

RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS—WILBUR S. PEACOCK

ANC

Short Stories

July 25th

25c



Part I of a great
new serial by - -

**GORDON RAY
YOUNG**

"Hard-Hunted"



"May I have
the last waltz?"

"YOU'VE HAD IT!"



HE could scarcely believe his ears. This lovely girl was giving him the definite brush-off . . . not delicately or nicely, but downright rudely. Only a few hours before they had been introduced and he had fallen for her head-over-heels. At first she seemed to like him but then, after a dance or two, she openly showed her boredom and annoyance. He couldn't understand why. Poor guy . . . it just happened that the night he wanted to put himself in the best possible light he put himself in the worst.

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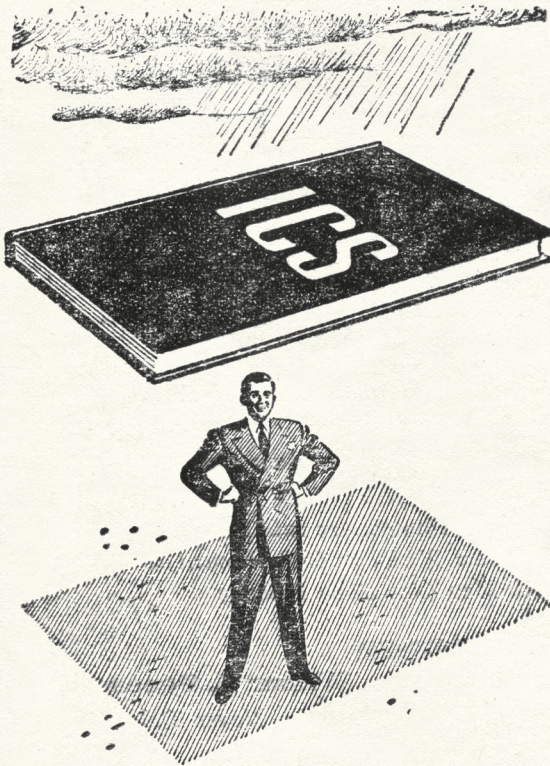
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LAMONT BUCHANAN

JULY 25th, 1948

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NO
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THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

CONDUCTED BY PETE KUHLMOFF

MAILBAG ROUND UP

Lever Action .30-'06

QUESTION: Like a lot of other guys, I have read *SHORT STORIES* and the Shooter's Corner for so long that I don't feel presumptuous in addressing you as "Pete." At any rate, my brother-in-law and I have a question which we wish you to settle for us. It is in regard to the .30-'06 caliber rifle and is as follows:

I maintain that there is no such thing as a standard make and model of a lever action .30-'06 rifle. Guns have been my hobby for years and in addition I was an ordnance man, armorer, and aerial gunner in the air forces; during all this time I have never seen, read of, or heard of a lever action .30-'06. The only lever action gun I know of that has the power and ballistics to compare with the '06 is the Win. Mod. 71, Cal. 348.

Roy (the disputing B-in-L) claims to have fired a government piece of that description during his service with the army. I ups and offers to buy the guy a .30-'06 lever action rifle if such exists in a standard make and model.

Please let me know if such a firearm exists, has existed, by whom made, when, model number, or if same was or is a wild cat. In other words, has there ever been and is there such a critter?

J. P. G., Idaho.

ANSWER: You are going to have a hard time locating a lever action .30-'06 for your B-in-L as they have not been manufactured for quite some time.

Winchester produced the Model 95 (lever action) in .30-'06 caliber from about 1908 until after World War I, at which time this caliber was discontinued due to a number of them blowing up when slap-happy

characters tried to use 8-mm Mauser ammo. in them.

A military model with 24-inch barrel was produced for the .30-'06 cartridge. A knife bayonet hooked onto the front end of this neat little model.

The Model 95 was a fine rifle and could be had in most any high-powered cartridge available during the period of manufacture.



Guns for Belgian Congo

QUESTION: I have read *SHORT STORIES* ever since the first issue came off the press, and as a gun crank I have followed your contributions with a great deal of pleasure and no small profit. I have seen you moved from the rear to the front and now to the middle, where you belong! Your page is one of the most enjoyable in the magazine.

I am writing to get your opinion on the Remington .35 Auto. and to give my own! Also, to tell you of a practical experiment I am about to make. This gun, "The Woods-master" is generally sneered at by big game hunters, because its ballistics read very unfavorably. I had one in my arsenal for three years before I ever gave it a fair trial, always weakening at the last minute and leaving it in the gun cabinet in favor of a .30-'06, or a .375 Magnum for really big meat. But a year ago we hunted a favored spot in Utah, and I let a pal use my favorite gun, and took the .35 Auto. for myself.

I was on a stand on the side of a hill, midway between two good stands of timber, sitting in the angle of a rail fence, watching both ways. I had a man 100 yards above me on the hill, and one 200 yards to my right. Two large bucks walked out into a small clearing 215 yards to my left, and stood a minute to look around. Sitting as I was, I had a rest for each elbow, and might

almost as well have been shooting from a bench rest! It really should have been illegal . . . but I do-ed it! When I fired, I saw the buck sort of hump himself, so I let off the second shot *quick*. He just collapsed where he was standing. He didn't even move his feet. Went down like a collapsing tent when you strike all ropes at once.

When I got to him he was dead as a mackerel. The top rim of an average coffee cup would have covered both holes. He was minus a third of his heart, and a quarter of one lobe of his liver. He weighed in at 305 pounds. The second largest buck killed in Utah that season, the Rangers afterward told me.

Pete, I believe this gun is badly underrated. I have used it since with equal success, using the 200-grain bullet I have never had an animal get up when I hit it. (And since most of my shots are at standing game, and I somehow just happen to be able to find an elbow rest . . . so far I haven't missed a shot with it.) But all of the later meat was gotten at normal ranges, say, 60 to 100 yards.

What do you know about this gun? Have you ever given it a real honest-to-goodness tryout in the field, on meat? Or do you know any of the boys who can qualify to testify?

Now, as to the experiment, I am leaving the first of May for a trip high up in the Lualaba highlands of the Belgian Congo, to be gone four months. I am an archeologist, and we have some caves that are ossuaries, to explore. These caves are infested with leopards. Something has to be done about this. Also, elephants, lions, hippos, water buffalo and such-like beasts are thick in there, and something ought to be done about that also. So, the guns go along with the picks and shovels, the cameras and the gadgets that archeologists generally carry.

