. During that time his wife caught a serious cold and almost died. The lumber he had ordered for a new house and barn was mired down in an arroya and then carried away by a flash flood. His two best men quarreled with him and quit.

The night before he sold Lodi, Sam Dockweiler rode over to see Will Noble. He rode over to ask one question. He rode over to ask, "Will, did you ever hear that horse laugh?"

Will nodded his head soberly. "Yes, I heard him laugh, Sam. He laughed while he was bucking and when he pitched me over his head. It's like no horse sound I ever heard. It cuts through you like a knife. Lodi is still as wild as the country in which he was born."

"He's saddle broke," Sam insisted. "He's the greatest horse I ever owned, Will."

"But do you feel comfortable on him?"

"I don't even feel comfortable with him around."

"Set him free, Sam."

Sam Dockweiler shook his head. "I can't afford to. I'm going to sell him. I don't want to but I'm afraid to keep him any longer. Ed Tarboe wants him. I told him that in my opinion, Lodi was a bad-luck horse, but Ed still wants him."

Will Noble shrugged his shoulders. He said, "All right, Sam. Do whatever you wish but don't bring him back here. You couldn't give him to me."

ED TARBOE paid sixty dollars for the grey stallion. He couldn't afford it but he had always wanted to own a really good horse and he had never seen a horse he liked any better than the grey.

He kept Lodi for almost a month. During that time, every well on his ranch went dry and rustlers hit the Tarboe herds three times in succession, almost stripping his range of cattle.

There is nothing strange about a well going dry. There is nothing unusual in rustling. Ed Tarboe told himself this in all seriousness, yet he could not overlook the fact that other wells in this part of the country were still fresh; that other ranchers with cattle more accessible to the border than his, hadn't been bothered by rustlers.

The final blow to Ed Tarboe came in the form of a letter from his mother-in-law, stating that she would arrive within a week for a long visit. Ed and his mother-in-law didn't get along. He would rather have been visited by any plague under the sun.

"You're a bad-luck horse, Lodi," Ed Tarboe said to the grey stallion after receiving

this letter. "You half killed the first man who bought you. The second man to own you lost his house and barn. You have cost me my wells, my cattle and my peace of mind. The quicker I get rid of you, the better. I hate to let you go, Lodi, for you're all horse, but you're not for me. And don't laugh. Don't laugh, or I'll shoot you."

Lodi tossed his head and gave a shrill whinny. Tarboe said later that the big grey understood him, understood every word. "But, of course, I didn't shoot him," Tarboe added. "Why should I have shot him? Tom Hammett was ready to pay me forty dollars for Lodi and I wanted that forty bucks."

TOM HAMMETT was middle-aged. He had an attractive daughter, a dependable son and a young and beautiful second wife. He was a practical man. He didn't believe in luck, either good or bad. He discounted the stories he had heard about Lodi. As nearly as he could tell, Lodi was a horse worth a good deal more than forty dollars, therefore he was glad to buy Lodi for forty dollars. He would go on as he always had, making his own luck.

In six weeks, however, he didn't feel that way. Shortly after Tom Hammett bought Lodi, his son got into a shooting scrape in town and fled for the Border, a scant half-hour ahead of the sheriff. Ten days later Tom's daughter married a gambler from Maysville, a man with an evil reputation. While Tom was trying to recover from these two blows, his wife ran off with a whiskey drummer from Omaha. She took with her all the money Tom had banked in what he thought was a hidden drawer in his desk.

This was enough, even for Tom Hammett. He couldn't blame Lodi, of course, for what his son had done. He couldn't blame Lodi for his daughter's unwise choice of a husband. He couldn't blame Lodi for the loss of his wife and his money. All this, Tom Hammett knew, but certainly, no ill fortune of such proportions had come to him before he owned Lodi. There was something else which annoyed him. Whenever he went out to the corral to saddle-up, Lodi would toss his head in an almost derisive gesture and would whinny in a way which was very close to a laugh.

"You've got to go, Lodi," Tom Hammett said finally. "I still don't believe in bad

luck but I'm not going to keep you. You're going up for sale, right away."

Tom Hammett offered Lodi for sale that night in Camarillo, offered him for sale for forty dollars, but found no buyers. For a week the offer stood. During that week a prairie fire stampeded close to a hundred head of Hammett's cattle into Yucca gorge. Tom came down to twenty dollars after that and then to twelve, the same price which Will Noble had paid the Indian. He asked twelve dollars for Lodi, twelve dollars for the finest grey mustang stallion the Camarillo country had ever seen. He found no buyer.

Out of his desperation came his great idea. He talked it over with Sam Dockweiler. He talked it over with Ed Tarboe. He talked it over with a few other men in the Adobe saloon, men to whom he had offered Lodi, and who had refused to buy the grey stallion at any price.

"Make up a purse of twelve dollars," he suggested. "Make it up in secret. Don't give me or anyone else the names of any who contribute. Bring me the twelve dollars. I will write out a bill of sale to Jim Purdy. We will give the grey stallion to Jim Purdy as a gift. If there is any man in this country who can stand a little bad luck, it is Jim Purdy."

There was a general agreement on that. Jim Purdy was undoubtedly the meanest man in Camarillo. He was a close-fisted miser. He held mortgages on nearly every ranch in the valley, on most herds of cattle,

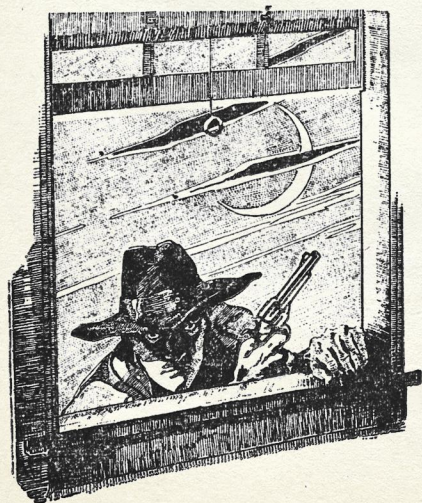
on most crops. He was grouchy, bitter, unfriendly. He was about sixty years old. He lived with his wife in a house on the edge of town and his wife was as unfriendly as Jim. They had no children.

The suggestion of making Jim Purdy a present of the grey stallion was one to grip the imagination. Everyone who had owned Lodi had experienced misfortunes. The misfortunes had been increasingly severe. Jim Purdy was an ideal candidate for what the grey stallion must have in store for its next owner. The purse of twelve dollars was quickly made up. It was brought to Tom Hammett and a bill of sale was made out, transferring the ownership of Lodi to Jim Purdy.

Lodi was hitched to the tie-rail outside the saloon. What passed for Jim Purdy's office was in a shack across the street. Quite a group of men watched Tom Hammett unsaddled the grey stallion and lead him over toward Purdy's office. When Lodi tossed his head and whinnied, Tom Hammett laughed. Tom was beginning to feel good.

All the men in town gathered in the street for the presentation. Tom Hammett called Purdy outside and handed him the reins.

"I don't know who bought this horse for you, Jim," he explained. "The men wouldn't give me their names. As I get it some of them went together and made up a purse to get you a real horse. I reckon maybe they appreciate what you've done for them and for Camarillo. Anyhow, Lodi is yours."



TWO MIGHTY fighters of the West—Colorado, the Red; Ike Poe, the Black. Unlucky or Lucky, Fate Pulled Their Trails Together.

A whole county reverberated to the clash—legends grew and smoke lazed upwards before gun hands were withdrawn. . . .

"A Gun Debt Gathers Interest"

A long novelette in our next issue . . . by

WALT COBURN

Jim Purdy stared wide-eyed at the grey stallion. He certainly had heard of Lodi. He probably had heard what everyone else had heard, but a real pride came into his face as he stood there. His shoulders straightened a little.

"You mean that Lodi is really mine?" he asked under his breath.

"He's really yours," Tom Hammett answered.

Jim shook his head sadly. "He's a finer horse than I need. I don't ride much any more. I couldn't hitch a horse like Lodi to a buggy."

"Sure, you could," Sam Dockweiler grinned.

Jim went on shaking his head. "No, I couldn't. Lodi is too fine a horse to be hitched to a buggy. He's too fine to carry a man around on his back. He belongs where he came from, up on the high plateaus of the Quemados. I'm going to set him free. I'd love to keep him, but I can't. It's all right, isn't it, if I set him free?"

"You can do what you want to," Hammett growled, "but you're getting rid of a mighty fine horse if you set him free."

Jim Purdy shrugged his shoulders. He moved closer to Lodi. He reached up and stroked Lodi's neck. He pulled gently at Lodi's ear. There were tears in his eyes. After a moment he pulled off the bridle.

"Beat it, Lodi," he said thickly. "Go back to the high country. Keep away from the world of men. Most of them aren't very nice."

Lodi reared suddenly into the air. He snorted. And then, as though he had understood perfectly what Jim Purdy had said, he wheeled and started up the street at a mad gallop.

Jim Purdy was standing there, watching him, watching the grey stallion out of sight, when Bill McAdams, the postmaster, touched him on the shoulder.

"Here's a letter which came for you this morning, Jim," McAdams stated. "I missed giving it to you when you called for your mail."

Jim Purdy took the letter. He opened it and read it. He caught his breath. He looked around at the crowd of men. "This is from some attorneys in Boston," he said slowly. "My sister, who died a month ago,

has left me her entire estate. It amounts to over a hundred thousand dollars. This means we can go ahead on the San Isabel dam project. A hundred thousand will just about pay the bill. The San Isabel dam will mean a lot to Camarillo."

No one had a thing to say. Tom Hammett fingered the twelve dollars in his pocket, the twelve dollars he had received for the sale of Lodi.

"Hey, Jim!" called a voice from down the street. "Hey, Jim Purdy!"

Everyone turned and looked that way. Mojave Joe Ryan had just hit town. Mojave Joe was an old prospector. He looked more seedy than usual. He looked excited. He was waving a sample of ore in the air.

"We're rich, Jim," he was shouting. "I've hit it, this time. Really hit it. Gold that assays ten thousand a ton. A mountain of it. Half of it's yours, Jim, for the grubstake you gave me. We're rich, Jim. Rich!"

"That's fine, Mojave," Jim Purdy nodded. "That's—"

His voice broke off. Beyond Mojave Joe, Doc Weller was hurrying up the street. At the sight of the doctor, Jim Purdy's face lost all its color. He tried to say something, but couldn't.

Doc Weller was a big man. He was wearing a wide grin as he joined the crowd. "You'd never guess what's happened," he declared. "You'd never guess it in a million years. Look at Jim Purdy over there. He's the father of twins. His wife just gave birth to a boy and a girl, as perfect youngsters as I ever saw in my life. Mrs. Purdy came through it fine. I reckon the drinks are on Jim Purdy, huh? The father of twins at sixty. That's going some."

Everyone stared at Jim Purdy whose face had turned as red as a beet. Jim was grinning, actually grinning. With a grin on his face he didn't look mean at all. Men crowded around him to offer congratulations and suddenly Tom Hammett pointed to the high bluff above the town.

There, on the edge, clearly outlined against the sky, was Lodi, the grey stallion. He tossed his head and gave a thin, shrill cry which sounded almost as though he were laughing. He gave that sound again, then turned and streaked toward the Quemado Mountains.

MEN who wouldn't DIE!

by George C. Appell



Born to Live

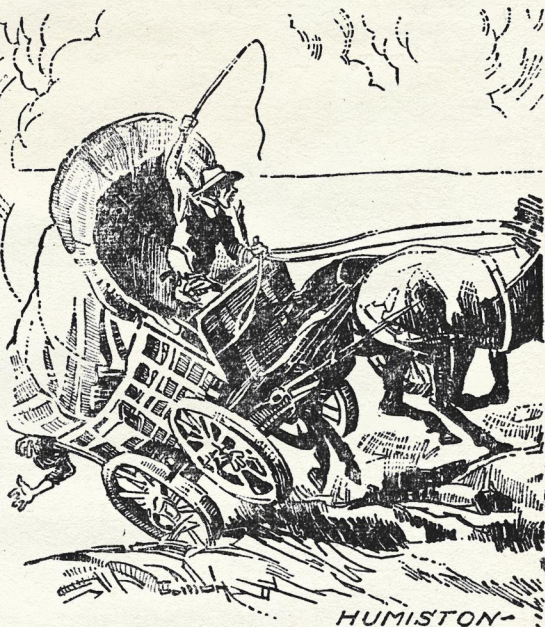
THEY were tough, in the Old West; tough as a buffalo's back.

Some of them wouldn't die until you'd hacked off their heads and run a chuck wagon over their mouths. That's how tough some of them were. Not all, of course. But some.

There was George Cowan. He died five times in two days and lived to laugh at it. He just wasn't ready to stay dead.

It was in 1877, when the Army was trying to chase Chief Joseph of the Nez Percés into Canada. Either that, or catch him first. Joseph always slipped away, slipped north ahead of the Blue. And near Radersburg, Montana, the lusty Nez Percé jumped a party of six men and two women. One of the men was George Cowan, and one of the women was his wife. Joseph's orders that no woman was to be harmed were carried out. But George was shot in the head and again in the thigh.

Two braves leapt on him for the kill



when his wife—latter-day Pocahontas!—threw herself on George and kicked at the attackers. They darted away to take scalps, and George hauled himself into a tree and hid in the foliage. An Indian spotted him and shot him in the back. George fell, unconscious, and was left for dead.

He came to, and finding himself alone, crawled for miles on his belly. Semi-delirious from loss of blood and starvation, with three bullet holes, he finally managed to get a fire going. But the flames spread, he was too weak to put them out, and was burning to death when searchers, attracted by the flames, saved him.

They put him in an ambulance.

The team ran away.

After the ambulance had crashed, overturned and stopped, they dragged out George and carried him to a town that had a hotel. In bed, he felt well enough to have visitors. Many came, and for lack of other furniture, sat on the bed.

It broke and fell apart.

But George Cowan recovered soon afterward, and lived a long and healthy life.

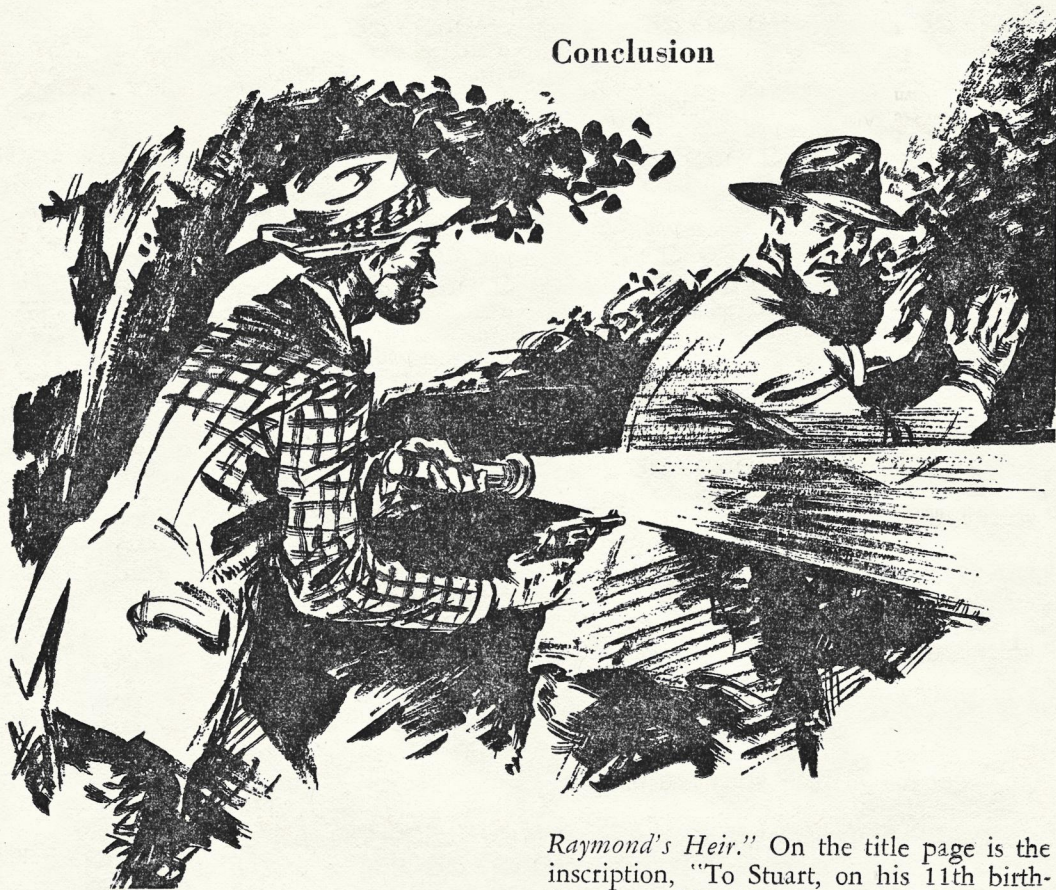
Blackmail Is as Dangerous as Well as a Treacherous Occupation

MURDER '97

By FRANK GRUBER

Author of the Simon Lash Stories

Conclusion



THE STORY SO FAR

READERS of SHORT STORIES have met Simon Lash, private investigator, before. He's quite a guy, as, in his own way, is Lash's right hand man and strong arm, Eldie Slocum. Eddie can hardly get over the fact that Simon's latest case has to do with books; even worse, with book collectors.

Undue interest seemed to have been aroused in Horatio Alger collections, and a client of Lash's wants him to trace the boy whose name appears in a copy of "*Ralph*

Raymond's Heir." On the title page is the inscription, "To Stuart, on his 11th birthday from his Aunt Clarissa, February 2, 1897." Simon's client, Sterling Knox, hires him to find out about this "Stuart." He says his interest is simply one of curiosity; this Simon doubts; more so after he finds some underlined words in the book itself which make a message, "*This is poison they have given me. If I die, my cousin Paul is the murderer.*"

Lash follows the sales of the old book back through the hands of book sellers and jobbers till he finds it once belonged to a Claude Benton of Mt. Miller, Illinois—a place where Sterling Knox once lived. Only



Simon also discovers that the man who came to him about the book was using the name of Sterling Knox—a book collector—but that his real name is Halpin and that he also knew Mt. Miller, Illinois.

A girl comes to see Lash, also about Alger books, giving the name of Nell Brown, but she turns out to be Nell Benton, divorced wife of Charles Benton, Claude's son. He brushes her off, but discovers he and Eddie are being tailed by a man from the office of Harry Cross, another private dick, and can't find out from Cross what it's all about. Then the police arrive; the real Sterling Knox has been murdered, and will Lash explain his connection with the man. Lash won't, but says he himself has been knocked out. To himself he keeps the fact that the Alger book with the message has been stolen from his possession, and when Clare Halpin, daughter of Lash's client, comes to him looking for a copy of "*Ralph Raymond's Heir*" he puts a fake inscription in another copy

of the book he has picked up, but still can't get a clue to the disappearance of the first one.

He sends Sam Carter to Mt. Miller to check up on the pasts of the various characters and Sam is gored to death by a bull belonging to George Halpin. "Accident," say the local authorities. "Murder," says Simon Lash, and goes to Mt. Miller to investigate. Here he meets Claude Benton, unexpectedly in town.

PART III

XVII

DOWN in the lobby, only one loafer remained. Benny, the night clerk, still had the *Racing Form* on the desk in front of him, but he wasn't reading it. His face wore a rather pained expression, which could be either an attack of indiges-

tion or Benny, thinking, about something unpleasant.

Lash went up to him.

"I understand Mr. Benton reserved his suite of rooms two weeks ago."

"Yeah, that's right."

"By telegram."

"I don't know how he reserved them. Mr. Hale, the owner of the hotel, told me Mr. Benton would be out and to keep those rooms for him."

"He comes here frequently?"

"'Bout once every twenty years."

Lash gave the clerk a look of disgust and walked out of the hotel. Harry Clyde was still behind the wheel of his car. His eyes were closed when Lash came up, but he wasn't sleeping.

Lash got in beside him. "The newspaper office."

Clyde started the car, made a quick U-turn and headed down Main Street.

Remington, the newspaper publisher, was still in his office. He had a huge stack of bound file copies on his desk and was going through them. His eyes lit up when Lash came into the office.

"Look what you've got me doing!"

Lash noted the date of the file Remington had opened. 1898. Remington saw his glance. "The year of the big crash," he said. "Billings, small-town tycoon, taken by Chicago financiers." He slapped the newspaper. "It's all here, but my old man was afraid of libel and handled the city boys pretty carefully. The first announcement of Billings' railroad affiliations said the group—that's Billings and the city slickers—already had the railroad franchise."

"I'd imagine that'd be the first thing they'd get."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Remington said. "And from what I gather about Ralph Billings he was a pretty cagey lad. I don't think he'd sink two hundred thousand into a scheme unless he looked it over pretty carefully."

"Is that what he went for—two hundred thousand dollars?"

Remington nodded. "Which was a lot of money in those days—and a helluva lot for a man in a town of 800 population which is what Mt. Miller had in those days."

"Only it wasn't all his own money. Some of it belonged to the bank."

"Where'd you get that?"

"Claude Benton."

"You've talked to him?"

"I just came from there. He told me he was a second cousin of Stuart Billings."

"I could have told you that myself."

"What else can you tell me?"

"About Claude Benton?"

"About Claude Benton, the Halpins, the Billingses—Sterling Knox."

"Sterling Knox?"

"Yes."

"I don't see the connection between Sterling Knox and—well, Claude Benton."

"Murder," Lash said quietly.

Remington looked narrowly at Lash for a moment, then suddenly he inhaled softly. "Of course—you're investigating Sterling Knox's death in California! You sent Sam Carter here on some angle—and *he* was murdered."

"You've got the picture. Sam Carter was digging up information for me—information I needed to solve the murder of Sterling Knox. He was killed and no matter what anyone says, no matter what it looks like, nobody will ever convince me that Carter wasn't murdered."

"Can I quote you on that?"

"In your local paper?"

Remington grimaced. "The Chicago papers. I'll telephone them the story."

"Go ahead." Lash indicated the phone. "Now."

Remington needed no further urging. He picked up the phone and said, "Emma, get me the Chicago *Daily Globe*, will you?" A moment later he had the newspaper and asked for the city editor. When he got him, he said, "This is Chester Remington, publisher of the Mt. Miller *Gazette*. We've had a murder here and I thought you might be interested in the story. It involves some rather big people." He scowled. "No, not big Mt. Miller people. Claude of Benton's Department Store, in New York . . . Fine . . . Well, here's the story. A man named Sterling Knox—yes, Knox's Shoe Stores of Chicago—was murdered yesterday in Hollywood, California . . . You've had that story? The connection is that Knox's home town is Mt. Miller, Illinois. And Claude Benton's too. Anyway, a famous California detective named Simon Lash was engaged to investigate the murder of Sterling Knox,

in California. He got in touch with a private detective from Chicago—a named Sam Carter. Well, Carter was killed here last night, within six hours after arriving in town. No—no, the sheriff called it an accidental death. He was found in a pasture, gored by a bull . . .”