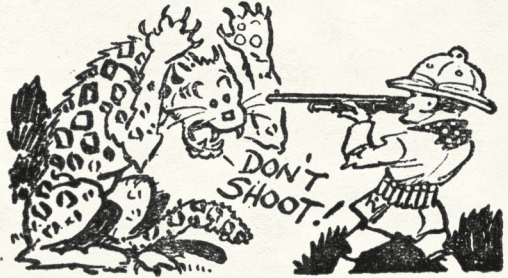
My arsenal on this trip will be:

2 Winchester, model 70, .375 H&H Magnum; 300-grain bullets. Open iron sights, Alaska Scopes, 2½ power, on Griffin and Howe mounts.

1 Remington-Springfield Sporter, .30-'06, 200-grain bullets. Open iron sights. Zial-Daylite Scope, 2¾ power; on same mounts.

1 Winchester Model 12, 12-gauge: 00

Buckshot. (This combination at short range, sneers at leopards. Catch them in the Adam's Apple with a charge of buck before it begins to spread, and it discourages them total and complete!)



To this I am adding the above-cited .35 Remington Auto., Woodsmaster, customarily left home. It is equipped with a Western semi-Buckhorn rear sight, zeroed for fifty yards, just installed. The front sight is a gold bead. I want to try this on water buffalo, lions, leopards at short ranges to prove for myself what it will, or will not do. As I said, I believe the gun is greatly underrated, and I am going to find out what it will do. But on elephants, hippos, and long shots on buffalo, I believe in nothing less than the .375 Magnum. If you are interested, I will report the results of my researches, when and if I return, late in September.

We leave New York May 6 for Leopoldville, then two weeks up the Congo to where we take to the brush. That *only* leaves 1,400 miles to where we will make our headquarters. And Pal, I shudder to tell you just how we will do that last 1,400 miles! It is a hard, tough life, and I'll bet you would give your sox to be with us!

Do you remember the question? I have rambled on until it might be lost in the verbal brush. This is it: "How do you rate the Remington Woodsmaster .35 Auto. as a meat getter?"

Pardon the length of this letter, and after all, I read far longer ones *you* write in "The Shooter's Corner," and pay gladly for the chance!

H. R., Calif.

ANSWER: Speaking of the .35 Remington cartridge—I'd say it is generally underrated, *but not by the guy who uses it regularly.*

(Continued on page 141)

HARD!



JACK

**\$10,000
REWARD
DEAD OR ALIVE**

HUMISTON-

*Being Reckless Out of Pride of Recklessness—That's
the Fool's Way*



Part I

By GORDON RAY YOUNG

Author of "Crooked Shadows," etc.

I

JACK RODIKER rode up to the old adobe and hadn't left the saddle before a small tousel-headed bare-legged girl ran out of the house and leaped at him as if thrown. He reached from the saddle to catch the kid, then heaved her high overhead. She squealed happily and came down with her arms about his neck, clinging like a kitten and fighting against the pull that loosened her arms.

Rodiker, long-legged and high-shouldered, leaned low to set her on the ground, then stepped from the saddle and gently poked a finger against the end of her nose. "Sue, you're getting purt' near pretty," he said, though she wasn't, being freckled,

tanned, skinny, with a copperish red in the curly hair that Arizona's hot winds combed, curled and frizzled.

When Tex Clayton stumped out on his wooden leg, Sue said, "Now he won't have so many kisses for Bess!" She set her head at a bird-like tilt and told Rodiker, "F you'll just have sense enough to wait for me to be old as Bess, you'll like me best!"

Tex Clayton shook his head and puffed. "I maybe orta paddle her sometimes." The day was warm and he was fat, with the smell of whiskey on him. It was always on him. "But I never yet laid a hand in anger on a youngun of mine." He rubbed the short gray fuzz on his fat cheeks. "Not even 'fore their maw went away." Tex solemnly looked afar off as if the Promised

Land was where the sky met the colored mountains that some called the Cathedrals.

"Well, come in, boy. I've got to get wood chopped, an' whew, it's hot! How's all your folks?"

The 'dobe floor was earth, bare but hard as slate and slick-smooth from dancing feet. Any Clayton could make music out of anything that tinkled or squeaked, and there were three girls and one boy. The long-legged Rodiker was awkward about moving to rhythm, which made him feel a dullard when Bess tried to teach, for she not only danced like a dust-devil but fiddled better than her brother, who was a gangling, lazy-slow, loose-jointed fellow until music moved him.

Jack Rodiker's mother, a gaunt, hard-toiling mountain woman, spoke of the Claytons as shiftless; she thought the motherless Clayton girls romped too much to be lady-like; and suspected that Tex didn't work hard enough at his mule trading to be honest. But both families were Southern and remembered The War and that was a bond.

Bess met Rodiker at the kitchen door with sweat on her face and the smell of dish-water on her hands. Sue's head was poked through the back door to watch and comment on the love-making, but Bess didn't care and Rodiker, blushing like a boiled beet, pretended not to care; so Sue, finding it no fun to jeer at persons who were deaf or acted like it, went off whistling and climbed a bareback mule that she kicked into an aimless, 'cross-country lope.

Bess was a pretty girl and careful of her prettiness; she brushed her light brown hair, scrubbed her face with moist corn meal, wore a bonnet outdoors, and of late the fellows who came to see her oldest sister were taking notice of Bess.

When she finished in the kitchen she sat on the stoop and watched Rodiker cut and split wood. Old Tex, hearing the sound of the ax, smiled to himself, nipped at the bottle of white whiskey and took up the fiddle, playing dreamily.

Ann Clayton came along the back veranda and sang "Hello there!" at Rodiker, then laughed, "Tex sure knows how to get his wood chopped!" Ann was a tall girl with a merry loveliness, and the light in her blue eyes danced as starlight does when the night winds blow hard.

The fiddle stopped. Bess listened for a moment then jumped up. "Somebody's coming!" Both girls caught at their long skirts and scampered through the house. Rodiker chopped wood until Bess came to a back window and excitedly told him, "It's Old Yank Arnold and a woman in a buggy. That sister'n-law of his, I think."