At that point Lash slipped out of the office, sprang into Clyde's car at the curb. “The telephone office—quick!”

Clyde seemed a little surprised, but shot the car around the corner, passed the Bijou Theatre and brought it to a squealing stop in front of the telephone building.

Lash dashed up the stairs, opened the door and caught the night phone operator, hunched over her board, her eyes squinted in thought, as she listened in on a conversation. At Lash's entry she reacted in surprise and shot a quick glance down at her plugs.

“Aunt Emma,” Lash said, “are you listening in on Remington's Chicago call?”

“I beg your pardon!” the operator exclaimed.

Then she became indignant. “See here, Mr. Lash, I want you to understand—” and as she talked her fingers pulled out a plug from the switchboard “—I'm not in the habit of listening in on conversations.”

“You had somebody else plugged in on that talk,” Lash accused.

“I did not!”

But her face showed her guilt.

“Who was it?”

“I don't know what you're talking about and if you don't stop insulting me I shall call the sheriff.” To give weight to her threat, she picked up a plug and pointed it threateningly at the switchboard.

Lash laughed and left the room.

Down an the sidewalk, Harry Clyde said, “George Halpin just left the movie.”

“For all of me, he can go home and have a good night's sleep. If he's got a clear conscience.”

“So far,” said Clyde, “I haven't asked you just what you're trying to find out, Mr. Lash.”

“I'm trying to find out who killed Sam Carter.”

“Is that why you've been looking through old newspapers?”

“Yes.”

Clyde toyed with the steering wheel. “It

ain't any of my business and you can tell me to shut my mouth, but maybe I could help you.”

“You could find out from your Aunt Emma who it was telephoned Carter at the hotel last night, right after midnight.”

Clyde sighed. “I guess I can't help you then, because Aunt Emma wouldn't tell me the right time. But if it was about Stuart Billings—”

“What do you know about Stuart Billings?”

“I've lived in Mt. Miller all my life.”

“But Stuart Billings died before you were born.”

“Sure enough, but you grow up in a small town like this where not much happens and you pick up things that happened long before your time. Like murder—”

“Murder?”

“Mt. Miller never had a murder in all the years it's been in existence. Not an out in the open murder. But there was always talk about the Billingses.”

“That Stuart was murdered?”

“Oliver Halpin never had more'n one pot to cook in, then after Stuart Billings died he bought a lot of dairy cattle and built a new dairy building—talk like that, you know. I grew up on it.”

“What other talk was there, Harry? About the Billings money, for instance?”

“Old man Billings? He was supposed to be the richest man in these parts.”

“But he lost his money. Or didn't people believe that he lost all of his money?”

“People don't usually put all their eggs in one basket, do they?”

“No,” said Lash thoughtfully. “They don't.”

“You were searching George Halpin's old stuff—I thought maybe you'd like to take a look at the old Billings place.”

“It's still standing?”

Clyde nodded. “Yep! And what's more nobody's lived in it since Ralph Billings killed himself. The bank took the place over and tried to rent it but nobody around here would take it. And then after a few years the place ran down pretty much and it got a bad reputation.”

“Haunted?”

“People claim they saw Old Ralph Billings walking around. Lights at night, stuff

like that. I spent a night there when I was sixteen or seventeen."

"Even though you knew it was supposed to be haunted?"

"I had a dollar bet." He started the motor of the car "You want to run out?"

"What about light?"

Clyde pointed to a battered glove compartment. "Flashlight in there."

"Then let's go."

A FEW minutes later they were out of town. They drove past the plant of the Midwest Consolidated Dairies, past George Halpin's farmhouse, where there were lights upstairs as well as on the first floor. A mile beyond the Halpin place, Clyde began to slacken speed.

Lash searched for the Billings house, but saw only a grove of trees on the right. Clyde stopped his car. "It's in among those trees—and we've got to walk."

Lash looked at the barbed wire fence beside the road. "That isn't a bull pasture, is it?"

Clyde smiled thinly. "It's a pasture—belong to a farmer named Holtznagle, but he hasn't got a bull."

Lash opened the glove compartment and found a rather surprisingly large flashlight. He took it out and looked toward the black mass of trees that were at least two hundred feet from the highway.

"I don't think this flashlight is going to make enough light," he said uneasily. "I guess I'll come back in the morning."

"I told you the reason I did that year in the state pen, didn't I?"

"For holding up a traveling salesman."

Clyde nodded. "Fella I was driving around like this. You know how much money I got?"

"I'm not in a guessing mood."

"It was thirty-two bucks."

"A small-town bad man," Lash said, bitterly.

"Yeah," admitted Clyde. "I got a reputation. I been out of the Big Place over a year and you know how many days work I've had since then? N-o-n-e, none, Give a dog a bad name—"

"I know a name for a dog," Lash said.

"Very funny," said Clyde, without humor. He gestured with the gun. "Get out. And put down the flashlight."

Lash dropped the flashlight to the seat of the car and climbed out. He looked up and down the road, but of course no headlights were approaching from either direction. There never are, when you want to see them.

Clyde got out of the car on his own side. He gripped the flashlight in his left hand, flicked it on and pointed it at the barbed wire fence.

"Let's go."

"What for?"

"Because I said so."

"I can give you my money right here."

"And somebody comes along and picks you up and I hardly get back to town, then the sheriff's after me? Uh-huh, get going."

Lash stumbled over the drainage ditch and caught his coat on a barb in the wire, but finally got through into the field. Clyde kept the flashlight on him and fell in a few feet behind Lash.

Lash said over his shoulder, "You won't be far enough away by morning, Clyde, because no matter where you go, I'll get you."

"Maybe," said Clyde, "And maybe not. I don't think you'll ever see me after tonight."

Lash didn't like the last statement. It could have a double meaning.

He continued on across the field. As they neared the trees, Clyde shut off his flashlight. Lash risked a glance over his shoulder and saw the headlights of a car coming from the direction of Mt. Miller.

"Stand still," Clyde ordered. "They won't see us from the road if we don't move."

He put his hand on his hip, the muzzle of his gun depressed, but so that it could be brought up even while pressing the trigger. Lash stood still while the headlights flashed past on the road.

Clyde flicked on the flashlight again. "All right."

Lash resumed his march for the trees and as he approached saw the shadow outline of a house. Clyde let the light play on it a moment; it picked out gaping window frames. Trees had grown up to the very walls of the old place.

As they came up to the house, Clyde said, "Well, I don't see Old Man Billings."

And no sooner had he said the words, than a voice came out of the deserted ruins. "Harry?"

"Yes," Clyde called back promptly.
 "A live ghost," Lash observed.

XVIII

A DIM light showed in the building—a kerosene lamp, in one of the rear rooms. Clyde stepped up close behind Lash and prodded him with his revolver.

"The door's unlocked."

Lash brushed away bushes that had grown up in front of the door, found a door hanging on hinges. He maneuvered a passage through it, with Clyde almost stepping on his heels.

Footsteps sounded in one of the rear rooms and then—Sheriff Walters appeared.

"Good evening, Mr. Lash," he said.

"Surprised, aren't you?" Clyde asked.

"Not very," Lash retorted. "Aunt Emma spilled it."

The sheriff stared at Lash. "Emma never told you nothing. She told me she didn't."

"She didn't give you a name," Lash said, "but when I asked her about the call to Sam Carter last night, she started to say it was the sheriff. She didn't say Mister or any name, just *the*."

"Could have been the butcher, or the grocer," the sheriff said.

"Only the butcher and the grocer weren't after me—and you were."

The sheriff glowered at Lash for a moment, then stepped back into the adjoining room.

Clyde, close beside Lash, prodded him and Lash followed into a larger square room, that had a packing case in the center of the floor. On it stood the lamp.

Clyde shut off his flashlight and stepped back from Lash, so that Simon couldn't reach him by a sudden movement.

Lash said, "I've got three hundred dollars in my pocket, Harry. You can go a long ways with it—and the hundred you've already got. And I won't be going after you."

"You won't anyway," said Clyde.

"Mr. Lash," said the sheriff, "I'm awfully sorry about all this. Things have been nice and quiet around Mt. Miller for a long time. We've had no crime to speak of—"

"—Since Clyde stuck up a traveling salesman."

"That was a little mistake on Clyde's part. The man made such a fuss about it,

Clyde had to—well, take the rap, I guess you'd call it. But it was only a year."

"You get the chair for murder."

"Who's talking about murder, Lash?"

"I am."

"Sam Carter was killed by a bull. Everybody's satisfied about that."

"Everybody but the Chicago newspapers. They're coming out in the morning and calling it murder. And they're saying some things about the sheriff of this county—and about Claude Benton and Olive Halpin and Sterling Knox. You're going to see more newspaper reporters around Mt. Miller than you ever knew there was—and more big town policemen."

The sheriff stared at Lash. "What're you talking about?"

"Fred Remington—he telephoned all the Chicago papers." He nodded to Clyde. "Aunt Emma can verify that. She was listening in."

"I don't believe it!" snapped the sheriff.

BUT Clyde looked uneasy. "He was at the telephone office just before we came here—and he went there from the newspaper office."

"What was Remington doing when you left there?" the sheriff demanded.

"He was on the telephone."

"I don't think they'll go for two bull-killings in two days," Lash said.

Harry Clyde exhaled wearily. "I guess we'd better check up, Uncle."

"Uncle?" exclaimed Lash.

"Aunt Emma's brother—didn't you know?"

"I guess everybody's related to everybody in town," Lash said bitterly. "I suppose Fred Remington's a cousin?"

"Well, no, that's the only bad part of this," Clyde said, "Fred don't like our family too well. He wanted to be postmaster a couple of years ago and Cousin Milton got the job."

"All right," the sheriff said, "I'll run in and talk to Emma."

"Better take my car," Clyde suggested, "it's out on the road, kind of prominent."

The sheriff scowled at Lash. "Keep your eyes peeled, Harry."

"I can handle him."

The sheriff hesitated, then shrugged and left the room. His footsteps sounded hol-

lowly in the front room, then died as he left the house.

Lash looked at Harry Clyde. "All right to sit down?"

"Against the wall," said Clyde.

Lash walked to the side of the room and sat down on the dirty floor. Clyde crossed so that he was on the far side of the room, a good twenty feet from Lash. The packing case on which the lamp stood was between them, but to one side.

For a few moments they regarded each other across the room. Then Lash said, "This is really the Old Billings house?"

"Yep."

"What room did Billings die in?"

Clyde made no reply. Lash said, "Or, didn't he die in the house?"

Clyde shook his head. "I don't know—and I don't care."

"Who's paying for this?" Lash persisted.

"I'm doing it as a favor."

"For your uncle? Well, who paying him."

"Nobody."

Lash snorted. "He's killing two men for fun?"

Clyde sighed. "Cut it out, Lash. I'm not in the mood."

"If it comes to that—neither am I. But I'm not just going to sit here and bite my fingernails."

"Shut up, will you?"

"Were you on the level about that working business, Clyde? That no one in Mt. Miller's given you a job since you came out?"

Clyde grunted a reply that could have meant anything.

"A thousand dollars," Lash said. "You can go a heluva long ways with that."

"You said you've only got three hundred with you."

"I can get the other seven hundred."

"How?"

"I can wire for it."

Clyde made a derisive noise with his mouth. "Three hundred in the hand's good enough for me."

"Uncle's going to let you keep the three hundred?"

"Uncle's getting his."

"Oh—so he *is* being paid!"

Clyde swore. "Damn you, Lash, shut your trap!"

Lash remained silent for about two

minutes. Then he said, "How'd you like it at Stateville?"

Clyde suddenly came across the room. He stopped three feet from Lash and looked down. "One more crack, Lash, and I'll kick in your face."

Lash guessed that he had gone far enough. He stayed quiet for almost a half hour. And then a voice called cautiously from somewhere outside the house, "All right, Harry?"

Clyde called back, "All right."

FOOTSTEPS sounded at the front of the house. Then the sheriff entered the room. His face showed verification of Lash's report.

"Remington talked to the Chicago papers, all right," the sheriff said. "Emma heard most of it, except for a couple of minutes when he"—nodding to Lash—"was up in the office."

"And they're going to say Sam Carter was murdered?"

"They can say it all they want, but they can't prove it. He gets buried tomorrow."

Harry Clyde looked worried. "It's all right for you—you're the sheriff. They can call you a dope for not knowing he wasn't killed by a bull, but me, I'm the only man in Mt. Miller with a record."

"And he'll throw you to the wolves when the going gets rough, Harry," Lash cut in.

Harry Clyde regarded Lash broodingly. The sheriff looked at his nephew and said quickly, "We'll stick together, Harry, don't worry."

"Like he stuck to you the last time," Lash said, "when he let you go to the penitentiary."

"Lash," said the sheriff testily, "keep out of this. Harry, you know I did what I could for you."

"Sure," said Clyde. "Only *I* served the time."

"And *you'll* do the frying this time," Lash pointed out.

The sheriff came over to Lash. He drew a .38 from his pocket. "I think you've said about enough, Lash," he began. Then Harry Clyde came forward.

"Wait a minute, Uncle, I want to get this settled first."

"It's already settled," the sheriff snapped.

"You helped me last night."

"Yes, but *I* didn't kill this Carter."

"Shut up, Harry!" cried the sheriff.

Lash came up from the floor at that moment. The sheriff cried out in alarm and threw down with his .38 and the only thing that saved Lash from that first shot was that the sheriff miscalculated. He assumed that Simon was coming directly at him. And he fired in that direction. But Lash was lunging for the packing case, not the sheriff.

The first shot missed him by feet. Then the sheriff, in whirling, knocked against Harry Clyde and spoiled Clyde's aim. Clyde's bullet whizzed over Lash's back.

Then Lash hit the packing box. He hit it with so much force that the kerosene lamp which stood on it, flew clear across the room. It smashed against the wall—and exploded.

Fire lit up the far side of the room, but it only emphasized the darkness on the other side and there Lash was now scuttling for the feet or legs of the sheriff.

Harry Clyde sprang back, looking for a chance to shoot.

Lash clawed at the sheriff, brushed against a leg. The sheriff, trying to leap back stumbled—and Clyde fired. The bullet intended for Lash, struck flesh, but it was the sheriff's flesh.

"Harry!" he screamed. "You shot *me*!"

He toppled backwards, the gun falling from his hand. Lash caught it before it hit the floor. Flame lanced at him again, but Clyde's mis-shot had unnerved him.

Lash fired and saw Clyde recoil from the impact of the bullet. He was about to fire a second time, when the gun fell from Clyde's hand. But Clyde remained on his feet.

"Damn't!" he said.

The sheriff was thrashing on the floor, sobbing in agony. "You shot me, Harry, you shot me."

Lash slowly rose to his feet. Across the room the fire was spreading rapidly. Kerosene fed the wood of the floor and walls that had been dried almost to the consistency of charcoal by the weather of three generations. It lit up the whole room now.

Clyde's right hand was clutching his chest.

"Damn it," he said, "I never had a chance."

His knees buckled suddenly and he slid to the floor. But his back supported him against the wall and he remained in a sitting

position. The sheriff uttered a final wailing shriek and subsided, although his body still twitched in the final death throes.

Lash moved across the room, although he had to shield the near side of his face from the heat of the flames. "Come on, Harry, I'll get you out of here."

Clyde's face was filmed with perspiration—and tears trickled down his cheeks. "Damn it," he kept repeating. And then blood gushed from his mouth and he fell sideways. His eyes remained open and staring.

Lash turned back to the sheriff. His body had stopped twitching. He was dead.

At the door to the front room, Lash turned and tossed back the sheriff's revolver. Then he walked out of the house.

Halfway to the highway, he looked back. The entire house was ablaze.

He was crawling through the barbed wire when headlights came swooping down the highway. Brakes squealed and a sedan stopped. A man stepped out of the car and looked toward the fire.

"Well, whaddya know," he said, "the old haunted house has finally gone up."

"It's about time," Lash said.

"I guess old Ralph Billings will have to find another place to do his walking."

Headlights appeared from the direction of Mt. Miller. Another car pulled up, then another, and then two cars came together from the other direction.

Lash started walking toward Mt. Miller.

XIX

IT was eleven o'clock when Lash started down Main Street in Mt. Miller, but there was still a light in the office of the *Mt. Miller Gazette*.

Remington greeted him enthusiastically. "I've made myself a hundred dollars this evening."

"From the Chicago papers?"

"Yep!" He rubbed his hands together gleefully. "They're all sending reporters. This old burg's going to get such a going-over, they'll never get over it."

"I've got another story for you," Lash said. "There's been a fire out at the old Billings House."

"Is that so? Hoboes?"

Lash shrugged. "If you want to let it go

at that, I guess you can say hoboos were camped there and accidentally set the place on fire. But if you don't like that story, you can go out there tomorrow, when the ashes are cold and dig around and find yourself two bodies—and two guns."

Remington stared at Lash in awe. "Two bodies—two guns. W-ho—are they?"

"Sheriff Walters and Harry Clyde."

The newspaper publisher gasped. "They shot each other?"

"You might say that and when you're writing up their obituaries, give Harry Clyde a break."

"He was the better man of the two. Walters murdered Sam Carter—and he would have murdered me, tonight, except for Harry Clyde."

Fifteen minutes later, Lash left the newspaper office and walked wearily to the hotel.

There was no one in the lobby except the night clerk, who was hunched over the desk, reading a copy of *Exciting Western Tales*. He looked over his magazine.

"I put your bag in Room 14," he said.

"I'm not staying," Lash said.

The clerk frowned. "Well, what about the room; you said you wanted it."

"I'll pay for it. Where can I get someone to drive me to Oregon?"

"If you'd been a half hour sooner you could have driven over with Mr. Benton."

"Benton's gone?"

The clerk nodded. "He wanted to catch the eleven-thirty for Chicago. But you're too late for that."

"When's the next train?"

"Two o'clock. Say—that's the milk train. You might get a ride over to Oregon in the milk truck."

Lash rode to Oregon on the milk truck. He got an hour's sleep on a bench in the waiting room of the Oregon Depot and then dozed fitfully sitting up, during the three hour ride to Chicago.

In Chicago he had breakfast and got a shave at the station barbershop. Then he phoned the airport and found that he could get a California plane in an hour. A taxi took him to the airport and by eight, Central time, Lash was flying over Illinois farmlands.

There were headwinds over the Rockies, but with the two-hour saving in time, the plane settled down at the Burbank Airport

at ten minutes after four in the afternoon. Lash slept most of the way. He rode to the Roosevelt Hotel in the airport Cadillac and there got a taxicab, which deposited him in front of his apartment before five o'clock.

The Cross Detective Agency car was parked across the street.

XX

LASH unlocked the street door with his key, climbed the stairs to the second floor and opened the door of his library. Eddie Slocum, sprawled on the couch with a *Racing Form*, sprang to his feet.

"Simon!" he cried.

"Hello, Eddie," Lash said easily. "What's new?"

"Plenty! But for the love of Mike, you left here two nights ago, you've been in Illinois and now you're back."

"I had enough of Illinois. I asked you, what's been doing here?"

Eddie Slocum grimaced. "Cops! They've been practically camping here."

"Why?"

"Lieutenant Bailey figures he's got something on you. Something about your fingerprints being in Sterling Knox's room at the Lincoln Hotel."

"What does he figure to do about it—or didn't he say?"

"He's done it." Eddie coughed gently. "He's got a warrant for your arrest."

"Oh, fine, so I'm going to have trouble with the police department." Lash exhaled heavily. "I see our watchman is still camped across the street."

"He's never been gone. But they're getting worried. Somebody calls up about once every two hours and asks for you."

"He doesn't leave a name?"

Eddie shook his head. "Young Benton was here this morning."

"I saw his father in Mt. Miller."

Eddie exclaimed. "I thought he was in New York."

"He was—then he was in Mt. Miller and unless I'm a mighty bad guesser, he's in Hollywood, right now. He left Mt. Miller a couple of hours ahead of me."

Lash went to his desk, looked idly at a stack of mail on it, then got out his private phone and address book. "It's about time we washed up this Alger book business."

He searched for a number, found it and dialed.

A voice on the phone said cautiously, "Hello?"

"Phil Appleton," Lash said.

"Who's calling?"

"Don't be so damn cagey," Lash snapped. "This is Simon Lash."

"Oh," said the voice. "How are you, Simon?"

"Lousy, and I hope you're the same. Look—I want you to do some work for me."

There was a short pause on the other end of the wire, then Phil Appleton said, "Well, I don't know, Simon, I'm pretty busy right now."

"Cut it out, Phil, you're never too busy to make a dirty buck."

"I like a dollar as well as the next man, Simon," retorted Phil Appleton, "but I buy a newspaper every day and there was a piece in the paper yesterday about an eye you hired in Chicago, who went out to some whistle stop and got himself killed."

"Yes, but you didn't read what happened there last night."

"What happened?"

"Make a guess—I've just come back from there."

"I see," said Appleton. "And I s'pose that makes Sam Carter mighty happy."

"Phil," Lash said angrily, "do you want this job or don't you?"

"I want a job, all right, but I don't want lead in my stomach. I got a wife and three kids."

"If you get killed," Lash said coldly, "they'll collect your insurance and be better off than they are now."

"That's what you think. All right, what's the job?"

"The Cross Agency's got somebody shadowing me. I want to know who they're doing it for."

"That's all, huh?" Appleton said, sarcastically. "They should break the confidence of a client, that's all."

"Cross would double-cross his mother for a fee," Lash said. "Now can you do it or not?"

"For how much?"

"For fifty dollars."

"Fifty a day, you mean."

"Fifty a day—all right."

"With a guarantee of five days, eh?"

Lash gritted his teeth. "All right, I've got other work for you, but I want that information first of all."

"You'll have it."

Lash slammed the receiver on the phone, but picked it up again instantly. He dialed another number.

A voice said, "Santa Ana Apartments."

"Mr. Oliver Halpin."

A connection was made and Clare Halpin's voice said, "Yes?"

Lash said in a rasping voice, "Mr. Oliver Halpin, please."

"Who's calling?"

"The Los Angeles Police Department."

There was a short pause, then Clare Halpin said, "Just a moment, please."

Oliver Halpin came on the wire. "Oliver Halpin talking."

"Halpin," Lash said, "I thought you might not want your daughter to know I was calling, so I told her the police. This is Simon Lash. . . ."

"Oh yes," said Halpin, "that's good, Sergeant."

"Can you come to my apartment?"