Rodiker sank the ax into the chopping block and went indoors, moving with the same sort of quiet as if up to thievery, being curious but shyly meaning to keep out of sight.

He didn't know Yank Arnold except by sight, and he had never been closer to the sister-in-law than across the street in town a time or two. Folks said she was the most beautiful woman ever to come into the Santsander. Now he edged up to the doorway where Bess and Ann were staring.

OLD TEX CLAYTON would have asked the Devil in had the Devil stopped before the adobe; and he stumped out, hat in hand, to greet Colonel Arnold and the woman and invite them in, though he knew that Colonel Arnold was about as unfriendly toward him as a man could be and not pull a gun on sight.

The buggy top was down and Cora Arnold held a small blue, lace-trimmed parasol in gloved fingers. She was wearing a heavy veil but pushed it up as if quite willing to be looked at. Her hat was small and blue; it sat forward on her head and had bonnet strings. She was also enveloped in a straw-colored linen duster and the Clayton girls couldn't tell what kind of a dress she was wearing; but her complexion was white, startlingly white in this hot, windy country. Her face was pretty but had the taint of snootiness, very like sullen discontent.

Bess whispered, "What's she so stuck-up about? Can't even ride horseback, they say!"

Ann murmured, "Wish I had skin like that!"

"Wish I had the money the old Arnolds have!"

Ann's tone was kindly. "Her husband's a half-cripple and sick much of the time, they say. Maybe that's why she don't look happy."

"Yank's a widower. She ought've married him instead!"

"I'd marry a baboon sooner!" said the gentle Ann, who remembered The War.

Colonel Arnold was tall, thin, ramrod-straight and hatchet-faced; a long mustache put his mouth in brackets, and there was a tuft of whiskers on his chin. His eyes were deep-set with a hard directness. Now he didn't leave the buggy. One of his splendid black saddle horses was tied behind and he held the high-headed team's lines with a steady, one-handed pull as he faced Tex Clayton.

Rodiker could hear his voice but not what he said, and didn't need to hear to know that he was laying down the law. Tex got huffy and slapped on his floppy hat, then r'ared back, propping himself on the wooden stump as he folded his arms like a defiant man before a firing squad. Cora Arnold looked aside at him, listened and seemed bored.

A bare-backed mule with a rope halter loped down the road, and Sue's spraddled legs flung kicks at the mule, hurrying him so she could have a look at the company before the house. She pulled up on the off side where Cora Arnold sat, and leaned for a close look at the milk-white face of the blue-eyed woman.

Sue's "jumped-up Judas, you're purty!" was a heartfelt compliment but earnestly loud.

Cora Arnold looked about and, with the startled gesture of brushing away a wasp, swept the parasol toward Sue's face. That frightened the mule. He gave a sidling jump and Sue slid from the slick back, landing in the dust. She came up as a ball bounces and her small hands had closed on whatever they could grasp, which was sandy dust.

Sue now called her the unloveliest names known to such mule skinnners as visited the Clayton ranch and shrieking, "You done it a purpose!" let fly with dirt she had grabbed from the road.

The parasol turned the handful and Cora Arnold then held up the parasol to have an astonished look at such a small termagant. Sue, an experienced scrapper, then let fly with the other handful.

Cora Arnold screamed, dropped the parasol out of the buggy and, throwing both hands to her dust-smearred face, cried.

Colonel Arnold half arose from his seat

to look across to the other side of the buggy and demanded, "What on earth?"

Sue began to tell him at the top of her voice, but he shook the reins and drove on, leaving a swirl of rising dust as if to escape in a cloud.

Sue picked up the abandoned parasol, daintily brushed a grimy hand at the dust-spotted silk; then, with a lace-edged parasol overhead to shelter her freckles, she began unhurriedly, and with what she assumed was a high-born lady's mincing gait, to trail her mule.

Tex Clayton stomped into the house, lifted the fiddle from the rocking chair, gave it to Bess to put away. He flung his hat on the floor, mopped his face with a bandanna, then sat in the rocking chair and drank from the bottle. He offered Rodiker a nip of white whiskey and wasn't offended by the headshake.

"D'yuh hear what all he said?"

"No, Tex."

"W'y," Tex shouted, "that ornery ol' scalawag said us Suth'ners better damn' well remember the Wah's over an' leave his cows alone or we'll git whupped again."

"He talk like that?" Rodiker asked hotly.

"He sho' did!" Tex slapped his wooden stump. "Worser'n that! W'y, he called me ugly names I never heard before. 'Cat's paw!'—that's what he said I was! 'Tain't enough to have a blue-bellied Yankee drinkin' out of the river above yuh, but he come right up to my own front door an' called me a 'cat's paw!' Called your own folks that, too, Jack! He said Ol' Jerym Bevarts is a-making cat's paws out of all us Suth'ners! He said, he did, that Ol' Jerym hisself wasn't no mo' Suthern than a skinned pole cat is a possum!"

II

ON A Sunday and near noon Rodiker dismounted at the Moheela livery stable, not far from the center of town and the town seemed deserted.

The stable hand asked, "Ain't you goin' to the picnic? They roasted a steer. They took ten-fifteen kegs of beer. The Claytons went by this mornin'. All but Slim was on mules and Old Tex fiddled as he rode. There's bronco bustin'. You could win yourself some money, like last Fourth."

Young Rodiker hooked his thumbs in his belt and with a wry-lipped noiseless laugh said, "I wouldn't top one like that man-killer again—not if he was dead and stuffed, I wouldn't! All I got was ten dollars and spent that for liniment!"

The stable man swung a hand vaguely toward the length of dark stalls. "If you want to see a purty horse, go look at Yank Arnold's girl's. Near ever'body that can walk or creep has gone to the picnic—but not them Arnolds. I reckon she wouldn't mix with common folks."

"She's nothing but a little kid."

"Not too little to be snooty as hell, you ask me!"

"I never was close enough to know. But Yank sure looks mean and high-headed."

"He is," said the stable hand. "Just rode off a while ago. Him and the girl stayed the night at the hotel. It's theirs, so they don't have to pay board."

As Rodiker tramped along the board sidewalk his sharp heels and heavy spurs clacked and jangled in the sunny stillness. The sheriff's office was open though no one was inside. He paused, wondering if there were new "Wanted" posters. "Dead or Alive," some had said, offering a pile of money.

On down the street was Bevarts' Cattleman Bank, and on a corner across the street the Bevarts Hardware Store, with a new Winchester in the window. He stopped, pushed up his hat, put his forehead against the glass the better to see. He was good with firearms. His father, a Confederate cavalryman, had seen to that.

A block farther down was the two-story Moheela hotel. A wide porch was in front, and over the porch an old sycamore of huge girth swung out crooked limbs that gave shade to loafers and scattered jewel-colored leaves when the fall winds snatched at them. A watering trough was at the foot of the tree.

He stopped at the trough, pumped into a rusty cup on a chain, drank, then climbed a few steps that led to the porch and went into the hotel. The bar was closed, not because it was Sunday but on account of the picnic; and he didn't see anybody about.

A girl's voice said, "Hello!" She was on the stairs, coming down and had paused. He bobbed his head and touched his hat,

wondering that she had spoken to him, and now smiled though she limped in coming on down. She steadied herself at the banisters and looked at him with dark-eyed interest. Just a mite of a girl she seemed, even in the long riding skirt; and the stable hand was wrong, for she wasn't snooty, not at all, but said quite cheerfully:

"I sprained my ankle and can hardly walk. Would it be too much trouble for you to help me to the stable? There's nobody around here to send for the horse. Of course, once in the saddle I'll be all right."

THE ankle may have been weak but didn't seem painful for she looked as cutely mischievous as a kitten that wants to play; yet when she was at the bottom of the stairs and left the newel post to take a step toward him, the ankle gave way and she thumped down on the uncarpeted floor and lay still.

Rodiker looked at her and felt helpless, then he got down on his knees; her eyes were closed and the small, tanned face had the placidness of death, but he touched her cheek and it was warm. He took her into his arms and stood up. Not knowing what to do, he turned this way and that, holding her close. Her hat, loosely fastened by chin thongs, had slipped off and her dark hair was a soft tangle of braided coils. Cologne's fragrance, faint as a mountain flower's perfume, came into his face.

When he started toward the wall bell behind the desk she opened her eyes and smiled. I never fainted before. It's not so bad, really not!" Her black eyes crinkled at him.

He held her close and said, "You oughtn't try to ride. You might faint again. On horseback that would be bad."

"Wouldn't it?" she agreed. "But I'm all right now. Honest." Her feet stirred the long riding skirt. "I can walk to the stable if you will take my arm. Let me down and I'll show you."

He set her feet to the floor and she clung to him in going toward a chair. He said firmly, "You stay here. I'll bring your horse."

When he led the side-saddled horse down the street she was waiting outside on a railing of the veranda with her back resting against a low sycamore limb. He offered his hand to help her down the steps.

She said, "You'd better carry me," and helpfully put an arm about his neck.

He said, "You're pretty little to ride clear out to your ranch alone."

She crinkled her eyes laughingly. "Oh, I'm lots bigger than I look!"

He, tall and long-armed, lifted her onto the side saddle; and she said, "Thank you, Mr. Rodiker," which surprised him.

"How do you know me?"

Her dark eyes laughed but her voice was serious. "I've known you for a long time. I saw you ride that mean horse last July Fourth. It jolted even my teeth, the way he bucked. I bet on you too!"

She waved back at him as she rode off; and he thought what grit Colonel Arnold's little girl must have to ride with an ankle that hurt so bad it made her faint. He was pleased that she had known him by sight; and he liked it that she had bet on him when he topped the man-killer, though likely it was no more than a bottle of pop.

He made bets with Sue Clayton that were paid with soda pop and candy, and was careful never to win. Sue and Kate Arnold, he thought, were about of an age.

WHEN Rodiker rode up to the Lazy S chuck wagon in the pre-dawn starlight, Bill Brody, the wagon boss, was pouring himself a cup of lye-strong coffee, and said:

"Get off that horse and eat. Then take a fresh one an' light out for John Henry's and ask where in hell is that wagon an' them riders he promised?"

Off south the beef cut lay dark and lump-shaped on the ground while riders moved at an encircling walk and sang wearily. Within a step and a jump of the wagon boss's feet were long blanket-wrapped cocoon shapes, and some snored. The cook, a tall old fellow with joints that creaked, crouched under the lantern by the wagon and poked his fingers into a dishpan filled with dough.

Bill Brody had a weakness for liquor and didn't sprain his back bending backwards to keep a straight tally book, but he had been top man with the Bevartses for a long time. He now turned impatiently to the turnip-sized watch that was hanging on the side of the chuck box; the hands didn't appear to have moved for a long time, and he asked the cook:

"You forget to wind this thing?"

"Mebbe. What does a man need with a clock when there ain't no clouds?"

Bill Brody lifted the watch from its crooked nail, put it to his ear. The hands said twenty minutes of four, and the watch ticked; but he pried open the face and moved up the minute hand, rehung the watch, then let out an unjoyful roar:

"Haller-lu-yer! A new day it has dawned! Up an' at 'em, you tassle-eared bob cats! Come a-whoopin'!"

He strode among the cocoon shapes, giving a push with a boot's toe or stinging cut with the quirt. Men stirred, wriggling from blankets and unfolding the boots from under the "pillow." Sleep-husky voices grumbled—not complaining, just grumbling. The air was nippy. Men stamped into boots, rolling bedding into tarps, flung the lashed bedroll into the cook's wagon and went stumbling toward the horses that the wrangler was heading in.

Men dipped into the bean pot, filled tin cups with coffee, soused hot biscuits into bacon fat; they hunkered down, chewing and swallowing as if each tried to finish first.

A big man rode up slowly on a big horse and wore a shabby overcoat against the morning's chill. He owned the Lazy S but wasn't much of a horseman. He owned a bank, too, and was more used to sitting on a chair than in a saddle.

Old Jerym Bevarts had a body thick as a barrel, a short neck, a heavy head that he carried in a lob-sided twist as if suspicious of what was going on behind him. He was gray, hook-nosed and hadn't many teeth. Tight-fisted, it was said; but it was said, too, that his sons appeared to have money and didn't do much work. The Bevartses might own cattle but they weren't cowmen.

Rodiker, beginning as a kid wrangler, had worked off and on for the Lazy S for years without seeing a Bevarts once a year. They seldom showed up during spring or fall roundups. Bill Brody ran the outfit.