Halpin hesitated. Then he said, "Very good, Sergeant. And thanks for calling me. I'll—I'll be down in a little while."

Lash hung up and consulted his book again. He was about to dial a third number, when the phone rang. He scooped off the receiver.

"Simon," said the voice of Phil Appleton, "my wife has a no-good nephew, who works for Cross. I had him with me for awhile and tried to teach him the business, but it was just like trying to teach a dummy, so when I gave him the breeze he went over."

"Give me his pedigree in a letter," snapped Lash. "Did you get the information?"

"Yes. I gave the office a buzz and happened to catch Nick in the office."

"All right, all right," snarled Lash, "who is it?"

"A man named Charles Benton. I never heard of him, but he's apparently got money, because—"

"He's got it, but don't go giving me a history of Charles Benton. I know it."

"Yes? And do you know that Cross has a day and night shift staked out, watching your office?"

"I'm not blind, Phil. Now, listen, call up

that no-good nephew of your again. Find out from him where Benton's staying—"

"He's already told me—he's at the Hollywood-Wilshire."

"Good. Now, here's how you earn your five-dairs' pay. Get over to the Hollywood-Wilshire. Get on Benton's trail—and let him know he's being shadowed. Got that?"

"I got it, but I don't see the sense of shadowing a man if he knows he's being shadowed."

"Because he's a nervous young punk and I want him made more nervous. So he'll do something."

"What?"

"That's what I want to find out. And look—do you know anybody at the Hollywood-Wilshire?"

"Nobody important, just one of the telephone operators. A cousin of my wife's."

"A no-good like your nephew, I suppose? All right, check with her about Benton's phone calls. And, oh yes, find out if Charles Benton's father is staying at the hotel—Claude Benton."

"Claude Benton? Say—isn't that the name of the New York department store man?"

"Yes. Now get right over to the hotel and call me as soon as you get there."

"Okay, Simon."

Just as Simon Lash hung up, the door buzzer whirled. Lash looked at Eddie Slocom. "Not already?"

"I'll find out."

Eddie darted into the bedroom and returned in a moment. "Yep, it's a police car. Do you want to hide?"

"I doubt if it'd do any good." Lash sighed. "All right, let him in."

Eddie went down the stairs and returned in a moment or two, with Lieutenant Bailey.

"Where the hell've you been?" the detective demanded as he came into the room.

"Are you asking because you want to know, or just because you hope I'll tell you a lie."

"I don't give a damn what you tell me—I know where you've been."

"Then why bother asking?"

"Because you had no right to leave town! I warned you—"

"Look," said Lash, wearily, "you've got a warrant for me, haven't you?"

"You're darned tootin' I have!"

"Are you going to serve it?"

"That depends on you."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Explain how your fingerprints got into Sterling Knox's room at the Lincoln Hotel."

"They got there because I was in his room—how else would they get there?"

The lieutenant scowled. "When were you there?"

"The day before he was murdered," Lash replied calmly.

Bailey regarded Lash sharply. "Knox knew you were there?"

"Since I wasn't invisible and he wasn't blind I don't see how he could have helped knowing I was there."

THE detective grunted. "Well, why were you there?"

"I was trying to get information—naturally."

Lieutenant Bailey took the warrant from his pocket. He held it aloft. "I'm showing you this, Lash, because I know what you're going to say—that you can't be made to reveal a client's name."

"Get ready for a surprise, Lieutenant," Lash said evenly. "I'm not going to refuse to tell you my client's name. In fact, I'm going to tell you everything about him. His name is Oliver Halpin."

Lieutenant Bailey stared at Lash in surprise—and mild disappointment. "Uh, who's Oliver Halpin?" he asked.

"He's a man with three million dollars. A retired dried-milk manufacturer, from Mt. Miller, Illinois."

"That burg in Illinois where you spent the last couple of days?"

"So you do know where I was."

"We've got a very fine teletype down at Headquarters. And the Illinois State Police have one, too. They're very much interested in you, in Illinois. In fact, they don't quite like the idea of you leaving there so sudden-like."

"They apparently know where to find me."

"That they do." Lieutenant Bailey rubbed the side of his nose with a long forefinger. "So this Oliver Halpin is from Mt. Miller, Illinois—?"

"Which also happens to be Sterling Knox's old home town. Or didn't you find that out yet?"

"I did. Well—go on, about this Oliver Halpin. What'd he hire you for?"

"To find the owner of a book."

The detective cocked his head to one side. "Come again!"

"A book," Lash said. He picked up the copy of *Ralph Raymond's Heir*, from his desk. "A book like this."

THE lieutenant came across the room and took the book from Lash's hand. He looked at it blankly. "I had a book like this when I was a kid. I read a lot of these, uh, Horatio Alger books. I think I even read this one."

"You'd have been a backward kid if you hadn't read Horatio Alger, Lieutenant. Not many kids missed them."

"Then what's so wonderful about this book?"

"It's a rare book."

"This? How much is it worth?"

"Ten or fifteen dollars."

The detective screwed up his mouth. "And you say, this Oliver Halpin hired you to find who owned a book like this?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Mr. Oliver Halpin lives at the Santa Ana Apartments. Suppose you ask him that question. I've asked it six times and I've yet to get a satisfactory answer."

The lieutenant opened the copy of *Ralph Raymond's Heir*, turned a few pages, then suddenly looked up at Lash. "On the teletype, they said a private eye named Sam Carter was killed by a bull in a cornfield. The name of the bull's owner stuck in my mind—it was Halpin."

"George Halpin," Lash said. "Oliver's brother."

"The sheriff up there reported it as an accident."

"It wasn't an accident."

"—and the sheriff," Bailey went on, "was found this morning in an old shack out in the country that'd burned down. Him and some guy shot it out."

Bailey looked at Lash and the latter returned his look unflinchingly. It was the lieutenant who dropped his eyes—uneasily. "I'd hate to think what I'm thinking, Lash."

"Along about tomorrow," Lash said, evenly, "the Illinois State Police will decide that the sheriff murdered Sam Carter

and dumped him into that bull pasture. And they'll probably also decide that the sheriff and a confederate got into a fight and shot it out. They may decide that and announce it or they may decide it and just let the thing drop altogether, since the sheriff's dead and there's no point in stirring up a local scandal."

"And you, Lash—Sam Carter was working for you?"

"I didn't kill the sheriff," Lash said quickly.

"Who did?"

"The man whose body was found with the sheriff's. A man named Harry Clyde."

"And who killed Clyde? The sheriff?"

"I didn't kill the sheriff," Lash repeated.

A little shiver seemed to run through Lieutenant Bailey. He said "Well, that was in Illinois. About this Oliver Halpin?"

"You can take my word for it, he and his brother George haven't spoken to each other in more than thirty years. They hate each other's guts."

The lieutenant stared at Lash a moment, then his eyes fell again to the book in his hand. "But about this book?"

"Halpin's a rich man. When he was a boy his mother gave a book like that to his cousin—she wrote her name in it. Well, Halpin wanted to locate that one particular book—the one his mother gave to his cousin."

"How old a man is Halpin?"

"Crowding sixty. The book was given to his cousin fifty years ago."

"Where's his cousin today?"

"He died forty-five years ago."

THE lieutenant blinked. "And he wanted you to find this book that his mother gave to the kid cousin fifty years ago?"

"No—he'd found the book. He came in here with it."

The lieutenant exclaimed. "Now, wait a minute—I'm missing something here—he had the book and wanted you to find it?"

"No-no, he had the book, but he wanted me to trace it back to the original owner—to verify that this was the book his mother had given to his cousin, a boy named Stuart Billings."

"But you said his mother had written her name in the book?"

"Correct, but he wanted to *prove* that this was his mother's handwriting."

"Didn't he know?"

"I'm telling you what Halpin *said* to me." Lash sighed. "I didn't say Halpin's story made sense, did I?"

Lieutenant Bailey glowered at Lash. "It's the screwiest thing I ever heard of." He drew a deep breath. "But look—this Sterling Knox hailed from Mt. Miller, Illinois—and so did Oliver Halpin. They were both here in Hollywood and one of them got murdered. It looks to me like—"

"Just a minute, Lieutenant, before you go making up your mind. There's another former Mt. Miller citizen mixed in this—a man named Claude Benton, who owns a little store in New York City, called Benton's Department Store."

Bailey winced. "I've heard of it. One of the biggest department stores in the country, isn't it?"

"I think it does a business of about a hundred million dollars a year."

"And Benton's mixed in this?"

"He was in Mt. Miller when I was there. He left a couple of hours before I did. Maybe he went back to New York and on the other hand, maybe he came, to Hollywood."

The lieutenant groaned. Then suddenly looked at the warrant in his hand and thrust it back into his inside breast pocket. "I'm not going to do a thing, Lash, not until I talk to this Oliver Halpin."

He went to the door, opened it, then stopped. "You're not figuring on taking any more trips, Lash?"

Lash shook his head. "No."

The lieutenant went out. Lash went to the bedroom window. He saw Bailey get into the police car, saw it pull off and saw a taxicab draw up into the spot vacated by the police car.

He returned to the library. "The door, Eddie," he announced, about one second before the buzzer whirled.

XVI

EDDIE went downstairs and returned with Oliver Halpin.

"I don't understand you at all, Lash," Halpin said as he came in. "For two days you refuse to talk to me, then suddenly you begin pulling your tricks."

"Tricks, Mr. Halpin?"

"You know what I mean—telling my daughter the police want me."

"The car that pulled away just as you came up in the taxi—that was a police car. Lieutenant Bailey is on his way to your apartment, right now."

Halpin moistened his lips with his tongue. "You told him about me?"

"It was either that or go to jail. I told you I'd talk to the police if it came to a showdown. Well, that was the showdown."

"I thought a private detective kept a man's confidence," Halpin whined. "Like a lawyer, or—or—"

"A priest?" Lash suggested. His lips curled. "Mr. Halpin, I haven't been hiding the last two days. I've been to Mt. Miller, Illinois."

"What were you doing there?" Halpin cried.

"I sent a man there, first—a man from Chicago," Lash said bluntly. "He was murdered—his body thrown into your brother's bull pasture, where it was trampled and gored by a bull."

HALPIN'S eyes threatened to pop from his forehead. "W—who—who would do a thing like that?"

"The sheriff," Lash said.

"Walters!" cried Halpin. "Why, I've known him all my life."

"Walters and his nephew, Harry Clyde," Lash said, "and then they shot each other."

Halpin reeled as if struck. "This—this all started because I—I asked you to trace down a measly book!"

"It started fifty years ago," Lash said.

"What?"

"I'm laying the cards on the table, Mr. Halpin," Lash said. "That book you brought up here—don't tell me you didn't know there was a message in it, words underlined in pencil."

Halpin walked to Lash's red leather couch and seated himself heavily. For a long moment he looked at Lash, then shook his head. "Yes," he said, dully, "I saw those underlined words. But—they didn't mean anything."

"Didn't they?"

"No. Somebody marked those words—for a game. Or for no reason at all."

"Who?"

"I don't know. The book is fifty years old—it's had a lot of owners."

"Oh, not so many. Stuart Billings, Claude Benton, his son, Charles Benton, Jay Monahan—you."

"Me?"

"You brought me the book."

"I thought you meant—" Then Halpin caught himself.

"Mr. Halpin," Lash said slowly, "who is your cousin, Paul?"

Halpin squinted at Lash. "That's the thing that's been driving me crazy, Lash. I don't know. I never had a cousin named Paul. I never had any relative named Paul. That—that's why I came to you. I wanted you to trace the book—well, I *hoped* that someone along the line who had owned the book had a cousin named Paul. But—" His words trailed off.

"What about the Bentons?" Lash asked. "Any Pauls in their family?"

"Claude Benton was an only child. There were no Pauls in his family."

"Or his wife's? Charles Benton could have a cousin named Paul, on his mother's side."

"Maybe, but Charles Benton is alive. He wasn't—murdered."

LASH looked thoughtfully at Halpin for a moment. The dried-milk manufacturer sat on the couch, his face haggard, his eyes worried. Then Lash said, "Mr. Halpin, you suggested that someone might have underlined those words as a joke—or for no reason at all. Only you don't believe that; well, why don't you believe it?"

For a moment Halpin wouldn't look at Lash. Then he raised his eyes. "You've been to Mt. Miller, Mr. Lash. Did you—did you learn anything there about my cousin, Stuart Billings?"

"He died all right, forty-five years ago. Of pneumonia, the paper said. It's a little late to verify the cause of the death."

"I know, but that wasn't—well, that wasn't what I was referring to." Halpin cleared his throat. "I—I meant about his circumstances."

"He was a pauper, is that what you meant?"

Halpin hesitated. "Yes."

"Yet his father had been the richest man in the county. Only he lost all his money in a railroad deal; is that what you meant?"

Halpin said slowly "My father built a new dairy not so long after Stuart's death."

"You mean there were assets that nobody knew about—nobody but your father?"

"That's not a very pleasant thing to think about your father, is it? Even though he's been dead for a long time. I—I have a daughter, Lash. I'd hate to have her learn that her grandfather was a—a thief."

"But if Stuart died, your father was the next of kin. He would have inherited the money, anyway. Of course if he—helped Stuart die—"

"No!" cried Halpin.

"But that's what you're thinking."

HALPIN got to his feet. He looked at Lash and drew a deep breath. "I'm going to forget the whole thing. Stuart Billings died forty-five years ago, my father thirty-seven. I'm sorry I ever started this business. But I'm going to drop it now."

"Maybe the police won't want to drop it," Lash said.

Halpin looked sharply at Lash.

"Sterling Knox was murdered," Lash went on. "Here in California. In Mt. Miller Illinois, Sam Carter was murdered—and two other men violent death."

"You said Walters and Clyde killed this man Carter. Then they killed each other."

"Clyde killed Walters," Lash said. "I killed Clyde."

"You!"

"They were going to kill me."

Halpin walked toward the door, his shoulders sagging. Lash let him get his hand on the knob, open the door. Then he said "Mr. Halpin, how long is it since you've seen your brother?"

Halpin turned slowly. He gave Lash a long look, then turned back and went down the stairs. Eddie Slocum started after him to see that the street door was latched.

The phone on Lash's desk rang. He picked it up. "Lash talking."

"Simon," said the voice of Phil Appleton. "Claude Benton's registered here, all right. He's got a suite adjoining young Benton's."

"I'll be over in a half hour," Lash said. "Wait for me in the lobby."

He hung up and got his hat as Eddie Slocum re-entered the library. "Stick next to the phone, Eddie."

"Where'll you be?"

"The Hollywood-Wilshire."

Lash descended the stairs, opened the door and crossed the street to the Ford.

The Cross operator watched him approach.

"Hello," he said.

Lash said, "I'm going to run over and see the man who hired your agency—Charles Benton."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And you're going to follow me, anyway. So why don't you drive me there?"

"This ain't no taxi."

"If you insist, I'll pay you the regular taxi fare."

"G'wan," said the operator, "beat it."

Lash shrugged and began walking. He went a half block when the car began to follow. Lash slackened his pace and the car, crawling at its slowest speed, nevertheless caught up to him. Lash stopped and lit a cigarette and the car was compelled to stop.

Lash began walking again. At the corner of Sunset, he stopped, began retracing his steps. The Ford made a U-turn. When it completed the turn Lash again turned and headed back for the corner. He waited for the car to make a second U-turn and catch up to him. Then he called "See what I mean?"

"You win," said the man in the car.

Lash opened the door and climbed in beside the private detective. "Hollywood-Wilshire Hotel, son."

The man grunted. "This is silly."

"Ain't it the truth?"

The driver turned on Fairfax and began scooting across town. After they had passed Melrose, Lash said "Who was it conked me on the head in my apartment—you or someone else?"

"I don't know what you're talking about?"

"I'm talking about the night somebody swiped a book from my place and I came in too soon—remember?"

"You're screwy."

"All right, skip it—for now."

ON WILSHIRE the private detective turned right and a moment later pulled up in front of the Hollywood-Wilshire Hotel. Lash opened the door on his side.

"Do you have to go up with me, or are you just supposed to find out where I go?"

"Look, Mister," the private detective said

angrily, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"All right, act as dumb as you look. But if you are coming in, I'll be in Charles Benton's room. Okay?"

The man made no reply and Lash went into the lobby. Phil Appleton was playing the pinball game near the cigar stand. Lash crossed to him. "Charles is in 806—his old man, 808; the rooms adjoin."

"What about phone calls?"

"He calls the Cross Agency about six times a day."

"And Long Distance?"

"He made a Long Distance call to Mt. Miller, Illinois, yesterday and he got one from there. And he's called Las Vegas, Nevada, a couple of times."

"What about other local calls?"

APPLETON took a slip of paper from his pocket. There were four notations on it. One was Simon Lash's own telephone number. The other three were the same: Granite 1-5115.

"This Granite number—" Lash began.

"I thought you'd want to know. I called it. Somebody who answered, said, Oro Grande Apartments."

"Good," said Lash. "You're earning your money, Phil."

"I always do."

"I brought a man from the Cross Agency over here with me—he looks like a gigolo, dark, long sideburns. He may come into the hotel in a minute. If he goes upstairs, you follow him."

Appleton nodded and Lash went to the elevators. "Eight," he said, as he stepped into a car.

A moment later he stepped out on the eighth floor and found 804 nearby. But he continued on to 808. He listened at the door and heard a rumble of voices, but could not distinguish words.

He knocked.

"Yes?" called a voice inside.

Lash tried the door, found it open and pushed into the room. Charles Benton was seated in a Morris chair in an attitude of disgust. His father was pacing the floor. It was apparent that the elder Benton had been lecturing his son.

Both reacted in astonishment as Lash came into the room.

"Simon Lash!" cried Benton, senior. "I thought you were—"

"I left Mt. Miller two hours behind you," Lash said grimly. "You heard what happened there?"

Claude Benton hesitated. He had heard, all right, but was trying to make up his mind as to whether he should admit it. Charles Benton cut in:

"You get around, Lash!"

"So do you. By the way—I rode over with the man from the Cross Agency."

Benton, Junior, gasped. "Who?"

"The man who's supposed to shadow me."

Claude Benton fixed his son with a cold stare. "Is that some other nonsense you haven't told me about?"

"I don't know what he's talking about," Charles Benton snapped.

"I'm talking about the day and night shift you've got on me, Benton," Lash snapped. "And I'm also talking about the man you had break into my place—the one who slugged me and stole the copy of *Ralph Raymond's Heir*."

"You're crazy!" cried Charles Benton.

"I'll lay you a hundred dollars to a dime you've got the book right here in your place."

A slight gleam of triumph came to Charles Benton's face, but he erased it quickly. "I'll take that bet."

But Claude Benton was not satisfied. "Charlie," he said warningly, "I want the truth; did you—uh, do that?"

"No," Charles Benton replied. "I haven't seen that Alger book."

Lash said sarcastically, "And you didn't hire the Cross Agency to shadow me?"

Young Benton hesitated, then shrugged. "I'll admit *that*."

"You're a fool, Charlie!" the elder Benton said.

"I wasn't doing it for myself," Charles Benton retorted.

Lash said quietly to the elder Benton, "Don't you think it's about time we had a talk, Mr. Benton?"

"No," Claude Benton replied promptly. "I haven't got anything to talk about."

"We could talk about the murder of Sterling Knox."

"I wasn't in California when he was killed."

"Charles was."

Charles Benton took a couple of quick steps toward Lash. "Why, you cheap flat-foot, I'll knock——"

"Knock ahead," Lash invited, "if you feel lucky."

At that Benton might have taken a chance, but his father stepped in between the two younger men. "There'll be no brawling. Charles, sit down. And you, Lash, get to hell out of here."

Lash sighed. "You may change your mind about talking."

"If I do I'll let you know."

Lash sighed again, said, "But you were in Illinois when Sam Carter was murdered."

Benton regarded him dourly. "Get out!"

Lash left the room, rode down in the elevator and found Phil Appleton still playing the pinball game. About twenty feet away, the swarthy Cross operator sat in a big leather chair, reading the evening edition of the *Los Angeles Times*.

Lash went up to him. "Better call your office in about fifteen minutes," he said. "I think you'll be fired by that time."

The operator sneered. "Yeah?"

Lash went toward Phil Appleton. "Keep him from following me," he said as he walked by.

At the door Lash shot a quick glance over his shoulder. The Cross man was coming toward the door. But Phil Appleton was cutting across to intercept him. Lash smiled and left the hotel.

XXII

OUTSIDE, he had the doorman signal for a taxicab and when it came he climbed in. "Oro Grande Apartments," he said.

"Where's that?" asked the cab driver.

"Orange, just off Sunset."

Ten minutes later he paid off the taxicab in front of the dingy old mansion that had been converted into apartments. He entered the lobby and found it lighted by a twenty-five watt bulb, which gave just enough light to conceal the names on the mail boxes.

The first floor had produced only abuse the last time Lash had been here, so he climbed the stairs to the second floor where another twenty-five watt bulb gave forth a sickly light.

He knocked on the first door. It was

opened by a hulking man who hadn't shaved for at least four days. Lash said, "I'm looking for Nell Benton."

"A guy can lose a lot of teeth knocking on doors at ten o'clock at night and asking for a dame," snarled the man without the shave.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Lash said, "only I'm not looking for a dame—I'm looking for Nell Benton."

"Try the next door and if a man answers, duck." And with that the door was slammed in Lash's face.

A thread of light showed under the next door. Lash walked up to it, listened a moment, then knocked gently. Footsteps slithered on carpeting inside the room, then Nell Benton's voice asked nervously, "Yes?"

"Simon Lash."

Lash could hear her inhale sharply. Then she said, "Please go away."

"Open up," Lash said.

"Go away," she repeated. "Go away, or I'll call the police."

"If I go away, I'll call the police."

There was another pause, then a chain rattled and Nell Benton opened the door a couple of inches. Lash pushed on it. She resisted, but was no match for him and suddenly stepped clear.

Lash entered the room and closed the door. Her eyes widened in fright. "Please open the door."

"I want to talk to you," Lash said. "About your husband."

"My husb—" she began, then caught herself. "I haven't got a husband. I—I've been divorced."

"Then let's talk about your ex-husband. I've just come from him."

She backed away. "H-he sent you here?"

Lash looked about the one-room apartment. It contained a studio couch, a dressing table and a couple of chairs. "He wants the book," he said bluntly.

Her head began to swivel, before she caught herself. "What book?"

Lash nodded toward the dresser beside the studio couch. "The one you've got there."

"I haven't got—I mean, the only book I've got is a novel from the rental library."

Lash started deliberately toward the dresser, but she headed him off. "I want the book," he said.

"I told you I haven't got it. I mean—I——"

Lash reached for the top dresser drawer. She grabbed his arm in both of her hands, tried to pull it away. But Lash let her wrestle with his arm, and half turning forced her away and with his left hand pulled open the dresser drawer.