Old Jerym got down from the horse as if coming down a ladder. He took a plate from the cook, helped himself to beans, bacon, biscuits, molasses, then sat on the ground near Rodiker. He couldn't sit on his heels like a proper cowman.

"You're young Rodiker, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Fine folks, the Rodikers. Um-hm, yes."

The old man lifted his face and stared about owlishly as he chewed. He watched men rise, scrape their plates into, or at least toward, the fire, then drop the tin plates into the bucket.

Old Jerym poked out a spoon toward the scraps that came from the plates and told Rodiker, "I pay for ever' speck of that waste!" He sipped coffee and chewed. "You're purt' near the best rider in this country, ain't you?"

"I been throwed."

"You rode that bad-buckin' horse last July Fourth, didn't you? Dougal—you know my son Dougal?—he bet agin you. I told him he was a fool to bet agin a Rodiker, ever!"

Rodiker flushed proudly and Old Jerym chuckled; he had never before said anything of the kind, but it was a pleasant thing to say now, and didn't cost a dime.

Rodiker rode west, crossing and recrossing the snake-crooked Santsander. Yank Arnold ran cattle on both sides of the river. The Bevartses had come up from the south. There was lots of range but not enough for both outfits and the little ranchers and nesters who squatted close to the water.

At fall roundup time Arnold sent a wagon to work under Bill Brody but never showed up himself. His other wagons, with smaller outfits joining in, combed the valleys from the Northern Cathedrals to the red and rugged Sierra Gordos on the west. He had three or four ranches, owned a half-dozen brands, and some said that he and his brother acted as if they owned the earth.

Rodiker had headed into the outskirts of the colonel's range to reach John Henry's ramshackle place. Nobody was in sight. He hallooed, then pushed open the door and looked all around. Bedding was off the bunks. He looked around outside. The chuck wagon was gone. Fresh grease was at the edge of the can on a wagon shelf, so he knew they had greased up the axles and rolled off.

John Henry had most likely got word from Colonel Arnold to join up with one of his crews. Rodiker explained to his horse, "If I lived as close to Yank Arnold as John Henry does, I'd most likely want to do like he wants me to, too."

About five miles on the way back, Rodiker turned aside and rode toward an upland grove of piñons when he thought he saw smoke. It vanished but he rode on toward where it had been until he heard the faint boom-boom of a double-barreled shotgun and black puffs rolled up and floated off; and he was near enough now to see the startled quail sliding down from shoulder-high flight into brush and behind rocks.

Since it was powder smoke and not fire, he hadn't any more interest and was reining about when a voice hailed him. He saw a man on a boulder, and the man waved an arm, beckoning.

Rodiker rode up and, from having seen him in town, recognized Yank Arnold's brother, whose name was Craig. He was heavier than the colonel and older, with some kind of a war injury that kept him out a saddle. He used a buggy for going about, and that was no good in roundup work. He liked to hunt and two bird dogs lay at his feet when Rodiker stopped before where Craig was sitting on the lichen colored boulder.

He had an embittered, pain-plowed face and, after eying the Lazy S shoulder brand, said meaningly, "You are a hell of a way from your own stamping ground!"

Rodiker looked back at him and said, "Yes," stubbornly not explaining because he acted mean.

"I thought you might be one of my men looking for me. That's why I waved." Craig's eyes and voice seemed demanding to know what Rodiker was doing up here. There wasn't any reply at all, so Craig said, "What is your name?"

"Jack Rodiker."

"Oh, Rodiker, eh? I'll tell you right now, once and for all, it is best if you Rodikers, Claytons, and all the rest of the Bevarts' bootlickers keep the hell away from this range!" The shotgun lay across his legs, not pointing at Rodiker, but it could point at him very quickly and Craig's look expressed a warning as he slapped the gun's stock.

Rodiker took his time and his voice drawled with soft slowness, as nearly always when he was mad; and he said:

"I've heard tell that you are ornery mean. Some say it's on account of your back hurtin' all the time. Some say it's just Yank

cussedness oozin' out like resin from a pine knot!"

Craig Arnold's hard eyes slowly widened and sparkled, then he threw back his head and laughed.

When he stopped laughing he had a hand to his back and pressed there to ease pain, but he looked amused. "So your name's Rodiker? Well, from now on, I don't care what the colonel says, no man who'll talk back like that to a double-barreled shotgun would steal a cow! Ride on, Rodiker.

But come back if you ever want to work for a damnyankee that oozes pine-knot cussedness!"

IT WAS far past the middle of the afternoon when Rodiker found the Lazy S chuck wagon some ten miles from last night's camp.

He'd been without dinner, but luke-warm beans were in the pot and he piled up a plateful and drank stale coffee, then changed horses and rode out to find Bill Brody.

Some steers in the beef cut acted like they had made up their minds that they wouldn't go to a Kansas City slaughter house, and were breaking in all directions from the herd; and the men who were trying to head them off rode through as much dust as the people in hell have smoke. It was a near thing to a stampede and the wagon boss that lets his herd get away isn't likely to be boss the next morning. For one thing, it is bad to run beef cattle, so the riders, a-whoopin' and a-hollerin', tore around the herd to hold what hadn't broken out.

Rodiker took out after a galloping long-horn that had a ten-sized A on its side. He forefooted the steer with a thirty-foot throw and sent it into a somersault.

Bill Brody came alongside Rodiker and said, "We'll have fresh beef tonight! Sometimes I think Yank Arnold runs his meanest cows down where we'll have to handle them!

"And John Henry sent me word today that the Arnolds had told him to bring his wagon to them. Yank Arnold may learn some day he don't own ever'thing and ever'-body in the Santsander. You had your ride for nothin'!"

III

RODIKER was spreading his tarp when a horse came pounding through the dusk and pulled down at the chuck wagon; and Slim Clayton asked the cook where was Rodiker.

Rodiker heard and called out, so Slim rode over to him and dismounted from the lather-wet horse, then pulled at Rodiker's arm. Slim's was a bean-pole build and he had a sleepy eyed laziness, but now there was urgency in his quietness as he walked Rodiker well away from the camp before he said:

"Craig Arnold's been killed out in the piñons and his wife says you done it! She seen you! It was today about noon!"

Rodiker asked, "You funnin' to scare me?"

"I near rode my horse to death gettin' out here to tell you what Colonel Arnold in town says she says."

"I stopped in the piñons coming back from John Henry's and I talked to him, but I didn't know she was around, and I never—"

Slim said, "Looky! What a woman says is so, allus, when she is pretty, and Cora Arnold's that!"

"I never before today spoke to Craig Arnold and—hell, man! he offered me a job any time I want it!"

"Don't talk that way. It ain't so and nobody'd believe it."

"I'm tellin' the truth."

"And I'm tellin' what the colonel says she says. And he's offerin' a thousand dollars for you. Dead or alive! I knew you'd just joined up to work for the Bevertses wagon out here. If they's anybody else in town knows where you are, Arnold riders'll have your neck in a rope before mornin'. So you light out!"

Jack Rodiker sat on his heels in the darkness and studied. "Why would I shoot Craig? I had a sort of liking for him after our talk."

Slim said, "Yeah?" unbelievably, then squatted beside Rodiker and fingered the dust. Fifty yards away tired men were spreading their bedrolls. Here and there a final cigarette burned like a floating coal. Slim rolled himself a cigarette and told more of what he had heard in town:

"It's bein' said somebody hired you to shoot him. Most folks would guess that 'somebody' is a Bevarts! As it's told, Craig was quail huntin' over in the piñons and she was along an' dozin' in the shade. A shot close by made her jump up. Craig was plugged in the back an' the man she says was you was ridin' off lickety-split. The horse you rode was a roan and branded Lazy S, the which means Bevartses."

"In the back, me?"

"It's what Yank says."

"She must've mistook me for—but in the back, me?"

Slim became impatient. "You rode in the piñons. Your horse was a Lazy S. She says she seen you. The sheriff is Arnold's old trail boss and he'll pick damnyankees for the jury. The judge of the circuit is a damn old carpetbagger!" Then Slim added recklessly, "Personal, I don't care where any Arnold gets shot or who by, but I bet the Arnold riders'll be out here in a hurry. You've got to cut an' run."

Rodiker pondered some. "Slim, you tell my folks, and yours, I never done it. You tell them the Arnold woman's somehow made a mistake, and if I can get to talk with her she'll know by seeing I'm not who she thinks."

He saddled with a stealth-like guilt and headed out into the darkness, seeming to confess by turning fugitive; and before midnight Arnold riders came in. They said Yank Arnold swore he'd keep offering more and more money until Jack Rodiker was killed, or caught and hung. And Colonel Arnold wasn't a blowhard.

RODIKER rode from the Santsander into the Requa country and went to work for a man who raised horses. One afternoon the man came from town with some liquor in him, and after eying Rodiker, said, "You're him!" and started to pull a gun.

Rodiker reached out as a rattlesnake strikes, twisted the gun aside. "How'd you know?"

"Reward poster there in town offers two thousand dollars. Tall, wide-shouldered, gray-blue eyes, and no man is a better rider. The name is Rodiker."

He shook off the posse and after a long time made his way into Kansas where he

went to work for the Hayes Brothers. Here he felt safe enough to write Slim a letter and gave it to a freighter. In town, before he got to the postoffice, the freighter saw a fresh reward poster that said, "Wanted for Murder!" The reward was \$3,000 and signed by the sheriff of Moheela. The wanted description not only fitted that tall fellow at the ranch, but his letter was addressed to a man at Hoheela.

The freighter opened the letter and showed it to the sheriff. The sheriff rode out to where Rodiker was working and caught him asleep. It was about midnight, so the sheriff tied him up and set one of the cowboys as a guard. In the morning Rodiker and the cowboy were gone. The cowboy himself was on the dodge and had been hiding out at the Hayes ranch.

Soon a bank was held up in Western Kansas by two very bold men. The posse shot the Hayes cowboy to death but the other man escaped with—so the bank said—\$20,000 in gold.

Colonel Arnold increased the reward and newspapers began to make a big to-do over the young outlaw who couldn't be caught. Rodiker was being reported from many places at the same time: A halfbreed outlaw in Indian Territory "confessed" that Rodiker had been among his companions in a train robbery; a stage driver out of Phoenix "recognized" him as the lone highwayman who had lined up his passengers. It was Rodiker and his bunch, so the newspapers said, that flagged down the Union Pacific outside of Denver and dynamited the Wells, Fargo safe, but when the four men were caught he wasn't among them. One night a man rode his horse into a Calabasas gambling house, leveled out two guns, said, "I'm Jack Rodiker! Fill up my saddle bags with coin!" Somebody sneaked a shot and killed him. He had thought Rodiker's name would be more impressive than his own.

It was a name that began to flare in print clear across the country. One New York paper sent a correspondent into Huerfano County, Colorado, to confirm the story that Jack Rodiker did ride many muddy miles into town one rainy night and drag a doctor back with him for the croup-choked child of a woman he'd found when he stopped and asked for something to eat.

The woman hadn't known him, but worriedly explained that she was alone with her sick child because her husband was out with a posse, wanting a part of that reward, now up to \$5,000.

The doctor said the outlaw told him, "I'm Jack Rodiker. I've got no money to pay you. I never in my life held up a bank or train or stage. But this sick kid looks like a little girl I used to know."

THAT was how it went for more than three years, then Bill Brody of the Lazy S received a letter that said, "I am scared to write my folks or the Claytons on account of how they are being watched to get some track of me. I want somebody to talk with Mrs. Cora Arnold and find out why she thinks I killed Craig because I never did. Will you?"

Bill Brody showed the letter to Dougal Bevarts, and Dougal made a whistling sound of astonishment. He said, "What a chance!" He was a big fellow with solid, heavy features, and a liking for fancy dress, but was goodlooking.

Bill Brody said, "I don't care whether he killed him or not, I want that reward!"

"Sure," said Dougal. "But Cora Arnold told me herself she seen him. Old Yank would have a cat-fit if he knew we'd been writing regular ever since she went back to Ohio." Dougal was a married man himself, but he said, "Yank'll have more of a cat-fit when it's fixed so we can get married. Half of ever'thing was Craig's!"

Bill Brody had a few more drinks, then went to the hotel room where Colonel Arnold was staying the night. His was a hawk-like face, a tired face, but he was straight up and down as he stood in his stocking feet and his shirt was off. He was so cool toward the Bevartses and all their friends that he didn't ask Bill Brody to take a chair.