The Alger book lay on top of some underclothing. He took it out and then Nell Benton let go of his arm and retreating to the studio couch, seated herself heavily.

"All right," she said, dully, "take it and go."

"Who got the book for you?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Actually, none, but I'm curious."

"Let's say a friend, then. You wouldn't know him."

"Does he know why you wanted this book?"

She looked up at him. "I don't see—" Then she stopped. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Lash said deliberately, "does this friend know you wanted this book because you're in love with your ex-husband?"

THAT brought her to her feet. "Love Charles Benton?" she cried. "That conceited, good-for-nothing, spoiled—"

"Brat," said Lash. "And you telephoned him three times yesterday."

She gasped. "How do you know?"

"I know something else," Lash said. "I know that Charles Benton would do almost anything in the world to get this book! He would even—marry you."

The color faded from her face. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

"He called you three times—you tried to bargain with him. But you can't bargain with a man like Charles Benton. He was born with a platinum rattle in his hand and he probably never felt a razor strop in his life. As you said, he's a conceited, spoiled brat. But you want him just the same, don't you?"

Her mouth opened to deny it, but no words came forth.

Lash said, "He isn't worth it."

Knuckles rapped on the door. A voice called, "Nell?"

"Oh!" gasped Nell Benton.

"Come in," Lash called.

The door was slammed open and a man

who almost filled the doorway, appeared. He was about thirty, stood well over six feet and was built like a big fullback.

He looked at Lash and said, "This your husband, Nell?"

"Quick on the up-take, son," Lash said. He held up the Alger book. "I just stopped in to pick up the book you borrowed from me, the other night."

"Walter!" exclaimed Nell Benton.

But Walter was coming forward, walking on the balls of his feet.

Lash said, "Don't—!"

Walter grinned wickedly. He made a pass at Lash's face and as Lash's hands went up instinctively, he drove his fist into Lash's stomach.

Lash gasped in agony and bent forward. Then Walter's big fist exploded on his chin and he went careening back. He collided with Nell Benton and ricocheted from her to the studio couch. He crashed back on it and lay still for a moment, as he fought nausea.

He licked it after a moment and sat up, with an effort. Nell Benton was struggling to hold back Walter—and succeeding, since the young giant had already vented his rage on Lash.

Then he saw Lash sitting up: "I've got some more for you."

Lash said weakly, "You can lick me, but you're licked yourself. By a man who didn't even lay a finger on you. Charles Benton."

Walter took a step forward, then stopped and peered into Nell's face. Evidently he saw the confirmation there, for his huge body seemed to deflate as if punctured.

"Is that right, Nell?" he asked.

"No!" cried Nell.

"Yes," said Lash. "By this time tomorrow they'll be looking for a Justice of the Peace."

"So you're going back to him," Walter said thickly.

And then Nell could deny it no longer. She backed away from Walter, buried her face in her hands and began to sob.

Walter looked down at her from his superior height, swallowed hard and dropped a hand on her shoulder. "All right, Nell, if that's what you want."

He stepped back, exhaled heavily and looked at Lash. "I don't know how, but you did it. The guy's no good, but if she

wants him—" He shrugged wearily and went out, closing the door behind him. But he opened it again.

"Only you can tell him that there's a guy waiting for her when she walks out on him the second time. I'll be there—and that's the last he'll see of her. Tell him that, for Wally Wayne."

He closed the door again. Lash heard heavy footsteps walk away and got to his feet. He felt rocky.

Nell raised a tear-stained face. "Please go," she said.

Lash nodded. "I'm taking this book with me, but don't worry."

He opened the door, stepped out into the hall. Twenty feet away, Wally Wayne stood in an open doorway. He was lighting a cigarette.

Lash said, "Sorry, chum."

Wally made no reply and Lash descended to the first floor. He stepped outside, went down the three short steps to the sidewalk and Clare Halpin came out of the shadows and fell in beside him.

"Mr. Lash, I saw you go in and I waited."

"When did you see me go in?"

"Ten minutes ago."

"You were watching the house out here?"

She nodded. "I—I was trying to get up nerve to go in to see Nell Benton."

"Why should you have to nerve yourself up to see her? You went to school with her?"

"Yes, but—" She took Lash's elbow. "Please come with me. I want to talk to you. It's—very important."

Lash shrugged his elbow from her grip. "I'm not in the mood for talking tonight. Not any more. I'm going home."

A street light flashed on a stubby automatic in Clare Halpin's hand. Lash groaned. "For the love of—"

"There's my car," Clare Halpin said tautly. "Get into it." And as Lash remained still, "I mean it—you've had my father arrested and I could kill you for that."

"Your father's arrested?"

"They telephoned him and he went down and hasn't returned."

"The police didn't telephone your father. I called him. He came to see me."

"When?"

"More than an hour ago."

"He hasn't returned home."

SHE stabbed the automatic into Lash's ribs and he moved toward a coupe parked a few yards away. He opened the door on the curb side and she nudged him again with the gun.

"You drive."

He slid across behind the wheel, found the ignition key and turned it. Clare Halpin crossed her right hand in front of her, so that the automatic was pointed at Lash.

"Drive," she ordered.

"Where to?"

"Las Palmas."

"Your apartment?"

"Yes."

Lash pressed the starter button, and the motor caught at once.

He shifted into second gear and drove to Sunset, a short distance away. There he turned left. At Highland Avenue a motorcycle policeman was parked at the curb, waiting for speeders to beat the lights. Lash waited for the lights to change, then crossed Highland and went two blocks to Las Palmas, where he turned left.

He pulled up before the Santa Ana Apartments and shut off the ignition.

A doorman stepped up and opened the door on Clare's side. "Good evening, Miss Halpin," he said.

Clare stepped out and waited for Lash. Her hands were thrust into the pockets of her mink coat.

Lash got out on the street side and walked around the car. He smiled brightly at Clare Halpin and took her right arm—where her hand, down in the pocket, gripped the little gun.

"Well, here we are, darling," he said mockingly.

"Come in," she replied tensely.

"Why, of course," Lash replied easily. He let his hand slide down her forearm into her pocket. Her fingers resisted, but she was afraid of attracting attention and surrendered the gun.

As they passed through the small foyer, into the lobby, Lash transferred the automatic to his trousers pocket.

They crossed the lobby to the elevators, Lash still holding to her arm.

But when they got out on the fifth floor and the elevator doors closed on them, Clare

Halpin tore her arm free of Lash's grip. "Give me that gun," she exclaimed.

Lash took it out, slipped out the clip of cartridges and handed her the gun. "Here you are, darling."

She walked stiffly to the door of an apartment, brought out a key and unlocked the door. Lash, close behind, reached past her and turning the knob, pushed open the door.

Oliver Halpin looked at them in the mirror over the mantelpiece. He was standing before a fireplace in which a log fire burned—a gas log fire.

"Lash!" he cried, then stared at his daughter. "Clare, when did you—?"

"Oh, we're old friends," said Lash.

"That's a lie," blazed Clare Halpin.

"Lash," said Halpin, "the biggest mistake I ever made in my life was going up to your office."

"Personally," retorted Lash, "I wish I'd never seen you."

Then Halpin saw the book protruding from Lash's coat pocket. "Is that—*Ralph Raymond's Heir*?"

"Yes. I finally got it back."

"Who had it?"

Lash shrugged. "What's the difference?" He took the book from his pocket.

HALPIN came forward, hand extended to take the book. But Lash avoided his reach. "Just a minute."

He opened the book, turned a couple of pages and found the underlined words: "*This is poison*—"

"Give it to me," Halpin ordered.

Lash riffled pages again, found a second group of words, underlined. Then Halpin jerked the book out of his hands. "This finishes us. Get out, Lash."

"You're the third person who's ordered me out this evening," Lash said. "I forced myself on the other two, but I came here against my will. At the point of a gun."

Halpin's eyes went to his daughter's face. She exclaimed, "I—I didn't know what to think, Dad, when you went down to the police station and didn't return."

"I wasn't at the police station, Clare."

"That's what he said, But—"

Lash said quietly, "You didn't come right home from my place, Halpin."

"I took a walk."

"Missing Lieutenant Bailey?"

Halpin shook his head. "I didn't miss him—he left here ten minutes ago."

"After you told him—nothing?"

"I told him all I knew."

A phone rang and Halpin's eyes went across the room to a little niche in the wall where a phone reposed. Clare started for it, but Halpin called, "I'll get it."

He crossed to the phone, picked it up. "Yes?" Lash, all the way across the room saw Halpin react. Then Halpin said into the phone, "Tell them I'm out." He slammed the receiver back on the hook.

"You can't tell the police you're out," Lash said.

"That wasn't the police," Halpin snapped. "Not that it's any of your business. And as for you, Lash, I said that we were through."

"Not quite. We made a deal. You wanted me to trace the original owner of this book. Well, I did."

"That's open to dispute, but I don't care to argue the point. Say you did what you agreed. All right, that ends your job. Good-bye."

"After you pay me."

Halpin's eyes narrowed. "I gave you five hundred dollars."

"I've spent more than that. I asked you how high you'd go—you said money was no object."

"You're being ridiculous, Lash. Or—" Halpin's eyes narrowed. "You think you can shake me down!"

"Yes," said Lash. "Blackmail. It's been done before."

Knuckles rapped peremptorily on the hall door. Halpin started visibly.

"I guess they didn't take no for an answer," Lash said.

XXIII

THE knuckles rapped again—louder.

"Don't answer," Halpin said to his daughter, who was starting for the door.

If she heard him, she paid no heed. She went to the door, opened it. Lieutenant Bailey came into the room. Behind him were Claude and Charles Benton.

Bailey shook his head. "I know you told the clerk you didn't want to see them, Halpin, but I thought it'd be a good idea if we all got together and talked this thing

out." He looked at Lash. "And you, Lash, I've got some embarrassing questions to ask you."

"You were down in the lobby when I came in?"

"Yep."

Claude Benton came into the room and walked up to Oliver Halpin. He looked him over carefully. "A long time, isn't it, Ollie?" "I haven't missed you at all," Halpin retorted. He crossed to the mantel and put the Alger book on it. Then he turned.

"All right, let's get it over with."

Lieutenant Bailey looked at Lash. "I talked to Mr. Halpin this evening, Lash. His story didn't quite agree with yours."

"Naturally," Lash said. "As a matter of fact, Benton's story won't agree with Halpin's. And *his* story," nodding at Benton, Junior, "won't agree with his wife's."

"What's my wife got to do with this?" Charles Benton cried.

"I just came from there," Lash said. "She's got a boy friend, named Wally Wayne—big handsome lad." He rubbed his chin ruefully. "With a wallop like a Missouri mule."

"So you walked into a couple. Well, when this is over, you're going to walk into some more."

"Cut it out, you two," growled Lieutenant Bailey. "Lash, I'm going to let you open the ball. You told me a cock-and-bull story about Mr. Halpin coming to you and wanting you to find the owner of a cheap Horatio Alger book. You stick to that story?"

"Has Halpin denied it?"

"Of course I have," Halpin snapped.

"Oh," said Lash, "so we're perfect strangers, are we?"

Halpin glowered at Lash. "You're full of tricks, aren't you, Lash?" he stabbed a finger at Lieutenant Bailey. "Officer, I told you that this man tried to blackmail me. I want you to arrest him. I'll prefer charges."

"Go ahead," Lash said. "Prefer them." He smiled at Claude Benton. "I guess that means he'll prefer charges against you, too."

Benton's eyes narrowed to slits.

Lash turned to Bailey. "As a matter of fact, Lieutenant, this does concern blackmail."

"Go ahead," Bailey invited. "Tell your story—if you've got one. I've got a lot of

time. I've got all night. But tell a good story."

Lash crossed to the mantelpiece and took down the Alger book.

"This book, Lieutenant, tells about a murder that took place forty-seven years ago." He shot a quick look at Oliver Halpin. "Mr. Halpin, please note I said forty-seven years ago—not forty-five."

"I don't give a damn what you say, Lash," Halpin said.

"Good—then I'll talk for the Lieutenant's benefit." Lash raised the cover of the book and held it so that Bailey could see the inscription on the fly-leaf. "Mr. Halpin's mother gave this book to her nephew, Stuart Billings, on his eleventh birthday, February 2, 1897. A nice gift, too, as the book cost a dollar and a quarter, which was a day's pay for a man in those days. And Mrs. Halpin wasn't rich, or even well-to-do. In fact, the family was quite poor." Lash looked inquiringly at Oliver Halpin, but the latter only scowled. He turned to Claude Benton. "You were poor then, too, Mr. Benton?"

Benton also remained silent.

Lash drew a deep breath and resumed. "Of course it didn't hurt to stand in with a rich man, for Stuart Billings' father was the richest man in the county. He was even president of the local bank, which probably held a mortgage on the Halpin farm. And Mr. Billings, Senior, appreciated the friendship of his sister-in-law—and her family. Because when he lost his money a little while later—in a railroad deal—and took his own life, he left a will in which he appointed Mr. Halpin, Senior, the guardian of his son, Stuart."

Lash paused and looked carelessly at Oliver Halpin. "Only Mr. Billings didn't die by his own hand. He was murdered."

Oliver Halpin's head came up so sharply that it almost cracked the mantelpiece.

"Ralph Billings was murdered by *your* father—"

Lash held up the Alger book. "This book threw me, Halpin. It's inscribed to Stuart Billings and I assumed because it was his book that *he* had underlined the words. But when Stuart died he didn't have the book any more. In fact, he hadn't seen it for two years." He turned to Claude Benton. "Mr. Benton, you were living in Mt. Miller when Ralph Billings died. But two years later,

when his son, Stuart, died, you'd already left Mt. Miller—gone to Chicago to make your fortune."

Claude Benton stared at Lash. "That's right," he said tonelessly.

"Dad," interrupted Charles Benton, "let's get out of here. We don't have to listen."

Claude Benton crossed to a chair and seated himself. "Go ahead, Lash," he said. "This book," Lash continued, "you had it in your possession for years. Your son got it—and he had it with him when he went to the Hudson Military Academy, where he shared a room with Richard Monahan, the actor's son. Charlie—you said Dick Monahan stole this book from you. Is that right?"

Charles Benton looked at his father. The latter nodded for him to answer. "Yes," snapped Charles Benton. "We had a fight and he got another room. I didn't know he took the book with him, but since it turned up in his possession, I guess he took it, all right. I know I didn't *give* it to him."

LASH addressed Benton, Senior, again. "Mr. Benton, have you recalled yet just how you came into possession of this book?"

Benton sighed. "You've asked me that question several times. I told you that I couldn't remember. I suppose I did get the book from Stuart Billings."

"On one of your rare visits to his home?"

Benton shrugged. "If you want to, you can say that I picked it up at the time of his father's funeral—which was the last time I was in his house."

"At any rate, you had the book when you left Mt. Miller?"

"Yes."

Lash looked at Lieutenant Bailey. "Make a note of that, Lieutenant—it's important." Bailey bared his teeth. "Oh, sure!"

Lash ignored the sarcasm. "Mr. Benton, how long did you have this book before you discovered the underlined words in it—the words that told about the murder of Ralph Billings?"

"Ten years."

"What were you doing at the time?"

"I was working in a dry goods store in Chicago."

"And then you quit your job and bought a store of your own?"

Benton looked at the pattern on the carpet for a moment. Then he raised his eyes. "Yes, I got ten thousand dollars from Oliver Halpin. I—I blackmailed him for it."

"Dad!" cried Charles Benton.

"Now, now," Lash said chidingly to Charles Benton. "You've known it all the time. Otherwise, would you have hired someone to steal the book from me?"

Claude Benton looked steadily at his son. "Is that right, Charles?"

Charles Benton hesitated then nodded. "Yes, Dad I—I came across it when I was twelve years old. I always wondered about it and a few years ago, I—well, I investigated."

"And you told your wife about it, too," Lash said.

Claude Benton sighed wearily. "I got my start by blackmailing a man."

"Ten thousand dollars, Dad," cried Charles. "But you ran it up to ten million."

"And I never enjoyed a dollar of it."

Lieutenant Bailey came forward. "That's water over the dam. It happened forty-fifty years ago, in Illinois. But a man was killed here in Hollywood, two nights ago, and I haven't heard a word about *that*."

Halpin said harshly, "Tell him, Lash."

Lash looked at him sharply, then turned to Bailey. "Halpin made three million dollars in the dried-milk business. He retired and came to California. And then he saw Sterling Knox on the street."

"Coming out of a bookstore," Halpin interposed.

Lash nodded. "Sterling Knox had a daughter named Nell, who married a spoiled brat," he glanced at Charles Benton, "—named Charles Benton. For that alone Halpin would have hated Knox. But he was afraid of him because he didn't know how much Knox might have learned—through his daughter—from the Bentons. He took a room at the Lincoln Hotel and there he began intercepting Knox's mail and found out that a book dealer had a book for Knox. Halpin got the book—and it turned out to be the one that had been held over his head for almost all of his life."

"And Benton hadn't had the book for twenty years!" Halpin said bitterly.

"Only you had to be certain that this was actually the right book," Lash said. "That's why you came to me. But to make sure that I wouldn't tumble, you underlined a few additional words—about a cousin Paul being the murderer. That was to throw me off the track, in case I got too much information, wasn't it, Mr. Halpin?"

Halpin said, "You're telling it, Lash."

"Night before last," Lash went on. "You got a call from Sheriff Walters of Mt. Miller, Illinois—from a neighboring town, I guess. He told you that a private detective was in town, digging into the histories of the Halpin, Billings and Benton families. You made certain financial arrangements."

"Damn you, Lash," Halpin said, thickly. "If you hadn't gone to Sterling Knox he'd be alive today."

Lieutenant Bailey cut in sharply. "You mean you admit you killed Sterling Knox?"

"I admitted it when I took the poison—"

A spasm of pain contorted his face. Lash took a step forward, peered into Halpin's face, then whirled to Bailey.

"Call an ambulance!"

Bailey exclaimed, "Poison!" and headed for the phone. As he whipped off the receiver, Halpin called to him. "They'll be too late. I took it ten minutes ago."

Halpin was right. He was dead before the ambulance arrived.

SOME time later the Bentons and Lash left the apartment. Outside the apartment house, Charles Benton gripped Lash's arm. "All right, Lash," he said ominously, "you made some cracks about my wife."

Lash hit him three times, and Benton went down to the sidewalk. As he sat there, looking up stupidly, Lash said:

"I'm going to call on your wife tomorrow afternoon," he said, "and if you haven't been there by that time and begged her to take you back I'm going to look you up and what you've just had isn't even going to be a sample of what you'll get."

Claude Benton said, "And I'm going to stand in line and take over after you finish with him, Lash."

Lash walked away from them.

*The Actual Job in Hand Was an Accurate Survey for the
Upper Sixty Miles of Hell Down Canyon*



STRAWS IN THE DEVIL'S BROOM

By GIFF CHESHIRE

I

PETE McALLISTER could see only a streak of blue sky, clamped like a luminous lid over the canyon. The grind of the river was continual here above Broken Neck Rapids, the churn of it re-echoing from the high, jagged walls. Sweeping Barge 30, of the Redburn District, U.S. Army Engineers,

dipped into the chute with a quick upbeat of speed, its flat bow gouging and rearing, its twenty-ton displacement only a cork on the rushing water.

Pete was afraid. He had displayed it unabashed a little before when he had protested running Broken Neck free. He had stepped way out of place in calling it foolish to take the rapids this way when there was a power hoist and plenty of strong cable aboard for

warping in comparative safety. To this Herb Stuart had scowled in brusque impatience, while Shag Brundage had laughed. Only Joe Laramée, the engineman, had seemed to agree with Pete, not openly but in the worried look in his eyes. Pete knew that Stuart's precious schedule had decided the man. They were far behind on this sweeping and sounding assignment, and as he sat angrily in the bouncing stern Pete could think of a dozen places in which it had been Stuart's own fault. But they were running free on the long rough stretch of Broken Neck Rapids now, and Pete's main concern was the dryness in his throat and the tight torture of his nerves.

He was no coward, but there were places where a sane man used common sense.

It happened sooner than even Pete McAllister had anticipated. Ahead a lip of water stretched from shore to shore. Studied from the head of the rapids it had seemed scarcely more than a ripple. Now, as they bore down on it, Pete grasped its extent with a hammering heart.

He saw Herb Stuart tense at the big sweep and shove hard over. It was a silly, futile gesture for they were totally at the mercy of the current.

They swept on. Stuart still senselessly battled the sweep. It succeeded only in canting them a little. When they hit the lip and swept over they were oblique in the channel. The flat scow dipped its nose deep in the water, its stern coming up over as if flipped by a giant's hand. Pete McAllister had a sense of being free in the air for a second. Then he was tossed widely into churning water.

He was dimly aware that the barge had capsized, then his personal peril was an all-consuming urgency. He hit the raging water helplessly and was swept under. The instinctive fight in him was instantly released. He threshed, opening his eyes against the shadowed depths, fearing a head-on collision with a submerged rock, and pumped his arms steadily to surface.

He broke water quickly, sputtering and tossing back his streaming hair. For a moment he could see nothing on the raging surface of the river. Then below he saw the survey barge, sweeping along, bottom up. He thought of Laramée and Brundage and Stuart and could see nothing of them. It

gave him a second of intense loneliness. He was being swept rapidly downstream and he let the current carry him.

THERE was the merest shelf at either edge of the water, the gigantic rock cliffs rising sheer above to astonishing heights. Presently he saw Shag Brundage crawling onto one of these as he swept past. Pete angled for the same side. He was an excellent swimmer and he used the water's force merely trying to steer himself shoreward.

The Salamander wasn't more than a hundred-fifty feet wide through this stretch. He swept hard against the shore rocks and his first clutching grasp was torn loose. He tried it again and got a hold and slowly pulled himself up, water streaming from his clothes, his tortured chest heaving. He lay there for long moments, getting back his breath and his bearings.

Shag Brundage staggered down the bank toward him. Even now there was a look of amusement in Shag's eyes, and suddenly Pete McAllister hated him with a shocking intensity. It had been only an adventure to Shag, as was everything. A few moments of excitement and to hell with everything else. Odd as it seemed under the circumstances, Pete reflected that it had been that way with Louise Winthrop, as far as Shag was concerned. A thrill of adventure at any price.

Shag Brundage was an immense young man, bare to the waist as he usually was to display his brown, splendid shoulders. He had a leonine head covered with tight brown curly hair. There was speculative amusement in his eyes as he looked down at Pete.

"You all right, McAllister?"

Pete grunted a reply that was without meaning. He shoved himself up and got to his feet, though his weak knees threatened to buckle for a moment.

"The others?" he grunted, finally.