Bill Brody said, "Colonel, how much is the most you will pay for Jack Rodiker?"

Colonel Arnold, knowing this man had been Rodiker's friend, thought he understood and took his time and didn't move his eyes off Bill Brody's face. At last he said, "Bring him in alive so I can see him hung, and I'll pay you ten thousand dollars!"

Bill Brody soon showed up in the little

Wyoming town where the letter had come from and asked his way to the Lone Star Ranch. There he said he was looking for a friend and gave the name Rodiker was using.

The ranch owner was a lank hard-bitten Texan who had moved into the tall grass country and he suspiciously looked Bill Brody over as he said:

"Didn't they tell you about him in town?"

"I never asked."

"If you had, you've learned he's a good man not to be lookin' for!"

"So?" said Bill Brody.

"Yes, so!" said the Texan. "Some days ago a blackleg gambler he'd knocked down an' kicked across the floor for cheatin' a damnfool dude, laid for him. The gambler, bein' a sure-thing sharper, got a couple of friends to help. They wasn't enough! He downed the three of 'em in the fastest time I ever seen—and I seen it! Before I had my gun out to chip in he was all through an' not scratched!"

"He could've had the town on a platter, but he told me he couldn't stick around to be looked at close. Right then I paid his wages and threw in a horse, too. Where he went, I don't know, but our sheriff sure ain't lookin' for a man of his size! So if you've got a badge hid under that vest, you won't get any help from around here."

"His name," said Bill Brody, "is Jack Rodiker and he shot a man in the back."

The tall Texan looked Bill Brody in the eye and said:

"He ain't that kind, so you are a liar!"

"He was seen do it!"

"Then who seen him lied!"

That was how the newspapers got hold of Jack Rodiker's name again and made a hullabaloo.

Ten thousand dollars was so much money that Bill Brody knew rich men who had less. He returned to the Santsander and visited Paw and Maw Rodiker's little mountain ranch and to show what a good friend he was of their boy's, he let them read the letter; but he didn't learn anything. They were war-hardened tight-lipped folks.

Bill Brody, from time to time, took along white whiskey and candy to make up closer to Tex Clayton and the girls, but he had his face scratched when he tried to kiss Sue, who was growing into a good-sized girl

with some weight on her bones and a strange straight-forwardness in her violet eyes. She didn't like Bill Brody, just didn't, and said that there weren't enough bull whips in Arizona to make her.

Years went by, some seven or nearly that; and Jack Rodiker was still talked about; some said he was heading the bad bunch up around Deadwood; and some said that, rich from robbery, he had a big ranch in California; but there was also talk that he had joined up with a Mexican general below the Border. Anyhow, Yank Arnold, keeping his word, kept raising the reward though the old sheriff had died. Colonel Arnold had the kind of stick-to-it Yankee stubbornness that had worn the South out during the war.

IV

IT WAS near midnight when the dogs began to bark because horses, coming fast, were on the rocky trail that twisted down through the pines to the Rodiker cabin; and Paw Rodiker rolled off—the corn-husk tick and, rifle in hand, looked out. Thin clouds slid away from the moon and against the forest's spire-tipped darkness he could see the splash of movement as men left their saddles.

Maw Rodiker was sitting up and pushed the nightcap from her ears, the better to listen. Their mountain ranch was far from neighbors and night riders, looking for her son, had come before. She heard a voice call out, silencing the dogs, and told herself, *That's him!* Feeling dread but eagerness, too; then a half-grown boy tumbled down the ladder from the loft with the joyous shout of, "It's Jack!"

Maw Rodiker answered sharply, "Pray God with no hurt in him!" Her work-worn fingers squirmed together as when one in pain will not cry out; it was endless suffering to know that her son was hunted by men who wanted to kill him for the money on his head.

She was putting a match to the candle when Paw Rodiker stepped back from the open door, and the two men standing there had the quietness of strangers waiting for welcome.

Paw Rodiker was black-bearded, big and bowed, and now stood bare-foot in red

flannels. Some of the buttons were off the undershirt and the black hair on his chest was thick, like the curly hair between an old bull's horns.

He said, "Step in," and soberly shook hands with his tall son who had changed enough to be indeed a stranger: his face was darkened by thick stubbly beard, his hair long and scraggly, his clothes weather-worn and he was very tired.

Slim Clayton, just as travel-tired, was with him.

Maw Rodiker lit a second candle before pinching the first's burning wick with thumb and finger, taking off the crust, then she relit it with the slowness of a ritual; and after that she faced about, bare-footed, in a nightgown with the nightcap like a brimless bonnet tied under her chin.

Jack Rodiker thrust out his rifle for Slim to hold, then his spurred boots thumped hard on the doweled floor as he went to her, put his arms about her, kissed her wrinkled mouth, and held her back at arm's length, staring solemnly.

She reached out and took off his hat for a better look at his face. He was big but had the lean stripped look of a man who sleeps little and rides hard; and his face was changed and strange, beardedly old. Always reckless, he had once been good-natured too, with a smile ever close to his mouth; now his mouth was hard, and the shimmer of unresting wariness was in his eyes. She knew that he bore the scars of worse wounds than torn flesh.

The half-grown Ronnie blurted, "I wouldn't have known you to look at!"

Paw Rodiker, down on his knees, brushed the hearth with a wild turkey wing and blew life into the ash-smothered coals. Maw Rodiker fixed a meal. The men ate as starved men do, and nobody spoke. White ash thinly overlay the coals again. The candles burned smokily, making shadows jump and bounce, and the only sound was the shift of boots under the table and the hungry chewing.

Rodiker and Slim went out to the stable and wearily bedded down in the mountain hay; and the rest of the night Maw Rodiker turned from one elbow to the other with head lifted and the nightcap pushed from her ears, straining her ears so that she could give warning if there were other sounds

than the night wind. By her side Paw Rodiker lay wide-eyed and motionless.

THE next morning Paw Rodiker saddled and took Ronnie with him.

The two men sat in the sunshine until it grew warm, then moved under a pine. Slim propped his shoulder against the tree trunk, took out his Jew's harp and made it hum like a swarm of bees in the springtime. Rodiker sat on his heels and somberly looked at nothing. His pockets were empty—so empty that he hadn't even tobacco and papers.