Shag Brundage shrugged. "It was every one for himself." He chuckled. "I bet before he hit the water Herb Stuart had figured out how he was going to cover this in his log, if he lived through it."

Pete swung away impatiently and started along the narrow ribbon of the bank. A couple of hundred yards below, the river bent enough that the space beyond was cut from sight. He headed that way with Shag

following. They rounded the turn to see Herb Stuart. He was sitting on the opposite bank, head resting on his knees, motionless, the picture of dejection. The hatred that had flared in Pete against Shag Brundage now extended to Stuart.

From the start of this project the engineer had had no concern beyond making a commendable record for himself in surveying the infamous Hell Down Canyon stretch of the upper Salamander River. It was something that had never been done before and it had excited interest throughout the district. It was the kind of thing that was meat and drink to Stuart. True to form, he had set out to add to his reputation for daring and enterprise.

Pete McAllister's voice slapped the man out of his depressed immobility. "Seen anything of Laramee?" he rapped out.

Stuart lifted his head then, gazing across the still wild water separating them, then shrugged a negative answer. The only thing the man was worried about was the effect of this on his own record, Pete told himself savagely. Pete went on past, though Shag halted.

Joe Laramee, who had operated the hoist on the sweeping barge, had been sent up especially for the work and Pete had not known him well. Laramee had been middle-aged, a quiet little man, and Pete had no idea if the man was a good swimmer or not. He knew that Laramee's only chance would be to swing himself ashore as the others had.

Pete went on downstream for a good half-mile, coming at last to the bottom of the rapids. He still had seen nothing of Joe Laramee. Then a little below the foot of the rapids, where quiet water stretched on around another bend, he saw the survey barge, bottom up, shoved by the current in between two rocks and wedged there.

Pete's eyes swept the long stretch of water and it was heartlessly empty. He knew then that Joe Laramee was beyond human help.

There was no sun at the bottom of the canyon, but motion had put warmth into Pete and his clothes already had started to dry. He pulled out his cigarettes, glanced at their sogginess and cast them into the river. He was waiting down by the capsized barge when finally Stuart and Brundage came into view. They walked swiftly, one

on either side. As they came up, Pete could see the tight worry in Stuart's eyes.

It struck him then that the man hadn't even realized that one of the party of four was missing. As they came up, Stuart stared at the barge. After a long moment he spoke in a voice that was flat with despair.

"My God! How'll we ever get it righted?" There was no mention of the missing man.

II

STUART still stood on the opposite side. He searched the river's length in either direction with troubled eyes. Moving down a hundred yards to slack water, he swam across and returned to the capsized barge. As he came up, Pete McAlister had a rocking sense of disgust. Here was unremitting ambition, callously ignoring its fruits.

Stuart's uneasiness played again upon the capsized barge. "God—if we've lost the records! The survey instruments!"

Pete's voice cut in like the blow of a fist. He was beyond any thought of the discipline of the party. "If I remember right, there was an engineman named Joe Laramee!" He saw the shock increase on Stuart's pallid face.

"My God, that's right. Haven't you seen anything of him? Lord, if he's drowned!"

"It would really be something to cover up, wouldn't it, Stuart?"

Stuart cast Pete a glance of intense hatred, and in the gaze there was now a heavy tinge of fear. The man was recalling that Pete McAllister had objected to running this stretch so heedlessly, for the mere purpose of saving the time it would take to warp. He was realizing for the first time that Pete might be inclined to make this clear in the proper quarters. Herb Stuart patiently saw ruin descending upon him here in this remote canyon that was to have augmented his reputation.

Pete walked away. He knew that it was useless, yet some deep instinct of decency in him compelled him to search the river below for several miles. The going was rough, and there were broken places where he was required to lower himself into the water and swim beyond some unnegotiable point. He got as far down as Duck Leg Rapids, where again the Salamander became an unrelieved heller.

He knew that if Joe Laramée had been unable to pull himself ashore thus far he never could have survived through the second rapids. Pete's instinct was simply to move on afoot. He wanted nothing more to do with Herb Stuart's party. Yet he realized they were probably thirty miles from the lower end of Hell Down Canyon.

It was because he was eager to emerge from it that Herb Stuart had been rushing the party far beyond reasonable caution for the last few days. As Pete looked back on it he saw that the expedition had been one continual record of crowding and recklessness on Stuart's part in the effort to make a dazzling record.

THE personnel for this Hell Down Canyon survey had been collected specially. Shag Brundage and Pete McAllister had been members of the crew of the dredge *Tumwater* when they had received orders to proceed to the little town of Stubbsville on the upper Salamander. Joe Laramée had been brought from a drill barge down in the lower Ratapan, and Stuart had come out of the engineering section of the district office.

Stuart was a slight man of middle age, with a balding head of light hair, small, burning eyes and the eternally truculent manner of the bantam-sized. He had lost little time in establishing the fact that he was head and shoulders above his companions in the enterprise.

Pete hadn't concerned himself much about the reasons for the project. The planning section of the Army Engineers was usually many years ahead of actual construction. The Hell Down Canyon stretch of the Salamander had not been navigated for a generation, though before the days of roads and automobiles it had served the mail boats coming upriver. It was part of an elaborate hydro-electric power development that the engineers had projected for future years. They wanted an accurate survey for the upper sixty miles of Hell Down Canyon about which little accurate scientific information was available.

So timbers and lumber had been trucked into Stubbsville, together with a small power hoist and great lengths of steel cable. And Sweeping Barge 30 had come into being there. Then, manned by a crew of four men,

it had put out into the river, drifting into Hell Down Canyon, which was some ninety miles in length. The canyon was cut deeply into the bare, brown wastes.

The task of probing and sounding the many shoals and rocky ledges over which violent water surged had been grueling. Stretch by stretch, Barge 30 had lowered itself with maddening slowness while the data was obtained and recorded—the precious data that had concerned Herb Stuart more than the life of a man.

Stuart's leadership had been blustering and inept from the start and they had made poor progress. The other three had learned quickly that Stuart meant to make this survey a glittering credit to himself. He talked about it continually, boastfully, and the ego in the man crept eternally into his small eyes and high-pitched voice.

As they fell more and more behind schedule, Stuart had crowded things harder and with lessening concern for the safety of his men. They had finished their assignment at Churn Rapids, three days before, yet considerably behind schedule. Stuart had decided to run free from there on, wanting to get out of the canyon and into the Ratapan, whence they could quickly make their way back.

When Pete returned to the capsized barge, Stuart and Shag Brundage were working at it. The water was comparatively slack here, and they had worked it free from the rocks that had stopped its mad flight and around so that its nose edged against the bank. Yet it was still bottom up, and with a bleak grin Pete reflected that the three of them would never manage to right it. Its contents including their camping outfit, had doubtless been lost with Joe Laramée.

He could see from the growing darkness in the strip of sky above that dusk was near. It occurred to Pete then that they had a long way to go without food or blankets to comfort them through the cold nights.

IT was sometime during that night that Pete roused with a strange sense of wonder. He lay unprotected on the narrow band of the shore, and his first impression was that it was the intense chill that had wakened him. He got up to walk about for warmth, and suddenly his ears picked up sound, a sharp punctuation in the canyon's

steady rumble. He tensed, for what he heard was exactly the sound of a heavy kicker, as if some boat was coming up the canyon. It was ridiculous, he told himself. He returned to the crude camp and tried to go to sleep.

Yet the memory of this was strong in him as he awakened at dawn. The other two were still asleep, and Pete climbed to his feet and walked again to get the coal and kinks out of his body. He was still convinced he had heard a boat the night before. It seemed preposterous but a mounting curiosity turned him again down the canyon. He had passed Duck Leg Rapids when he saw that the canyon widened out considerably, with a flat of bare land perhaps two acres in area on this side of the river. As he approached it, his gaze centered with sharp interest on a skiff tied at the water's edge. There was a heavy kicker in its stern.

He hurried that way, then abruptly threw himself flat. The sharp crack of a gun rocked along the canyon walls and the whistle of a bullet sounded alarmingly close.

III

PETE stared out from under bleached eyebrows to survey the immense cliff back of the flat. There were shadowed recesses there, and as his gaze sharpened he noted that one of these seemed to be the mouth of a rather large cave. Whoever waited there meant business, for a second shot rang out, and once more lead came too close to Pete to be only a warning.

A chilled feeling ran up Pete's spine. He was in the open, for there was no cover except scattered rocks. There were several hundred feet of open ground behind him. If he tried to move back across it he would target himself dangerously. He had had a taste of this sort of thing in the Big Fracas and liked it little. He hugged the ground, waiting for another shot, which did not immediately come.

It had been the high-pitched report of an automatic; he decided about a .38, a gun that meant business. Whoever it was had come in here during the night, apparently seeking deep privacy. Pete considered calling out to explain who he was. Maybe it was some old recluse he had startled, if recluses traveled by outboard. He lifted his voice.

"Hey, there! Cut it out! We're an engineering party and we had an accident. We need help."

The answer was the third shot. Sweat was gathering on Pete's forehead as he began to crawl out of there in movement so slow as was agonizing. It apparently was what the person below wanted, for there was no more shooting. Pete gained cover and lay for a moment with racing heart. Then he rose and started back up the canyon.

Stuart and Brundage were stirring when Pete got back to the enforced camp. They looked at him in interest, but they had been too removed to hear the firing. It gave Pete McAllister a grim amusement when he explained it.

"We're going to have us a hell of a time getting out of here, if we do get that scow set up straight. There's some nut below with a gun. He shot at me three times. He'll probably rip the devil out of us if we try to float past there, unless I scared him so bad he clears out. He came in last night."

"How?" asked Stuart.

"He's got a skiff with an outboard. It can cut the water below Duck Leg."

"No fooling?" Stuart was lost for a moment in thought. "An outboard's just what we need. If we could tow this thing down to Morriston we could have it righted with a derrick." The relief in the man's face was almost pitiful.

Pete gave him a cool grin. "If you want that boat, Stuart, you'll have to take it away from that egg yourself."

"So you let him scare you," said Stuart.

"Three shots will always scare me, I guarantee you."

"We're going down there," said Stuart. He started down canyon.

Shag Brundage was grinning as he climbed to his feet. He followed Stuart with a light shrug, and after a moment Pete turned after them. He was more curious than anything to see if that bravado lasted when they reached the flat. It was his second trip over the difficult terrain that morning, and hunger growled in his middle. He realized that they had to get out of there soon or they would simply starve. Maybe it was the thought of food in the other camp that propelled Shag Brundage, though Stuart still was thinking only of salvaging his reputation.

Reach by reach they again covered the rough stretches. Stuart paused short of the last bend before the perilous flat. He glanced at Pete briefly and said, "I think you just let some old hermit scare you out. If we go in openly it'll show him we don't mean any harm."

"Somebody'll get a hole in his head!" Pete snapped.

A nasty sneer crawled onto Stuart's face. "Would you rather shrivel up and die from hunger? We need that boat." Stuart squared his shoulders and stepped out. Brundage followed, and Pete came along behind.

To his astonishment there was no more shooting, though he saw the skiff was still at its moorings. The recluse had not used Pete's absence to clear out. Pete's bafflement increased as they strode openly across the flat still without signs of animosity. Pete saw a grin build on Shag's face and a look of self-vindication on Stuart's.

As they crossed the flat, Pete's thoughts were on Shag, and the bitter antagonism that had been between them from the start. It had risen over Louise Winthrop, Pete's girl, whom Shag Brundage had wanted for his girl. It gave Pete a grim satisfaction now to recall that Louise had proved herself to be no fool. She had puzzled and even angered Pete for a time while she led Shag on, shortly after the big bruiser had reported for duty aboard Pete's dredge. Then abruptly she had cut him off at the pockets.

Pete knew that the humiliation of it had sunk deep in Shag. Though he had trumped up a flimsy excuse that seemed unrelated, Shag had jumped Pete and whipped him. Pete had put up a good fight and had felt no shame at the beating for Shag was by far the larger and better practiced with his fists. Pete had not been afraid of him, nor was he ever later. Nor had Louise felt there was any stigma attached to the whipping.

"But it was my fault," she had said. "I led him on, but I had to teach the conceited louse a lesson."

Pete had only grinned at her. "I've still got one to teach him."

Then they had received the unexpected assignment on the Hell Down Canyon survey. It had been ironical, Pete thought, that chance had thrown them so closely together. Now Pete was linking this with the things working in foment in Herb Stuart. Shag

Brundage would probably like to see Pete McAllister ruined, while Stuart feared the thing that Pete was apt to tell about Joe Laramie's death. Pete had a feeling that before they were out of this, those two would get their heads together to make Pete McAllister the goat.

THEY approached the cave in utmost quiet. From the outside there seemed to be nothing there except the opening, which was about twice the height of a tall man. There was a collection of driftwood stacked outside the cave, with scattered chips where it had been chopped for a fire. From the look of it the site had been used for a camp for considerable time.

They were up to the mouth of the cave when a voice rapped out. "All right, you guys! Shove up them arms!"

Pete was not surprised. This was far more logical than the deceptive quiet. His gaze centered quickly on the dark interior. A man stood just within the shadows, a gun in his hand, covering them.

"So you came back!" he rasped. "You ain't got sense enough to take a hint! All right, this time we'll make it plain!"

Pete saw the looseness of anxiety in Stuart's face. Shag shifted weight and lifted his arms, a slack grin on his lips. Their stunned surprise afforded Pete a certain grim amusement. He had no idea what they had run into here, but the man's voice sounded tough.

He continued. "Go frisk them, Stub!"

A short individual of astonishing width shuffled out of the cave. He apparently was no hermit, for he wore a soiled snap-brim hat and a sport coat which made his grotesqueness more pronounced. He ambled through the engineer party, patting them for hidden guns.

"They ain't carrying nothin', Rancy," he said. "Just a bunch of dopes don't know where's a good place to boat ride."

The other stepped out then, tall and emaciated, and he still held the gun on them. He was ageless, with a wizened face and agate-hard eyes which now played over the intruders.

"Let's have it. What're you birds doing in here?"

"What're *you* doing here?" Herb Stuart rasped. "And who are you?"

Rancy gave him a slapping stare. "I'm asking the questions, punk. Start talking." "Why, we're engineers," said Stuart. "We've been making a survey of Hell Down Canyon. Sounding and probing, among other things. We had an accident last night. Capsized our scow and lost a man. I was wondering if we could use your boat."

The man Stub emitted a grim laugh. "Yeah, we should lend 'em our kicker, Rancy. That'd be good, that would. And give 'em pictures of ourselves to show the cops."

"Shut up!" snapped Rancy. His small eyes were vacant as he thought it out. "You guys're going to sound the river from here on with your long noses."

"So you guys're hiding from the cops," said Shag, with a laugh.

"We're monks," rasped Rancy. "We come here to meditate. And it makes us mad when somebody breaks in on our thoughts. So we make a lot of noise to get things quiet again."

"Look here!" said Stuart. "You mean you're going to shoot us?"

"Naw!" Rancy sneered. "We're going to tie knots in your tongues and send you home." He glanced up the river. "Where's your boat?"

"It wasn't a boat," said Stuart tightly. "It was a sweeping barge. It's capsized up above Duck Leg Rapids."

Rancy glanced at Stub. "Keep your gun on 'em, Stub. I'm going up there and look at it. Maybe they're lying and maybe not."

Stub shoved a big hand into the pocket of his sport coat, where a gun obviously reposed. "I can clip the eyebrows on anybody gets smart," he announced. "Go on, Rancy, but you're making work outta it. We gotta kill 'em, anyhow."

Rancy turned across the flat, heading for the river. He was the brains of this pair, Pete knew and was glad to see him go. It might be possible to get somewhere with this gorilla.

He said, "What did you guys do, Stub? Rob a bank?"

The man looked at him with a certain childish vanity growing in his eyes. "What do you think it was, a gum machine?"

It hit Pete then in a burst of illumination. He had read about it. A month before the bank in Larch Corners had been stuck up in

broad daylight, with the cashier and a customer shot down in cold blood. Pete's pulse accelerated. This pair had done it. The location was right. Apparently they had been here for some time, afterward if not before, coming probably by automobile to the river at some point below and on into this recess of Hell Down Canyon by boat.

They probably were waiting for the heat to die down before emerging. Their discovery by the engineer party had placed them in grave jeopardy. The law officers would not be apt to think of this desolate place as a logical hideout. But if mysterious goings-on were reported it would force the pair to flee, bracketing them in a limited territory.

Down at the water Rancy had started the outboard, and it roared up the river.

Pete cast another glance at Stub. "We're pretty hungry, fella. Would you spot us to something to eat?"

Stub studied it, then shrugged thick shoulders. "Okay. We got lots of grub. We was out, yesterday. You birds can go inside, but don't nobody get funny."

Pete led the way, blinking against the cave's duskiness. As his vision adjusted, he saw it had been rigged up for comfort and a lengthy occupancy. The charred aftermath of many fires was just inside, with two sleeping bags nearby. Against a wall provisions were stacked in disorder, canned goods, with a large box of crackers in sight, and there were cured meats and a cut of cheese.

His gaze lighted on several cartons of cigarettes and he called, "How about a smoke, too, Stub? Ours got dunked."

"Sure. Help yourself." Stub chuckled. "A man ought to die happy, I figure." He was a strange, paradoxical character, of simple childishness mixed with feral viciousness.

Pete opened a package of cigarettes and passed them to the others. He found matches, his mind digging at the problem. Stub's simple-mindedness did not make him an easy mark. Pete recalled the two innocent people drilled during the bank stick-up, and he was certain Stub had been one of the offenders.

Herb Stuart had been inspecting the larder. He raised suddenly with a gleam in his sobered eyes and stepped back.

"Fellow, have you got a can-opener?" he called.

"Sure," Stub responded. "Just stir that mess and it'll come to the top."

"Can't find it," said Stuart.

Stub's squat figure loomed at the mouth of the cave, and he came inside. He stepped warily to the litter of provisions, a hand shoved into the pocket where he carried his gun. Stuart had stepped back, and Pete had noted the sudden intensity in the man. Stub located the can-opener and as he raised with it Herb Stuart jumped. His arm was lifted, and not till then did Pete see the knife he held. Stub's gun blasted in his coat pocket as the knife sank into his throat. Blood spurted, and he went down in a thick heap. The surprise on his thick features was wiped out in sudden slackness.

IV

SHAG BRUNDAGE'S eyes glittered. "You sure got him, but where did you get the knife?"

"It was theirs," said Stuart in a tight voice. His eyes were wide and ringed with triumph. "I picked it up by that side of bacon. I had to do it or they'd have killed us. Now we've got to get Rancy when he comes back."

A shudder ran through Pete. He tore his gaze away from Stub. He had no pity for the man, yet strangely he felt no relief at his removal. There was a funny look to Herb Stuart as he bent to get Stub's automatic. Pete was astonished at the courage the man had displayed.

Shag Brundage started immediately to explore the cave. There was a suitcase and a couple of traveling bags. Shag went through them unabashed. When he opened the suitcase his voice ripped out in tight wonder.

"For God's sake, look at this! More damned money than they got in the mint!"

Stuart turned, and he still kept Stub's gun in his hand. Pete crossed over to where Shag hunkered. The suitcase was full of currency. The traveling bags contained the pair's personal items. Pete saw something and bent toward it, and immediately Shag slapped his hand away.

"Keep your grabbers to yourself, punk!" he snarled. "I found this!"

Pete stared at him in surprise. "And you figure finders keepers, huh? It's my idea the stuff belongs to the bank they took it from."

"How do you know they took it from any bank?"

"I read the papers. You'd know about it if you could read. The bank over in Larch Corners was held up about a month ago. Couple of people got killed. I'd bet my hat this is the pair that did it. I wasn't trying to fill my pockets with that money, Brundage. I thought maybe we could find something to identify them."

Pete continued his search. He found an account of the Larch Corners hold-up, clipped from a newspaper which proved his theory. Yet he found nothing in the way of personal identification. They were simply Stub and Rancy, and now Stub was dead. Pete straightened and stepped outside, puzzled that he was not one whit eased by the thick man's removal. The problem had been larger than the bandit pair. Joe Laramée still preyed on Stuart's mind, and Pete did not like the look all that money had put in the eyes of Shag Brundage.

Nearly three hours passed before they heard the outboard returning down the canyon, and Rancy seemed to have spent much time in investigation and thought up there. Shag Brundage spent most of this time tallying the money he had discovered in the suitcase, staring at it with lambent eyes. "Better than thirty thousand!" he kept saying. "Man, that stands for a lot of fun!"

Herb Stuart seemed little interested in the trove. He kept his head cocked to one side as though continually listening for signs of Rancy's return, meanwhile speculating to himself. Now and then his gaze would stray to Pete McAllister. Now, when the low cough of the kicker coming down was heard, Stuart tensed. He had held tightly onto Stub's automatic, and now he checked it briefly.

"Brundage, you and McAllister put up a front outside. Loaf around there. I'm going to hide in those rocks over there." He pointed to the right to where several huge boulders had been naturally piled.

Shag gave him a perplexed look. "Well, when you shoot make damned sure you get him through the head."

Stuart gazed back calmly. "I don't mean

to shoot him unless I have to. I aim to capture him."

"Playing the hero, huh? You aim to make a smoke screen to cover up that other. Mister, you better not get me shot in it!"

"I'll handle this, Brundage." Stuart moved out toward the rocks, disappearing there.

Pete hunkered down before the cave. With a scowl, Shag did likewise, muttering. "He never had a minute when he wasn't figuring how to get ahead. For the dinky salary the government pays. The heel!"

The outboard was nearer now, idling as it shot down the swift current. It hove into view at the upper end of the flat. Abreast of them Rancy cut the motor and angled hard in. He jumped ashore as the craft nosed, carrying the light line and securing it to a needlelike upthrust of rock. He glanced briefly toward the cave and apparently their open appearance there reassured him. He started up toward it, but there was caution in him as he moved. Pete noticed that he kept a hand in his coat pocket.

Halfway, Rancy halted to shout, "Hey, Stub! Where are you?"

Pete's heart raced. Stub was beyond answering and when he learned this fact Rancy would be turned into a berserk instrument of destruction. He found himself tensing unbearably when again Rancy called out. He pulled his automatic then and cut a slant so that he was not on a direct line with the cave mouth. It turned him partly away from Herb Stuart's hiding place. Again he rapped out, "Stub!"

Herb Stuart stepped calmly from behind the rocks then, gun in hand, and called, "Lift your hands, Rancy!"

Rancy was caught and knew it. Stuart was behind him, cut from the man's vision. Rancy mouthed a filthy curse and for the space of ten seconds seemed on the point of making a play for it anyhow. Then the trapped panic ran out of him and he dropped the gun.

Shag Brundage bounced forward to pick it up, but Stuart's voice halted him. "Stay away from it, Brundage! I'll get it!"

For a long moment the pair stared at each other, then Shag shrugged and slumped back. Holding Stub's automatic on Rancy, Stuart stepped around him and picked up the second gun. He gestured to Rancy.

"Go on in the cave. We're going to tie you."

STUART unloaded Rancy's automatic, placing the clip in one pocket and the gun in another. He motioned Rancy into the cave. An inexplicable feeling of dread was building in Pete McAllister. At Stuart's terse instructions, Shag Brundage bound Rancy's wrists and ankles with cord found in the interior litter. They left him lying on one of the sleeping bags close to the still and bloody Stub. If Rancy had any reaction to seeing his companion dead, he did not show it.

Pete's watch had stopped after his submersion, and he had lost track of time. He guessed that it was late afternoon. Hunger had been driven completely from him, but now Shag and Stuart ate from the bandit's provisions, and the bulge of Stub's automatic was conspicuous in Stuart's pocket. After a time Pete broke off a chunk of cheese and ate it with soda crackers. Afterward he grunted, "Thirsty," and started for the river.

It was unmistakably nearing dusk now, for the shadows in Hell Down Canyon were thick.

He reached the river and heeled, heading abruptly toward the skiff with its outboard motor. In the same moment a shot rang out from the cave, with lead thipping into the sandy soil at his heels.

Stuart's voice followed it. "Stay away from that boat!"

The sudden open hostility confirmed all that Pete had felt about the man. He kept going.

There was a second shot and his face ground into the pebbled shore, two lengths from the boat. Strangely he had felt nothing save a slap of icy cold against his left shoulder, yet it had drained the strength out of him. He got the painter loose, still flat on the ground, and managed to shove the boat into the water. He knew that Stuart was racing this way now. He would have to expose himself dangerously to climb into the boat. To start the outboard or to handle the skiff in the wild water was out of the question in his present condition. With a heave he shoved the boat out into the current and watched it catch there to move swiftly away.

V

HERB STUART was mouthing animal-like sounds of rage as he raced up. "You damned fool! Now, how're we going to get away?"

Pete managed to give him a cool grin. "That's your problem, Stuart. But I have no doubt you'll solve it. You're a clever thing. And you'll either pin the blame for this on me, or you'll kill me somehow and blame it on those pugs."

"I shot you to save the boat, you fool. You wouldn't stop when I warned you. Scared hysterical, and I had to drop you to keep from being marooned here."

"That'll sound all right," Pete agreed. "But you didn't stop the boat. It's gone. You'll have to change your plans."

"What do you know about my plans?"

"I can guess 'em. They're to come out on top no matter what it costs somebody else." Pete staggered to his feet. He wasn't badly hit, for the bullet had torn through the flesh above his shoulder bone. It was bleeding profusely, ringed with cold numbness, but he could work the arm. "You should've made that one good, Stuart."

"Maybe I tried, McAllister." Stuart shrugged. "Go on back to the cave."

Pete headed that way, his senses swimming as he walked. Shag Brundage, at Stuart's orders, bandaged his arm and the big man's eyes were on Stuart steadily. He, too, was alarmed by the man's buried intentions.

A strange serenity filled the canyon after that. As darkness fell, Brundage cursed and carried Stub's body out of the cave. They kept Rancy bound, and the man cursed them continually. Disturbed as he was, Pete wondered with dry amusement if any of them would dare to sleep during the night.

The early night hours wore away, with the fire in the cave's mouth casting its grotesque shadows upon the walls and deep interior. Its three inhabitants remained silent and alert, though sleepy-eyed. Fatigue climbed in Pete and his face was dry and burning, while the wound in his shoulder began to throb.

Shag Brundage rose at length and lighted a cigarette. He stared at Rancy then lighted a second. He moved over and bent over the man, placing a cigarette into Rancy's lips.

Shag squatted there beyond him, alternately removing and replacing the cigarette while Rancy smoked it.

Herb Stuart was across the fire, not far from Pete. The tightness in the man seemed never to relax, and Stuart sneered at Shag for his apparent act of kindness.

When Rancy had finished the cigarette, Shag tossed it into the fire. He rose then, returning to his former place. He stretched out with a wide yawn. In another moment he seemed asleep. Long, silent moments passed again.

Then Rancy rapped out, "Damn it, Stuart, can't you loosen my arms for a while? My hands're asleep. I'll get gangrene."

"If he's going to be your prize prisoner," said Pete, "you better not have any signs of mistreatment on him."

Stuart rose. "So the boy scouts are camping out here." He crossed over to Rancy. He bent, and then to Pete's astonishment Rancy was in motion. He sat erect and his hands were free and he had a knife in his hand.

Rancy seized Stuart by the shirt front, pulling him down. The other hand stabbed up and down twice over Stuart's thin chest. Herb Stuart collapsed with a squawking gurgle. Shag Brundage had come out of his feigned sleep and bounced forward. He had the gun out of Stuart's pocket before Rancy could free himself of Stuart's clutch. Bloody, the bandit shoved the body away, sat erect and filled the cave with foul profanity.

There was a pasty grin on Shag's face.

"You loosened Rancy's hands!" Pete gasped. "You slipped him that knife. You got it out of Stub's neck when you carried him out."

"So what, punk? I saved your life, if you ain't got sense enough to know it. He sure meant to kill you."

"And what're your intentions?" Pete demanded.

Shag lifted his shoulders and let them drop. "I'm playing it for Shag Brundage, punk, just like Stuart was playing it for himself. But I'm willing to bargain with you. You were smart when you turned loose that boat. You made him figure it all over again. He'd of found a new way. He couldn't have you telling how you warned

him about coming down them rapids that way. Playing the public hero wouldn't cover that one. Punk, you were on the spot."

"I could figure it out. What's the bargain?"

"We'll get outa here, all right. Somebody's liable to see Laramee floating along below. Or the outboard. Mebbe they'll come up to see what the hell. We got lots of food and we can wait a while. If nothing else happens, the engineers'll take a look-see pretty soon. We got nothing to hide in that capsized barge. It wasn't our fault. And nobody else knows these pugs was in here. Nobody knows about the money. We plant the pugs good and deep and hide the money for later and play camping out while we wait for somebody to come after us."

"So I kill the sucker for you and get bumped myself for a reward!" snarled Rancy.

"You get killed yourself, Mac. Hell, that money ain't any good to you on the dodge all the time. Pete and me ain't running from nobody. We could spend it and have fun."

"The reason for this generosity," said Pete, "is you've got a choice between splitting with me and killing me."

"That's right. They got you on the records down at the district office. But mebbe I could claim you drowned, like Joe Laramee, if I made damned sure first your plugged body never turned up. How about it?"

"You can go to hell," said Pete.

"Kid, I've got the guns." Shag laughed, pulled the knife from Herb Stuart's chest and tossed it into the flames.

THE night wore away, with Pete McAllister fighting sleep. Daylight found him sore, stiff and feverish. There was now nothing but cheer in big Shag Brundage. The man whistled as he helped himself to food, keeping apart and with the automatic shoved into the waistband of his pants. Rancy was silent and truculent, staring at Shag continually with burning eyes. He was no longer bound, but he looked puny compared to Shag Brundage.

"Didn't you guys have anything to drink?" Shag asked Rancy.

"There was part of a bottle somewhere."

Shag started to look for it. Pete moved

down to the river and washed his hands and hot face. Returning to the cave, he opened a can of pork and beans and ate it with crackers. Rancy made coffee in the blackened pot. Uneasiness gnawed in Pete continually. Maybe Shag was waiting for him to change his mind; maybe he wanted that liquor to pump up courage for a double murder.

Shag located the bottle in the litter, uncorked it and drank deeply, and offered it to neither of the others. Pete watched elation build in him after that. He had found the extra measure of courage he had lacked. He stepped outside the cave and strode in a wide circle, thinking. Presently he returned, and he stared at Pete, who still lay by the fire.

"You're a damned fool, McAllister. You could work the rest of your life for the money you turned down. I don't get it. But okay, you're out, like I had to deal out Herb Stuart. But that was for a different reason. Playing the hero and covering up his messes meant more to him than money. He'd have insisted we turn it in. He could see headlines. Engineer recovers bank loot and foil bandits. He could get drunk on that stuff."

"What're you after, Shag?" Pete asked.

"Not that stuff. They don't have to bring out the band for Shag Brundage. Just give me thirty thousand dollars. If you don't want to help eat that melon it's jake by me. I can have me women and clothes and a car. I can make that snooty dame of yours wish she'd thought twice."

"Leave her outta it, fella!"

"Okay, she's out of it. But you ain't going to have her, McAllister."

"You don't have the guts to kill me, Shag. That's why you're drinking. Trying to build it up."

"The hell it is. Anyhow, Rancy's going to kill you—just in case anything ever slips. I could deny it so even a damned lie detector couldn't catch me."

"You're scared. You'll never get the nerve, Shag. You haven't even got it to kill Rancy, and he probably needs killing. Maybe that's my chance. Maybe he'll get you yet."

"I'll cut out his liver," Rancy growled.

"You wantta be tied up again?" Shag rasped. He lifted the bottle and drank

again. A flush climbed up around his ears. Once more his eyes grew vacant with thought. "I should slave on a dinky salary! And I won't even have to pay any income tax on this."

"You gotta get out of here with it yet," grated Rancy. His cold, recessed eyes spat sheer hatred.

"I'll get outta here!"

Pete McAllister had tried to sic them on each other, yet they were equally afraid of each other. And Shag had the bottled courage. Presently he would have enough of it to act.

If a man were sufficiently detached, Pete thought, it would be interesting to watch the outcome. He felt drained and his nerves were frayed, and he knew this might drag on for days for there was no urgency. As far as the world was concerned they were non-existent. In another week or so the army engineers might investigate. Possibly, as Shag had mentioned, somebody would discover Laramie's body or the empty outboard and come up for a look.

Before then, probably, this little drama would have played itself out.

VI

THEY were around thirty miles above the first settlements, Pete recalled. Those reaches of the Salamander were fished a lot. If somebody should happen to show up before Shag expected it.

While the slow morning passed, Pete reflected on the wild motives that had unfolded here in the heart of Hell Down Canyon. Joe Laramie had wanted only to turn in a good job of work and had died because of the ambitions of another. Herb Stuart's unrelenting ambition had culminated here in ruin and death and he had been turned vicious and deadly in his efforts to save himself.

Probably it had been the simple mind of the man Stub that had let him drift into crime. What had happened to him here had been only the climax to a sordid and dangerous life. Those three were out of it, passed beyond purpose, their motives stilled. But three men still lived.

Rancy, Pete knew, was thinking only of escape and meant for it to be with the whole of his treasure. But there was no

climbing the sheer rock walls of the canyon. There was no getting down stream without some craft, however rudimentary, and there was no negotiating the upper reaches at all. Above all was the obstacle of a man more powerful than he, armed with two guns. Rancy was arrested and waiting for a break.

Shag Brundage had already made himself clear. He would simply wait for rescue, and by the time it came he would have found the courage to rid himself of his obstacles. He would go forth to find satisfaction for his senses.

As to Pete McAllister, he had only the simple wish to live and this mainly because there was a girl waiting. Simple as it was, it was a powerful motive. He meant to live, wounded and helpless though he was. He did not consider Rancy an ally, for the man would show him no more mercy than Shag Brundage.

Noon came, and again they ate. Shag had placed Stuart's body outside with Stub's by now. Pete found speculative amusement in considering the slow process of subtraction. It was as though Hell Down Canyon had grown too sinister even for the devil, who was sweeping it clean, making of his own hellions the straws for his broom.

It was in midafternoon when all three grew abruptly tense and alert and listening. Pete McAllister could scarcely believe his ears, yet he knew it was the cough of an outboard motor somewhere far below that had carried to them through the background growl of the river. At first there was a spasm of joy surging in him, which quickly died. He saw it had only pulled the trigger on whatever it was Shag Brundage had packed into his mind.

Shag listened for several seconds, his problem working plainly in the lineaments of his face. His gaze played from Rancy to Pete.

"Well, it's like I told you. Somebody's seen something and come up to find out what the hell. It's not too late. Too bad, McAllister, but I made you the offer." When Rancy made a threatening move, Shag pulled the automatic. "Take it easy. I'm going to give you the other gun, and you're going to plug the punk here."

"Then he'll kill you, Rancy!" Pete rapped out. "He'll have got you to kill the innocent

men. When he kills you the law'll be on his side. You're wanted."

"Ain't you smart?" asked Shag, with a grin. "Sure. Rancy went nuts when he heard somebody coming. And the money'll be hid. With the two pugs dead, how'll they ever know it was here? You stand still, Rancy." He stepped around the man till he was behind, then approached him. "I'll have a gun in your back when I put the other in your hand. If you make a funny move you'll get it through your kidneys."

Rancy waited in silence until Shag carefully placed the other automatic in his hand, keeping carefully behind, his own gun shoved hard against the man's back.

"Go ahead, Rancy! Kill the punk!"

For several seconds Pete McAllister had stood stock still. He knew that this was it, but he wasn't going to make an abject target. Sometimes the sound of the outboard faded out, only to swell again, louder each time. Someone was definitely coming up the tangled twists of the canyon.

Pete moved in a blind rush, and Rancy fired knowing he would himself be drilled if he hesitated suspiciously. He fired fast and high, apparently hoping that Pete's diversion would give him a chance. Pete had something of the same hope. He crashed into the pair, sore shoulder forgotten, fighting now to live.

Shag Brundage, taking no further chances, pulled the trigger and sent the bullet through Rancy. Pete had forgot everything except his intense hatred for this man. He got a tight lock on Shag's gun hand and twisted the weapon free. He drove his good right fist in savage fury into Shag's face. The man had been thrown physically off balance, with his plan off stride. He staggered back, trying to get his feet under him solidly.

Pete hammered his face and belly. He had the grim satisfaction of making the man cover up. Yet he knew that his wound

had drained him, that he couldn't keep this up. That it wasn't enough. A looping right fist from Shag rocked him. Shag pulled away, grinning now, growing confident again. He was up against a wounded man, he already outclassed physically. There was nothing to worry about. He bent his head and came in.

A gun exploded. Pete had completely forgotten Rancy, who had a gun in his hand. Rancy had fired the shot. Pete saw blood welling from Shag Brundage's temple as the man collapsed. Then he shoved himself hurriedly aside, recalling that Rancy bore him an equal hatred.

Rancy had rolled onto his belly. He used both hands to steady the gun and was trying to level it on Pete. Pete wove and Rancy fired wide and Pete jumped in. Rancy slumped before he even touched him. Pete straightened, rolling the man with his foot. The neck was limp. Rancy was dead from Shag's bullet.

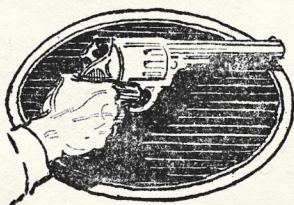
Pete was waiting at the water's edge when the outboard drew up. It contained two men with red shirts and waders and flies in their hat bands.

"What the devil goes on here?" one of them yelled.

"It makes a long yarn," Pete said. He told them. Strangely they were not fishermen but deputies from the county sheriff's office. They had seen neither body nor drifting outboard. A store down in Morriston had been broken into and provisions taken. Somebody had reported hearing an outboard on the river. They had thought of the canyon and decided to investigate in the guise of a fishing party. They had a first aid kit, and one of them re-dressed Pete's shoulder.

"You had a tough time of it, boy."

Pete grinned at him, "Reckon I got off easy." They did not understand him when he added, "When he got down to me the devil figured I wasn't ripe yet for picking."



Curiosities ^{BY} Weill

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NEW ENGLANDERS BURNED LARGE STOCKS OF POTATOES BECAUSE THEY WERE THOUGHT HARMFUL, AND IT WAS BELIEVED THAT IF THE CATTLE ATE THEM THEY WOULD BE POISONED!



BEFORE BE- COMING PRES- IDENT, THOMAS JEFFERSON WAS A PROS- PEROUS LAWYER BUT AT HIS DEATH HE WAS PRACTICALLY PENNILESS!

THE WORD
"TIP" COMES FROM THE
INITIALS OF THE WORDS
TO
INSURE
PROMPTNESS!



THE ANT-EATER HAS A TONGUE ABOUT 12 INCHES LONG. IT IS COVERED WITH A STICKY SUBSTANCE WHICH ENABLES IT TO LICK UP THOUSANDS OF ANTS AT ONE TIME.

*When Bat Jennison Made a Promise Which Might Involve
Life and Death, He Said He at Least Liked to
Know Who He Was Makin' It To*



THAT CAMP LOST SINNER

By GEORGE BRUCE MARQUIS

"STILL and but," Bat Jennison insisted, "I'm on the right road to thar, ain't I?"

"Not for *you*, you ain't."

Jennison looked long and carefully at this chance path companion who had favored him with this altogether equivocal answer. They had met far back in the Whetstone Mountains, where a neat little stream chirped its way across the trail. An ancient prospector, with the stigmata of his hard profession plain upon him, a gnarled rangy Cyclops, bent, limping, indomitable. How many years he had shuffled behind his

two burros searching for the Seven Cities of Cibola not even he could know. Twice he had entered their fabulous gates and returned.

Once he had been robbed of his garnered treasure, but not this time, not much he hadn't. Now he answered Jennison's unasked question.

"I say it ain't the right trail for you because I know you for an honest, square man. And I know that because I feel it."

"And you likewise," Jennison nodded. "As you say, Dad, it's a feel that goes out frum one square man to a similar square

man. Kinda talks language you both understand. Still I've gotta go to that camp."

"Don't do it," grey beard advised solemnly. "I've been there."

"But you're on the trail right now," Jennison reminded him patly, "and you're comin' frum that direction."

"Yep," the other admitted, "but I know a short cut 'round it. Five years back I was there, but not since. I lost \$10,000, my right eye and still carry a bullet in my hip from that sole visit. Camp was young then. Jest started, in fact, mostly by three men. Slats Dilger it was who batted out my eye with his pistol and shot me. They figgered me dead but I fooled 'em. Crawled away that night mostly on my hands and one leg. But I made it. Dilger ain't there no more. Happened along a trail a couple of years ago where I was camped. I seen him before he seen me."

A completed story in few words. Three year old vengeance crouched there beside a lonely mountain trail. Most emphatically. Slats Dilger did not return to roister with his fellows.

"And done correct, Dad," Jennison nodded approvingly. "Still I've gotta go thar. I'm lookin' up a square youngen who headed that way."

"How long back?"

"A month."

"You're wasting your time."

"Why?"

"Because if he's still alive he's now a crook. But," the old man added, "I see you're going and anxious to git started. Remember this. Rance Tidball's poison, but Cass Mosby's double worse. He's a damned bamaquillist."

SO WITH this tantalizing word, hiding furtively for the now out there in deep mental shadows, Jennison rode forward on a trail surveyed by nature, and fretted in form by many a flailing hoof. And he rode on a mission, though he would have disdained that meliferous word. For to him, he was merely doing a little job for a friend. And it mattered not at all that this friend was the governor of the Idaho territory. He would have undertaken it for a homeless waif if there had been an equal need.

By chance he had been in Boise the capitol, and had called on the governor.

And then the governor had laid a burden on him, to find a certain Bob Kelsey, a territorial marshal out on a tough assignment.

"You probably know all about that camp, Bat," the governor had added gravely.

"By repute solely," Jennison answered. "Even so, frum what I've heerd somebody sure throwed a ringer when they named it."

"Well, there's where Bob went," the governor said slowly. "I sent him. It's nearly a month ago. Not a word from him, nor about him either. I'm worried."

"Probable no need fur it," Jennison said cheerfully, a fake commodity for the governor's consumption solely. "Young chaps don't fret none and consequent cain't figger anybody else frettin'. And it jest happens I ain't got nothin' to do right now so I'll romp up thar and give him hell fur not git-tin' you word. And don't rile me by sayin' thanks and similar damned foolishnesses. Me and you governor is both of age. So long."

So now as Jennison followed the worm-like tortions of this mountain trail, his mind was cataloging and laying out for use all that he knew of that malodorous camp that lay at the end of his trek. On occasions that word, "bamaquillist," peered shyly from covert but that was all. It's hour of announcement had not yet struck. Meanwhile the camp.

It lay in a cross grove valley back in the higher reaches of the Whetstone Mountains, where they sloped away sharply north and south. East and west the valley was finished as all box canyons must be finished with steeple sloped dead end walls. Entrance and exit, north and south were through opposite slots in the valley walls. Not large was this shut in valley, just a few square miles of luxurious grass, bushes and trees. Saint Creek ran half its length, turned a right angle and then on to mingle at long last with the mighty Snake. And the camp on Saint Creek was Lost Sinner. Nomenclature in the primitive West was more often a wonder than delight.

ITS life span to date was about six years. At first it was a robber's retreat, a sometime hideout for road agents and cattle rustlers. The first harried stage coach, express rider and peripatetic prospector, the other preyed on the thin herds just then

commandeering the fabulous bunch grass ranges. Three men founded the camp and named it. Name the creek first for that matter. Their fame or in-fame has attained a certain sort of immortality. The obscene spawned camp has perished. Cass Mosby, Rance Tidball, Slats Dilger. The latter had already been gathered to his fathers, reaped and garnered by the one-eyed prospector.

TWO years ago gold had been found in the gravel bars of Saint Creek. Not very extensive but incredibly rich. A wild rush then, presently to ebb as the worthwhile claims were soon all staked. But remained to fatten on the new sort of manna, Cass Mosby and Rance Tidball. As the west expressed it, "The camp was putrid with gold dust and sin." Toward this leper puddle in the high hills Jennison journeyed to meet Tidball and Mosby the predeclared "bamaquillist."

Now as he rode along he considered this errant marshal, Bob Kelsey. The governor had not stated his age, so Jennison really had little basis beyond conjecture in calling him a "young chap." But it was a young man's world, that West, so Kelsey might well be young. It seemed that the governor's interest came largely from the fact that Kelsey carried a letter of earnest recommendation to the governor from an old friend. So to oblige a friend of a friend, so to speak, Jennison dined with whimsey chance. One thing however would be very likely so. With a marshal's undercover job at a very tough camp, Bob Kelsey would not be wearing his badge nor right name either, for that matter. Yet Jennison would be able to recognize him, thanks to a rare accomplishment on Kelsey's part, if he were ever in a mood to display it to the world.

Now Jennison played brief tag with that elusive word "bamaquillist." Almost he regretted that he had not asked the ancient to render it into everyday English. Almost but not quite. Call it pride or whatever, a man shrinks from displaying ignorance before an equally unlettered man. With Levitt it would have been entirely different, but then Levitt knew everything.

Jennison entered the valley through the vent in the north wall. The V was wide enough to accommodate the trail and the outrushing water of Saint Creek with little space to spare. The creek was only three

miles old here, its place of birth from under the sheer wall that fenced in the east end. There it was glass clear, but where Jennison first encountered it it was turbid and unlovely. Men who muck and moiled for gold did just that to these mountain streams. Directly opposite was the rift in the southern wall.

Through it, three years before a group of irate cattlemen had pounced. The three wily leaders had escaped but not, a half dozen tardier followers. These had been promptly hanged and the camp destroyed. But phoenix like it had risen from its ashes.

The valley was a flattened oval, its east and west axis roughly four miles, its north and south a long two. What camp there was all but leaned against the abrupt east wall. Here the timber was very heavy thinning rapidly toward the west. The placer bars were all west of the camp. As to inhabitants, a fluctuating score and a half.

Jennison had traveled a scant half mile into the valley, when he saw his first miner, and sampled the moral fruits native to this camp of the admittedly damned. The trail had swung back from the creek behind a thin curtain of birch and alder, thickened on occasions by haw trees and rose bushes. Two rods or so away a man squatted on his heels beside the creek, idly rotating a miner's pan. Straining off the final washings he drew out a buck-skin poke, pinched between thumb and finger the leavings in the pan and transferred it to the sack. His actions were so like a bored dilettante's, that they stirred Jennison's interest. When had a miner ever before failed to peer avidly into his final trailings? In Jennison's wide experience never. And now as he pondered this new something, the answer passed in review before his eyes.

TWO men had sauntered into sight from up-creek, one swinging a pistol loosely in his hand, the other with a belted revolver snug about his pouted waist. The babble of the creek blotted out what they said, though Jennison filled it in easily enough. One man swung his pistol muzzle in a careless, half circle, his companion held out his hand, the miner fumbled forth his buck-skin poke. As the two turned in leisurely way toward camp, the despoiled man sat down heavily on a creek side boulder and cradled his touselled

head in his hands. Nor had he moved when Jennison stood beside him.

"What kind of a damned holdup was that?"

Even at Jennison's harsh query, the other stirred slowly, more like an automaton than a man. Now he looked at Jennison out of dull hopeless eyes.

"You're a stranger here," he nodded finally.

"Yep," Jennison said fervently. "Still that don't tell me nothin' about that said holdup. And you don't hafta be afeard to tell me," he added soothingly. "Us square men has gotta stand together."

But Jennison had a way with him that made for trust and understanding. So it was now.

And while the shadows of evening marched across the valley floor, the man plodded through a tale, the strangest and most revolting that Jennison had ever heard. Twenty slaves, two masters, eight assistants, whose routine brutalities would have crimsoned the cheeks of a Simon Legree, such was the picture. Disarmed, their horses impounded, tucked away in this remote and all but inaccessible valley, the chains of their bondage were absolute. There had been resistance, a few even had tried to escape on foot. These first had been shot out of hand. The others pursued and slaughtered with ruthless thoroughness. From this Alamo of crime no messenger must reach the outside world. When a stranger wandered into this valley he was robbed and killed.

"It's getting toward dark," the narrator observed, "and you ought to be hitting the back trail. Maybe they ain't seen you yet, so you've got a slim chance to get away. It's slim, but still it's a chance."

"You ain't yit told me your name," was Jennison's answer.

"No I reckon I ain't," the other admitted, "and I don't see what that's got to with it. But it's Ab Pettus."

"Mr. Pettus," Jennison told him, "when I make a promise I like to know who I'm makin' it to." He reached out to grasp the toil worn palm of the wondering Pettus.

"Mr. Pettus," Jennison said solemnly, "I promise you and your friends to help you along up this muss."

"By God!" the other's grip tightened. "I bet we do it."

THE camp was about two miles away. It snuggled the east wall, in a little clearing gouged without care from a perfect jungle of forest. At the moment Jennison was not interested in the camp, but a camping spot, near enough but not too near. He found it by the aid of the last flickering daylight. A neat little oval, with grass aplenty for Sunflower, his buck-skin pony. Now Jennison unsaddled his beloved trail companion and staked him out. And he covered the head of the picket pin with a fold of saddle blanket before he drove it in to the hilt. To remark that he did not build a supper fire, approaches perilously near to recording a banality. What he did was to munch a few flinty hardtack interlarded with slices of uncooked bacon.

Like all good generals he planned his campaigns with care. Yet his experience taught him that there were certain imponderables which no forecasting could master. Treachery where least to be expected, certain sudden baffling shifts which reason could not foresee, the mockery of ordered expectancy by accident or caprice, these were possibilities to be met and checkmated often in the blinking of an eye. Here, too, Jennison was superb. And though all evidence was to the contrary he plotted his actions on the hypothesis that his presence and purpose were known to the leaders of the camp. This was the ultimate test of genius.

Among the twenty bondsmen was the usual traitor, who shared meagerly with the ten for his despicable stool pigeoning. Bill Murk, he was, a savage debased animal, loud voiced and truculent when among his fellow slaves. His mine was next to that of Ab Pettus. Now it chanced that he did not know of Jennison's talk with Pettus, but he did see Jennison when he returned to his pony. That one glimpse was enough, even in the dimming light. So it was that in time Mosby and Tidball were acutely aware that they harbored a well-armed stranger in their tight little valley. A man too, who seemed disinclined to make their acquaintance other than on his own terms.

It was food for thought, and action.

Jennison was well armed, better indeed than the eager spy reported. From him they received the thumbnail sketch, the brace of pistols, the Winchester carried ready across the pommel of his saddle. But out here

alone on a desperate venture Jennison was better armored than that. Item one. A single shot Derringer sleeve gun, deadly for short distances and so cunningly hidden that search would probably not disclose it. Anchored to the inside of the right shoulder seam of his mackinaw was an inch wide band of good elastic, its other end secured to the butt of the Derringer. The length was so, that the small gun snuggled just inside the bend of the elbow. A sharp jerk, and the butt of the pistol was in his hand. item two, a knife. This demands explanation.

Jennison did not carry a dirk or bowie knife affected by certain types of cold blooded fighters. He loathed all such offensive weapons and the men who practiced the ripping art. Yet a defensive weapon was vastly different to his probably jaundiced view. So peril and cunning had devised a knife that to his comfortable way of thinking did not violate his often expressed ethics. On the inside of his right bootleg, just under the lug, was a thin sheath, its outside stitching a part of the ornate decoration common in fancy boots of that period. And in that thin scabbard a thinner blade of steel. Three times already this knife had saved his life. Tonight it would surely accompany him on this altogether desperate venture. Because of that he could not shift from boots to moccasins. At that he would not clatter about. Over his boots he drew a heavy pair of socks. Like the Grecian gods on mischief bent his feet would be shod in wool.

A half mile of timbered magnificence lay between him and the camp. The trees were tall but well spaced, with little bush encumbrance. Progress would not be difficult for a full moon had ridden up over the valley rim. For this he had waited. Indeed he had dated this trip here with that natural torch lighting in view. So when the tip of the trees were becomingly silvered, he was ready.

But first a word with Sunflower. Men said that Jennison and Sunflower communed as man with man. Be that as it may, certain it was that the bond between them was stronger than death. The years of common peril and hardship shared together so ungrudgingly had made it so. Jennison did talk to Sunflower and Jennison believed that Sunflower

understood. Perhaps it was the tone of voice, the touch of hand, the steady care, the total absence of lacerating spur or stinging lash, or even a sugar lump. Now as Jennison spoke to his pony, the velvet nose prodded gently at that fabulous mackinaw pocket, prodded gently but insistently and most surely not vainly.

"Here 'tis," Jennison chuckled as he dredged the bottom and produced three nodules of sugar, brown, aged and hard as flint. "Your sole and only fun tonight anyway. And now I've gotta ramble. Should you feel a unseemly whicker comin' on, swaller it tight. So long."

LEAVING his Winchester to keep Sunflower company, Jennison set out. And beng a devotee of the Latin philosopher who advised "slow speed," Jennison did not hasten. Too much peril lay ahead for that pastime. For the distance and way were both unknown, and a notion was nibbling at his alert senses that he was expected, that his presence and even his relative position at this particular moment were the dangerous property of the masters of this empire of slaves.

When he halted, tiny sounds beat upon his cardrums threateningly magnified by the solemn silence. The chaffering of pine needles gossiping idly with a gentle breeze furnished a floor upon which lesser sounds trod ever so lightly. The soft whispering of little deer mice tunneling beneath the dry leaves, a distant scoffing of an owl, the far off lament of a lonely coyote, all were a part in this unrehearsed symphony that played that night for Jennison and him tone deaf.

A brief flare of a match had informed Jennison that it was approaching ten o'clock when he set out. And now at the end of an unguessable period he was halted by something very tangible indeed. The smell of wood smoke. As he stood there sampling that homey odor another of his keen senses garnered more immediately tingling information. He heard a man spit. No preliminary raucous clearing of a throat, not that, but just the simple act of spitting. And after that silence. The expectorating artist had doubtless bedewed but a modest litter of trash and dry leaves, yet his gunning in that Stygian silence had the sound of buckshot clattering on a tin roof. Now Jennison

did not chew, but most of his friends did. By close association he ought to have been able to guess the distance, but night time in a black and unknown forest was a dubious time for the niceties of accurate gauging. The marksman, he hazarded might be fifty feet away, and then again he might be but ten. One thing however was abundantly clear. The total lack of movement or other sound before and following the eruption marked the targeteer out most surely as a highly competent guardian of the corporate gates.

For a long moment Jennison conferred with himself as to the feasibility of stalking the expectorating sentinel, bludgeoning him down with his pistol, trussing him up and gagging him. Certainly it would be triple insurance against further misconduct on the guard's part. But that moment's consideration of the lightning conceived plan served to point out basic flaws. An instance, the somber darkness. For now that he was certainly very near the camp, the moon had disappeared, blocked off effectively by the intervening towering south wall of the valley. Besides, there might well be two or three men, a guardmount, indeed, not just a guard. The saner plan was to outflank him. So with silent thanks to the animate spray gun, Jennison drifted to his left.

In time he came into a place of stumps and knew that he was near the collection of cabins that was the camp. But above it. The sheer east wall reared its bulk high before him, a half turn and a few steps brought him to the bank of the fretting creek. South, and directly in front now was the elbow in the valley wall that made and finished the upper box canyon. And over there just across the creek, was the pasture where the leaders kept their horses. A snort of surprise or of some other undefinable equine emotion demonstrated that to Jennison as he stood there peering into that across creek darkness. But he knew that the camp was down creek, and near. For the moment that was information and to spare.

He began to edge his way down stream fumbling his way among the clattering stumps and tangle of rotted limbs. Slow work it was and tedious. He traveled now pistol in hand, every sense inordinately alerted, while the minutes snailed by on leaden feet. Then suddenly he caught the

flicker of a light. A dull light, that appeared and disappeared jerkily, as if obscured then revealed by a leafy branch skylarking with a whimsical breeze. A stone's toss away probably, certainly not far. So now, while the light seemed alternately to smile and to frown, Jennison paused for a final rehearsal of ways and means.

First then he reviewed the plan of the camp as detailed to him by Ab Pettas. Plan is a misnomer. The camp had simply grown that way. And a dozen buildings more or less hardly needed a plat to which it must conform. But Jennison knew that the nearest building to him was the most pretentious though scarcely a palace. It was the home of Mosby, and here he lived in whatever solitary splendor the camp might afford. Of course it was built of unpeeled logs as the others, but it sneered at its lowlier brethren because it alone had a stone fireplace, and stone chimney, this latter of course built outside. Next was a larger cabin, occupied by Tidball and the seven or eight lieutenants. Farther still, and set on the creek bank was a slatternly and raffish building, the club house, so to misname it, of the miners. Here they forgathered of nights to drink the worst liquor in the west. Provided gratis by the masters, it was doled out niggardly. It was a place where laughter was rarely heard. Beyond this feculent hangout of mirthless men, were the huts of the miners.

At the sudden nip of a cold breeze that skittered down from the high places, Jennison turned up the collar of his mackinaw and buttoned it snugly. A simple act that was to shield him from fearful maiming if not death itself. Still moving circumspectly he advanced, bending low and pausing often to listen. Yet the end of the trail was nearer than he thought. Limned against the sky as he crouched, almost in reaching distance was a building. Two steps, and by touch he had identified it. That outside chimney was the sure trademark of Mosby's cabin. Lightly he ran his fingers over it. He could climb it, for the staggered flat rocks offered excellent footage, might in fact, but not now.

Yes, it was Mosby's cabin. Mosby the "bamaquillist!" Suddenly that taunting word peered from around a mental corner, leered impishly, then bobbed from sight. Almost he had caught it, yet not quite. And for a half dozen priceless seconds, vigilance stood

muted, while he played hide-and-seek with that mocking word. He had forgotten the dog.

Pettus had told him about the dog. A great, fierce brute, unblemished mate to the phantom black hound which ran mute behind Hugo Baskerville that tragic night in the far off days of The Great Rebellion. Ferocious, untamable, feared by the men of Lost Sinner, even by Tidball and his satellites.

Only one man in the camp was master of the gaunt beast, Cass Mosby. Between Mosby and the hound was a comradeship something at which the others marveled and shuddered too. Mosby alone could unmuzzle, feed, and remuzzle. Other than at feeding time, the muzzle was never removed. The animal roamed the camp of nights, fierce, intractable, cunning. To leap suddenly on a man, hurl him to the ground and vanish seemed the acme of sport to the dog. Primarily to rebuke him if he tried that game on him. Jennison carried a pistol in his hand. A blow from that eight inch barrel would crush the dog's skull like bric-a-brac. Sheer genius counselled in the naming by Mosby. Devil. So Jennison knew about the dog. What he did not know, nor did any other man in the camp but his master know, was this. Not ten minutes ago Mosby had slipped off the muzzle and turned Devil loose!

Yet if Jennison had known it, that swiftly silent lunge from the dark would have toppled him, no less. One hundred thirty pounds of hurtling bone and muscle is not easily denied. The surprise then was not so much in the swift overthrow, but in what instantly followed. For even as Jennison was measuring his length upon the ground the hound had leaped astride his falling body, and turning his head sidewise had clamped his great jaws around Jennison's neck, an ever tightening inexorable vise. Half stunned by the fall, nauseated by the hound's fetid breath, with those terrible fangs boring on relentlessly through the reinforced fabric of his heavy mackinaw collar, Jennison did the one thing sanity could acclaim. Angling up his pistol he blew that evil skull to nothingness. Yet Jennison pulled the trigger reluctantly. For the roar of his forty-five Colt's would shatter his tosy hopes buttressed on planned surprise.

Its echo was to deliver him into the hands of the enemy.

Weighted down by the splayed body of the hound, his eyes smeared full of blood, his revolver wrested malevolently from his grasp by the piston-like thrust of a giant paw and only clipped seconds in which to escape. If fate had only reprieved him for two moments longer he would have won free. But a man stumbled across both bodies, in falling grappled him by chance and held on grimly. A lantern streaked out from Mosby's doorway, the barrel of a pistol rocked Jennison into unconsciousness.

Consciousness returned slowly, for most emphatically the blow had not been of the feather duster type. As his mind drifted back slowly from unknown shores, dimly he became aware of voices, of mumbling, of jumbled overriding words, then ordered, coherent speech. The lantern had been held down close to his face and a voice that he was to know as Mosby's had said with certainty:

"Yes, that's Bat Jennison all right."

Startled exclamations greeted his statement, incredulity, wonder, jeers even, but Mosby brushed them aside.

"Hell," he said impatiently, "I've seen him, twice before; remember at Bootleg Bar, even if he didn't see me. And I've heard enough about him besides. It all ties in. Who else in the world would try what he's done tonight but Bat Jennison? You bet it's him. And he'd probably got away with it if it hadn't been for my dog. Poor old Devil! *That's* something Mr. Bat Jennison's going to pay for. So you're awake now hunh!"

This to Jennison's fluttering vacant stare. A pretend bewilderment for Mosby's consumption, for Jennison's mind, now returned from its brief vacation, was functioning flawlessly and in high gear. He groaned, rolled slightly, and his left hand was cradled briefly in the crook of his right arm. Yes, his sleeve gun was still cuddled there. And his boots were still on, so this thin sheath knife was still with him. Of course, they had his pistols but his lot could be worse. Oddly enough a remark of an old time comrade floated into consciousness to bring him cheer. "Bat, we've skated more often on damned thin ice and lived to hang up our skates." Good old Lefty Steffins

wonder where—Mosby's voice shunted him from fond reverie to sternest reality.

"Rance, take him down to your cabin, and keep him safe for me! I'll play with him later." Now to another man. "Polk, help me carry poor old Devil into my cabin."

Jennison decided that it was high time for complete and public recovery. In fumbling around they might stumble onto that sleeve gun. So he stretched, flexed his muscles and sat up. He looked at the circle of faces and grinned a question.

"When the boat blowed up did they save the women and the children?"

There was one thing which these hardened men who lived by bludgeon, knife and gun knew and honored, stark indomitable courage. It was so now.

"By God," one of them blurted, "you're sure everything we've heard and that's whatever."

"Yeh," Rance Tidball added reminiscently, "And we've also heard you're trickier than an Injun and a damned sight smarter. And since you're on your feet we'll be moving. Take holt of him, Bud, you and Henry."

"Hell, be your age," Jennison shook them off. "I'm all growed up. I even go to the spring by my sole lonesome. You don't need to carry me. I'll walk."

"All right," Tidball conceded that much to ramping dignity. "But remember I'll be on your tail with a gun trained on your back. *Don't try nothing.*"

THE moon had swung far enough to the west that it was just now in the act of half-way peering above the canyon wall. So by its light they marched, a compact body, Jennison in the center. Not far, sixty yards at a reasonable guess, with the shabby club house of the miners a few yards further still and across whatever street there was. A knot of men were gathered outside that building as they approached. To Jennison's keen but furtive glance, that knot of men seemed in commotion. A white strained face had appeared and disappeared, and then they pell-melled inside. Noting the haste, Tidball chuckled in careless ignorance, "Scared of their own shadows. Hell, a jack-rabbit could chase 'em over the crick." If he had only known or seeing had interpreted correctly. For the pallid faced man

jerked back into that group had been Bill Murk, the stool pigeon who had performed his last traitorous act. In his eagerness to report Jennison's presence he had bungled. Men had overheard his gleeful tale to one of the guards, and relayed it to the other miners. Under pressure, best left to the imagination, he had wilted objectly and confessed. His end was certain and very near. So Tidball had erred in his fatuous judgment just passed on the miners. A day ago, yes, but not tonight.

Tidball's cabin, with its length on the street, was about twenty-four feet by half as wide. It had but one door, this in the middle on the street, and two small windows. The floor was punchcon, the single table was home made, chairs ditto. The half of the cabin toward Mosby's was given over to sleeping. Eight pole bunks cleated against walls and end cared for that pastime. The other end had a fireplace for whatever cooking they did. End and walls there were garish with macabre whatnots made of deer and elk heads. Only enough of the skulls to support the horns had been considered good form. A taxidermist would have swooned at the sight, but not from envy nor joy. These grisly relics were festooned with rifles, cartridge belts, lariats, bridles, spurs, frying pans, and strips of dried elk meat. A gourmet would have swooned with the taxidermist but not for the same reason. For lighting, a span of gutting candles.

Tidball marched Jennison on back to the bunk devoted end. Here was a decrepit willow chair into which Tidball invited his prisoner with a pistol pointing directive. For a long moment he stood there considering his guest per force of arms. A doubtful smile emerged.

"Mr. Jennison," said he, "you sure look harmless. You look like you knowed you was licked and to hell with it. Yep, you look like the feller the hen run over. But I ain't satisfied. I don't know what you're figgering on but I'll bet you're figgering. So to make me feel a mite surer I'm snubbing you to something."

"Well," Jennison agreed disconcertingly, "should it make you feel easier seems to me it's your plain duty so to do. Still you've gotta admit the odds is some heavy agin me. Six to one and me ungunned don't make a overly good bet."

"Damit," Tidball swore in perplexity, "but you're the dangerousst man in the world. Here," he compromised, "I'm stringin' a pack thread from one leg anyway to make me feel more comfortable."

The "pack thread" was a hair lariat that could have withstood the surge of a frightened steer. Jennison negligently stretched out his *left* leg, the rope was noosed tight and its free end carried behind Jennison's back and secured to a cross beam. Yes, Jennison was well anchored. But he could heave anchor swiftly if opportunity smiled, and he had just a few seconds to retrieve the knife hidden in the leg of his right boot.

Now Jennison lighted his pipe and crossed his right leg comfortably across his tethered left. A simple act, yet purposeful. It brought the open upper bootleg very near to his swiftly agile fingers. On a bet he could have frisked forth that thin steel blade in two seconds with time to spare. Now as if at peace with man he looked about the room not hastily but in the manner of a man sight-seeing casually and with little interest in what met the eye. But on that leisurely investigative tour he had catalogued everything in that cabin that could be of slightest value to him. The men, their positions, their armament, all had been set down. But of supremest importance was the fact that his two precious Colt's forty-fives were lying in a bunk not six feet from his tingling fingers. As to the men, six, Tidball and five nondescripts for designation solely. Bud, Henry, Sam, Chuck, Saul. Up at Mosby's cabin, that "bamaquillist" and Polk, total eight. There should be ten, and Jennison speculated mildly as to the missing pair of guards. Telepathy or no, Tidball at that very moment asked the pertinent question.

"Where's Jude and Tib?"

THERE it was, right in his teeth, and the very aptness of it almost gave Jennison a start. The nobody, Bud, made answer for the group.

"Why Cass put them on watch along the crick down below the cabins, remember?"

"Sure I do now," Tidball nodded. Then after a moment, he added, "Funny they ain't showed up by now though."

"Mebby they hunkered down and went to sleep. Awful damned sleepy heads both Jude and Tib," offered Chuck.

"Could be," Tidball agreed, "But I wouldn't want to be them if Cass finds it out."

Jennison had a sudden hunch surer to him than reasoned conclusion. These missing guards had been prey to the resurgent miners! Yes, their enemies had been reduced to eight. A coordinated thought had come to the man named Sam.

"I don't like it," he stated uneasily. "With all this shootin' and hustlin' it don't sound like Jude and Tib not to show up. You don't suppose—"

His anxious question drove to nothingness on his lips, muted by a scream of mastering fear, fleeting agony, hopeless despair. It stung the men idling there in the cabin to feverish activity. Dragging out their pistols they rushed the door amid a bedlam of crisscrossing unintelligible shouts, all meaning lost in the uproar. Tidball alone maintained his sense of present responsibility. He glanced swiftly at Jennison, appraised his quiet mien, told himself complacently that his prisoner had not moved, could not in fact, then issued flat orders to the clamoring men.

"Three of you hustle over to their shebang and see what's happened. If you kill a half dozen to hell with it. Now skedaddle."

Despite Tidball's self congratulatory assurance that Jennison had not moved, he fumbled a contrary fact. Jennison had moved, a twinkling motion treading hard upon the heels of that frenzied scream and the din of the aftermath. To dart his educated fingers into that gapping bootleg, to reft forth that razor edged blade, to sheer through that knotted lariat and return the knife to coverage, were but petty diversions of one continuing act, time swifter than the telling. Yes, Jennison had moved.

AS the three guards trotted out through the door, Tidball glanced once more at his captive. Legs still crossed, Jennison was leaning over to knock the spent dottle from his pipe. Now he straightened up, blew lustily through the stem to clear it, then dropped it into the side pocket of his mackinaw. He was clearing the decks for action.

Outside in the moonlight, the detailed men, they were Bud and Chuck and Henry, set out briskly for the now dark and ominously quiet clubhouse, pistols swinging

free in their hands. and they went as blithely as though they hunted rabbits, not men.

"They've hid the mangy coyotes," so Henry appraised the silence.

"Yep," Bud concurred, "I'll bet we don't see hide nor hair—" A prediction never to be completed and a wager never to be collected in this world. For the black shadows before the clubhouse had suddenly erupted men, a yelling seething mob armed with clubs, picks, shovels and the weapons taken from the two missing guards, Jude and Tib. Before the three could retreat, they were swarmed under, clubbed down, crushed, trampled. Not a battle indeed but a massacre.

THAT terrifying roar of blood-minded men, shots, sounds of blows, frenzied and despairing yells for help from the doomed three, rocked Tidball and his two henchmen to the core. Forgetting Jennison they leaped to the doorway, all but rushed out, hesitated, retreated, then slammed the heavy door and barred it in frantic haste. Already the howling mob was hammering at the gates.

"We can hold it, I reckon," one of the men, Saul, observed doubtfully.

"Till they burn us out," Sam added practically.

"Sure we can hold it," Tidball declared confidently. "Cass 'ill scatter 'em. Just wait till he cuts loose."

"Mebbe we can buy 'em off with Jennison." The hopeful thought was Sam's, his voice pitched up at an angle to carry above the din.

"Jennison ain't for sale."

At the words the three whirled about to face the man who had uttered them. No longer a prisoner, not six feet away and with his deadly Colt's gripped in those fearfully competent hands, little wonder that for the moment they stood slack-jawed staring with eyes that seemed to float in their heads at this man who seemed above search, bonds or reasoned precautions.

"No," Jennison repeated, "I ain't fur sale, but mebbly I can bargain with 'em. When you're my prisoners." His voice hardened. "I've got you covered. Drop your guns and up your hands, *now*."

He had offered them the one possible

chance of escape but they could not accept it. Call it folly, or blindness or the ugly nod of fate, call it the inexorable dues paid for their way of life. Whatever the name the final total will be the same. So when presently Jennison flung open the door the miners knew that of the two masters and eight swashbuckling henchmen, Mosby and the man Polk alone remained to their consideration.

"They wouldn't surrender," Jennison explained with a touch of sadness in his tones, "and I give 'em the chance."

"Well," it was Ab Pettus reporting for the miners, "none of ours surrendered either, but then we didn't ask 'em." Then he went on briskly.

"While we're at it let's finish the job. You say Polk is with Mosby in his cabin. We've got guns plenty now. What say we ring it with men and set fire to it. If they come out they get shot. If they don't they roast. Any way you take it they're finished."

Grunts of approval from these just manumitted slaves shading off into amazed surprise at Jennison's veto of this altogether simple and to them highly satisfactory plan.

"No," he said firmly, "we ain't doin' it that way, because I've gotta see and talk to Mosby. He's the only man alive probable who knows something I've gotta know. I figger him and Tidball both knowed it—"

"And Tidball ain't talking, thank God," a miner interjected fervently.

"So," Jennison went on patiently, "I've gotta see Mosby. And since he more'n likely won't come out regardless of offers we make, I've gotta go in."

"Don't do it, Mr. Jennison," Pettus pleaded. "He'll mow you down the minute you set foot inside the door."

"I ain't goin' to romp in through the door, Mr. Pettus."

"But," Pettus argued, "the winders ud be as dangerous. There's only two little winders and them tight barred. Let's burn him out and lasso him as he runs."

"No," Jennison was gently adamant, "he might git killed and I've gotta see him alive."

"No door, no winders, no lasso," Pettus coned the possibilities over slowly. "Then how the hell you going to manage?"

"Per the chimney, Mr. Pettus."

"Per the chimney," Pettus parroted fog-

gily. Then his eye traveled over the spare body of the little man and he nodded.

"It's wide enough," he conceded, "and there ain't likely a fire. Still I wish to hell you'd give it up. Burning 'em out 'ud be surer. "And," he added, "after all you've done for us." Then at grips with sudden emotion he left the sentence dangling.

"Boys," Jennison included them all in one comradely glance, "You've done noble tonight. But I've got something left undone. I've gotta finish it alone." Now as he looked into their anxious faces he added for their comfort, "And my hunch tells me I'm comin' out alive."

But who were they to lean on hunches. And it was Pettus who answered for group determination.

"If you don't, Mosby 'ill sure land in hell a roasted buzzard."

JENNISON climbed easily up the staggered sides of the squat rock chimney and slitting his eyes peered down. It was wide. Even Whispering Thompson could have squeezed his bulk down its capacious maw. No smoke, no andirons, and a heavy layer of ashes to feather-bed his fall. A simple drop of ten feet, and elbows to brake with. And he would go tobogganing with a pistol in either hand.

Eyes tight shut, Jennison made gentle landing in a fine upjet of ashes, ducked stooping out from under the low mantel and stood erect. Now he swept the room swiftly with keen investigative glance that caught and registered every essential detail. Of special note. In the corner of the fireplace end of the room, a home-made cupboard, tall as a man, with two long upright doors, closed and held so, by heavy wooden buttons. A man might conceivably be crouched there, but he could not button himself in, nor escape unaided. Jennison was looking for Polk. Mosby had been in full view from the first.

He had been sitting at a table toward the farther end of the room when Jennison first glimpsed him, his head bowed in his encircling arms. At Jennison's dramatic entrance he had looked up, then as Jennison advanced with pistols at an instant ready, Mosby had stood up slowly, his empty hands conspicuous on the table's edge. Jennison remembered that once he had tabbed Mosby

a "young chap" and so it was. Thirty maybe, easily less, though the dimness made exact diagnosis a chancy pastime. For all the light was furnished by two candles, both on the floor, just beyond the table. On the floor, on either side of the dog. It was a sight to plague the memory, gruesomely suggestive of some obscene rite. And Bat Jennison whose charity was often unfettered by reason felt the sting of pity. Still no Polk.

Six feet now from the fireplace, eight perhaps from the man, Jennison received a shock, notable in a life amply furnished with acute surprises. Very near behind him, he would have wagered touching distance, a voice spoke to him, a voice odd in tone and timbre, muffled a bit, yet disconcertingly distinct and jammed-packed with solid implications.

An infinitesimal step ahead of the voice Jennison was mentally excoriating himself thus:

"Polk from that damned buttoned-up cupboard!"

And the voice.

"I've got a double-barrelled shotgun, crammed with buckshot and slugs trained right on your crupper."

Mosby, standing now, pistols in hand intruded a restraining word.

"Don't shoot him Polk if he's reasonable. I want to talk to him bad."

"Won't," the voice seemed stubbornly reluctant, "if he does right. Drop your guns, Bat Jennison *now*. All right. Walk on slow." The Voice was keeping pace with Jennison's steps. "Settle in that chair."

"That chair" was at the side of the table. On the other side of the table standing, Mosby, alertly watchful, smirking triumph gleaming in his eyes, and mirth. And Jennison in that swift sidewise glance knew the reason for his mirth, and had at last to his very present chagrin run to earth that tantalizing word, "bamaquillist."

A voice thrower, a ventriloquist, corrupted by untidy ignorance into "bamaquillist."

"I knew you'd come, Mr. Jennison," Mosby said almost casually. "All I had to do was wait. And I figured *how* you'd come in too. The door and windows being barred, you'd slide down the chimney. And I know you never shoot a man who's empty handed. Knowing that the rest was easy, I

wasn't really taking any chances, with my voice throwing and everything."

"If you knowed I'd come per the chimney," Jennison asked practically, "why didn't you jest camp thar and pot me when I hit ashes?"

"You might have outshot me," Mosby admitted frankly, "and besides I wanted to talk to you first. I wanted to thank you for cleaning out my pardners. You see I've known for a year or more that this game was doomed to play out. Rance didn't figger it that way but I did. So I've been salting money away, every chance I've had, *outside*. Rance thought it was hid in the corner yonder. Hell! It's in a bank in Walla Walla, waiting for *me*. And I don't mind telling you, Mr. Jennison, because you'll never live to tell anybody else that me and Polk dug a tunnel from under this cabin out to the crick bank. Trap door hid under my bunk. I know a way out of this damned valley that nobody knew but me and Polk. And Polk don't now I reckon. He's dead over there in my bunk right now."

"You killed him."

"Why of course. He knew too much. That wipes the slate clean. I'm leaving pretty soon by that tunnel. Nobody can stop me, nor bother me afterwards but one man. You're that huckleberry. I'd have to kill you for that reason. But I've got a bigger one. You killed my dog."

"Care if I smoke?"

"By God!" Mosby beamed admiringly, "You're a cool cucumber. Go ahead and smoke. I'm comfortable, and I want you comfortable. I always did hate to shoot a coward. But a brave man I don't mind a bit."

Now Bat Jennison harbored a far deeper design in that request to smoke than the mere whim to titilate his lungs with the crisped ghost of nicotine. In the crook of his right elbow nestled that precious one shot Derringer, and his supreme need was to feel the friendly smack of that worn butt as his eager fingers closed round it. To engineer that feat, and not at the same time arouse the suspicions of Mosby was no simple task. Yet he accomplished it. The match, held in his *right* hand flamed too long, long enough indeed to lick conspicuously at thumb and finger. Swearing softly and to Mosby's evident delight, he whipped the

sputtering splinter floorward with emphasis aplenty. The stratagem worked, the deception was perfect. So now with the sleeve gun in hand, concealed by his overlapping and as if carelessly placed left hand, he was ready. And the sands were running low. Mosby's tantalizing mood might veer instantly, and well Jennison knew it.

FOR the moment though he stood smiling down amiably at Jennison, his lips parted slightly, apparently still in a mood to banter. And then Jennison heard it, an oddly tinkling musical tone, not a tune, though it had rhythm. Producing at will by a very few, though the know how never seemed clear even to the artist himself, known colloquially as "lung music." The only comparable sound known to this narrator was made by a rotating toothed cylinder enshrined in the hollowed-out cover of that gloomy morgue of ancestral memories, the old-fashioned family album. And Jennison achieved a complete education as Mosby tinkled forth that sound. For according to the governor at Boise "lung music" had been an accomplishment of Bob Kelsey, the man Jennison had set out to find! And had found him here in this cabin of death. Mosby was Bob Kelsey.

"You fooled the governor complete," Jennison remarked from around his pipe stem. "How come you had that letter?"

"Bob Kelsey, you're meaning," Mosby chuckled reminiscently. "Why you see he



happened into this camp. Being a stranger, one of the boys, Saul, I think, picked him off. When we went through his clothes we found the letter. I figgered it might be smart to run down to Boise palm myself off on the governor, learn what he planned to do about us up here, and so forth. And you've got to admit it worked. So the governor sent you up here looking for Bob

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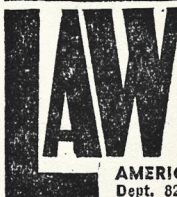
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Kelsey, eh? Who I wonder, will he send looking for you."

And Jennison knew that the swiftly fore-shadowed end was now in view. The tale was finished. Mosby was preparing to scrawl "finis" underneath the final chapter. So what he said now carried not the faintest breath of surprise.

"I'm a dead shot, Mr. Jennison," he could have made comment on the weather so far as human emotions were concerned, "so I won't bungle the job. But to make it easier for you, though I'm damned if you need it, I've worked out a simple plan. I'm going to count out loud, and along at some number which I've already picked out, I'll kill you. The top number is twenty. Fair enough?"

"She's o.k.," Jennison assured him pipe still in his mouth. "Start countin'."

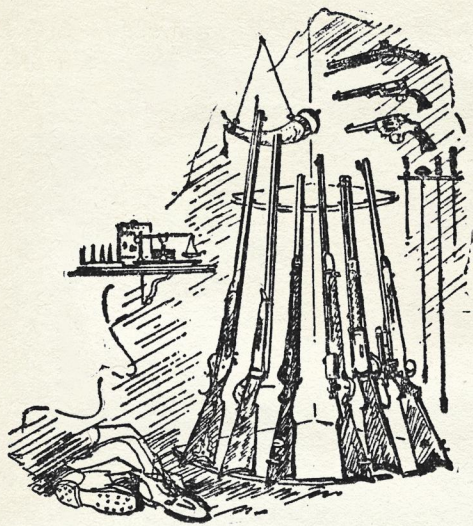
"Mr. Jennison," Mosby assessed Jennison's spirit justly, "you're the gamest man I ever met. So long and good luck to you."

POSSIBLY Chevalier Bayard, would have waited in knightly fashion until Mosby had at the least droned out "twelve," before he unsheathed his sword. But Bat Jennison had never heard of the fabled hero "without fear and without reproach," and he had no sword. Besides, Mosby might elect to halt at any handy spot along his self-declared mathematical trail. So "three" as it dropped casually from Mosby's lips proved to be the number to seal the count. That right mackinaw sleeve had spurted flame. Under Mosby's chin appeared a neat round hole, its edges clear cut and for a fractional second unstained. Then the edges crimsoned, the red smear spread in magical way, the heavy pistol clattered noisily to the floor. Mosby toppled to twitch once and die.

"He made a mistake," Jennison explained to the staring miners. The sleeve gun was not in evidence when he had let them in, nor would it ever be in evidence to them.

Now he pointed to Mosby. In falling an outflung arm had come to rest across the body of the only thing Mosby had loved, the dog.

"Comes morning," Jennison said almost gently, "we'll bury 'em side by each. I figger he'd like it so."



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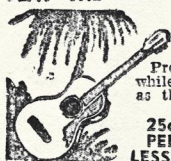
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St. Etienne and Charleville. This may seem strange, because it would seem only natural to reproduce the British Brown Bess with which we were armed and presumably more familiar in Colonial days. But it was a wise choice, for the French musket was not only stronger due to the stock being secured by bands instead of pins, but was more accurate at long range.

It has not always been easy to keep up the program of producing weapons of war superior to those of any potential enemy.

Improvement of design and creation of new types, involving continual research and experiment are required to meet the more and more exacting demands of modern warfare. This is indeed apparent when we consider that during the past 150 years we have progressed from the comparatively crude muzzle loaders, the barrels of which were made by forming bars of iron into hollow cylinders and then welded—a process which incidentally was in vogue during the Civil War, to the auto-loading or full automatic cartridge guns made of alloy metals which were unknown a few years ago.

All this in spite of retarding factors such as difficulty in obtaining appropriations for research and experimental work—as a matter of fact there were times when hardly enough money was available to keep the armories open for reconditioning arms in service.

Also the "Board" has made unfortunate recommendations as to the adoption of new arms, or so it seems. For instance, take the case of the single-shot Springfield caliber .45 Model of 1873. This rifle was recommended and accepted instead of one of the very practical magazine arms of American and foreign design which were demonstrated at that time. This set us back about twenty years as far as the rifle is concerned.

It is easily understood why, in times of comparative security, we would hesitate to make a change which would necessitate expending considerable funds on a proposition which would seem to be not completely necessary. Although this attitude has cost us heavily in the past, we have always managed to "come out on top."

The manufacturing set-up at Springfield is about the same as that of most modern machine shops. The usual division being apparent, each in charge of a qualified and experienced foreman. All under the immediate and personal supervision of a general foreman, who reports to an officer designated by the commanding officer as Officer in Charge of Shops.

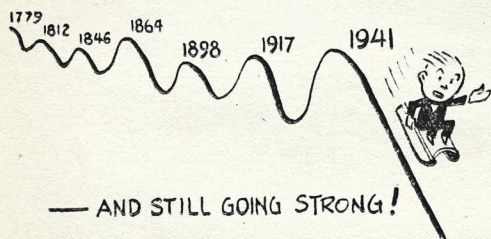
The divisions roughly are: Planning, forging and pressing, heat-treating, milling

laboratory, power and plant maintenance, assembling shop, proof-firing and targeting.

To maintain maximum production it naturally takes a very large staff to man such an organization. During peacetime, with appropriations cut to the bone, many of the highly skilled craftsmen so necessary for the production of fine arms are scattered to the four winds. So, about every twenty years more or less we have the same old story.

For a typical picture of this story let's see what happened during World War I. (I'm taking this period because I have all the figures at hand, and unfortunately this information on World War II is not at the present time available for publication.)

We started actual hostilities on April 6, 1917, with a reserve of 600,000 Springfield, caliber .30-'06 rifles, also stored were



160,000 Krag, .30-40, plus a number of Springfield single shot caliber .45-70 rifles which were cleaned and repaired and eventually used for guard and training purposes in this country. We were frantic for training arms, so twenty thousand Ross caliber .303 rifles were purchased from the Canadian government, and deliveries of Russian caliber 7.62-mm. rifles totaled 280,049. Did you count the number of different calibers? I get a total of 6, counting the .22 which was also used for training. The ammunition supply and distribution problem was a little confusing to say the least.

Something had to be done and quick to clear up the rifle situation! So, the ordnance boys looked around and discovered that three commercial plants had been producing the Enfield caliber .303 for the British government. With a few changes, this rifle could be adapted to the .30-'06 cartridge. This was the logical thing to do so plans for immediate production were made.

From April to August, 1917, 14,986 rifles were produced at Springfield, and

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Amazing new discovery "GUM GRIPPER" makes loose, slipping dental plates fit snug and comfortable—makes

NEW EASY METHOD false teeth feel and fit like new—almost like having your own teeth again.

for Uppers or Lower NO PASTE, POWDER OR PLASTER. Simply squeeze "GUM GRIPPER" on evenly—then put your plate in your mouth. Wear it while "GUM GRIPPER" sets in a few minutes. THAT'S ALL YOU DO.

GUARANTEED ON ANY DENTAL PLATE

Will not harm denture or irritate gums—sanitary, tasteless, odorless. Keeps mouth sweet and clean, prevents sore spots. **SEND NO MONEY.** Order a Tube today for only \$1.00—use the coupon below. Application of "GUM GRIPPER" is guaranteed to last from 3 to 6 months, or your money back.

FREE

GENEROUS SIZE PACKAGE

DENTAL PLATE CLEANER included FREE of Extra Cost—cleans like magic without brushing. Will not harm denture.

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Gum Gripper, Dept. 8-C 127 N. Dearborn, Chicago 2, Ill.

Rush "GUM GRIPPER" on money-back guarantee.

☐ I'll deposit \$1.00 plus postage with postman.

☐ Enclosed is \$1.00. You pay postage.

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LOOK around you. See the way tractors, trucks, buses, railroads, ships, power plants and equipment of many kinds are "going Diesel." Every day new opportunities are opening—in industrial and farming communities—for trained men who can install, maintain, operate and repair Diesel engines. Plan now to build your future in this growing field.

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☐ Check here for special information if you are under 17.
☐ Check here if Veteran of World War II.

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FREE
FACTS

from August 1 to December 31, 1917, 89,479 were manufactured. These were all Springfield 1903 rifles chambered for the .30-'06 cartridge.

By August 1, the three commercial plants were in production and by December 31, 1917, they had completed 302,887 Enfield rifles which were also chambered for the .30-'06 cartridge.

By the end of the war, 2,193,429 Enfields had been manufactured, while only 265,627 Springfield '03's were produced at Springfield Armory and 47,251 more at Rock Island Arsenal. Very interesting if you like figures!

The situation was a little different at Springfield Armory when World War II came along. All of the machinery, gauges, etc., were ripped out and set up elsewhere to produce rifles to be used by snipers and for the Chinese government. This left the boys at Springfield starting from scratch, or practically so, on the big job of tooling up to manufacture the Garand.

So, tear this out and paste it in your hat for comparison with what happened at Springfield Armory during World War II—when and if we get said information.

In the meantime progress marches on at Springfield Armory!

NO VAULT OF OURS

(Continuation from page 63)

no Ozark Dew in sight. I call my secretary on the phone and ask her how come there is no Ozark Dew. She tells me there are four bottles in the little safe. I can feel myself getting weaker by the minute. I go to the corridor door, look outside. It is empty. The safe is gone. O'Kelly, I tell myself, is not only a demolition expert, he is a robber and a thief. Somehow, and in some manner, he knew them four bottles were nestling in their straw containers behind the safe's inner door. I break the bitter news to Gus.

He still don't say anything. And neither do I. We just sit there and glare at each other.



NEW RING

A handsome new style STERLING SILVER ring. Your choice of two imitation diamonds or one imitation diamond and one imitation ruby. Only \$8.89 plus 78¢ Fed. tax. Satisfaction or your money back. Shown about exact size. SEND

NO MONEY—pay postman plus postage and C. O. D. fee. Order NOW. RAMONA Co., Dept. N-138, Wheeling, W. Va.

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THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

*You Can Influence Others
With Your Thinking!*

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas*? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have

privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

This Free Book Points Out the Way

The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. *They will show you how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. Use the coupon below and send for a copy of the fascinating sealed free book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs.*

The ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC)

Scribe W. F. N. The Rosicrucians, AMORC,
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California.

Kindly send me a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." I am interested in learning how I may receive instructions about the full use of my natural powers.

Name.....

Address.....State.....

FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT

DISEASE OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD



The cause of the disease is not a germ as so many people think, but a vegetable growth that becomes buried beneath the outer tissues of the skin.

To obtain relief the medicine to be used should first gently dissolve or remove the outer skin and then kill the vegetable growth.

This growth is so hard to kill that a test shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy it; however, laboratory tests also show that H. F. will kill it upon contact in 15 seconds.

DOUBLE ACTION NEEDED

Recently H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's Foot. It both gently dissolves the skin and then kills the vegetable growth upon contact. Both actions are necessary for prompt relief.

H. F. is a liquid that doesn't stain. You just paint the infected parts nightly before going to bed. Often the terrible itching is relieved at once.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED

Send Coupon

At least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is both contagious and infectious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us \$1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



GORE PRODUCTS, Inc. N. F.
809 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you \$1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY..... STATE.....