At noon Slim ate dinner fast and, never quite at ease around Mrs. Rodiker, went outdoors.

She sat on a stool across the table from her son and they looked at each other, not speaking.

When he opened his palms as if showing something, she understood their emptiness and nodded; then she said:

"You sent me word last year from Mexico that if you ever come back it would be to kill Yank Arnold."

Their eyes met in a long-drawn-out staring before he asked tonelessly, "Hadn't I ought?"

"I guess you think then you'll go off with Bess Clayton—some're's afar off an' change your name."

He told her steadily, "For over six years now, I've been hard-hunted. I'm tired."

She put her fingers on the table's edge and asked pointblank, "Did Old Jerym Bevarts send for you?"

He smothered, or tried to smother, his surprise behind a steady look; and his, "Why do you think a thing like that?" was cautious.

"Some time ago Tex Clayton rode up here on his mule to say Jerym Bevarts had asked Slim to get word to you. He had a jug of white whiskey and his fiddle. He got drunk and your paw lugged him out to the stable for the night and took off his pegleg so he would stay there. We've never let on to anybody that we've ever heard from you, but—" she jerked a thumb backwards across her shoulder—"looks like Slim learned where you could be found. I reckon the fool Claytons eat out of Old Jerym's hand like the jackasses they are." Then, breaking the words as sharply as

glass breaks, "Jerym Bevarts is a copper-head!"

He raised his empty cup, looked into it, put it down. "I have to take my friends where I can find them."

"Friends? You can't have friends!"

"No?"

"No!" she said sternly, then went to the cupboard where, from far back, she took out a large piece of paper that had been folded many times. All of it was water-stained, and parts were cardboard stiff from the paste that had once attached it to wood. She unfolded the crackled reward poster before him and her lean forefingers rested on the \$10,000.

"That's why you can't have friends, ever!"

It was the first of its kind that he had seen, offered the largest reward. He reread the water-smeared large print that called him dangerous and gave warning that no chances should be taken in attempting his capture. Ronnie, she said, had sopped it off the board in front of the printshop in town one rain-whipped night last winter and brought it to her without Paw knowing.

Rodiker looked up, smiled grimly. "From how this reads, looks like I'm a kind of fire-eater!"

She refolded the poster carefully, then said, "Plain speakin' may make you mad. No man likes the truth when its edge is against his own throat! While I can lift a hand I'll do what can be done to shelter you safe, but while I've got a tongue I'll say what I think is needful.

"Twasn't no fault of yours that made you outlaw, but now I think you've got pride in it. You've been staring at this poster like it was a lookin' glass that made you feel handsomer than you are! Blood-kin was before law and is stronger, so whether you've done—or ain't done—all people say, you've got a home wherever me an' Paw have got a roof. But because you are a hunted man we have no peace. Right now him and Ronnie are out to watch the roads so you'll be safe.

"And if you've come back thinkin' to be friends with the Bevartses because they carry a quarrel with Yank Arnold, you are as stupid as a goose with a craw full of whiskey-soaked corn!"

He stood up as if leaving, but moved the bench and sat down again with a hand to his jaw. Her plain speaking seemed one-sided; and thoughts lay within him like unhatched eggs he brooded over; but he had no ease with words and so remained silent until she, starkly direct, demanded:

"Why have you come back?"

He stooped to the blackened pot on the floor and poured more coffee, then turned about at the table, wishing for a cigarette. He sipped coffee, straining the grains through his teeth and became so lost in thought that he absently felt in his vest for the makin's that weren't there.

"I am a-waitin'," said Maw Rodiker.

He looked up, then stood up as if to walk away, but hooked his thumbs in the belt as he stared down at his mother.

"It took me a long time to figure that maybe Cora Arnold didn't make a mistake like I used to think. That's because I was too young then to know how women lie."

"So?"

"She was so eastern she didn't much more than know a burro from a cow, yet she said my horse was a roan and shoulder-branded Lazy S. And it was.

"But she says when she seen me I was ridin' off. I ought've wondered long before I did how she could tell what a horse, goin' hell-for-leather from her, was shoulder-branded with! God A'mighty Hissself would have to squint pretty hard to read a brand He couldn't see!"

HIS thumbs were still in the belt, his shoulders were high and squared as he looked down at his mother and with stern slowness said: "She lied. Somebody who knew me and the horse had to put the lies in her mouth. Somebody that was there and seen me and told her what to say. Somebody that wanted the Bevartses blamed for maybe hiring me to do it. Somebody that killed Craig because him and her wanted Craig killed. And so, what man got the most from him being killed?"

Maw Rodiker studied a while before she spread her hands flat on the table and said tiredly, "I've hated Yank Arnold for his spite an' malice, but it never entered my head that he'd maybe do a thing like that and put the blame on you!" She sighed wearily. "But I reckon what evilness can

be thought of, man can do—and some woman'll help!"

He took his hat from the floor and put it on, again felt in his pocket for makin's that weren't there. "She left the country, I hear, soon as Craig was buried. How much, I wonder, did she get from her husband dying? And Yank Arnold? Come a time soon when maybe he'll tell me all about it!"

Maw Rodiker stared until she understood fully, then she got up and rounded the table and put a tight hand on his arm. "No, not that! If you shoot him, folks'll be just that much surer you killed his brother, too!"

HE WALKED to the door and looked out absently, but a wish surged in him to knock Yank Arnold down before people and kick him into a confession they could hear.

When his mother said, "And what's more, you can't stay in the Santsander and not be known!" his hand went to his rough beard and felt about. He still looked from the doorway as he told her, "I've changed. I wasn't more than a kid cowhand when I left. The country's full of strangers. I'll play like one of them."

"It's dangerous!" she said. "You're outlawed!"

He turned about and looked amused, and hard and reckless, too. "Down below the Border they don't call you 'outlaw' unless you're on the side that loses. It's been a little of what you call 'dangerous', too, but I didn't mind."

She said, "I know. I learned durin' The War." Her tired voice dropped to a weary monotone. "Danger for men like you is all the same as a no-good woman. She draws you on and on, takes all your strength and manhood, leaves you dead, or near it, then calls for some other fellow. And now by coming back into the Santsander you're bein' reckless out of pride in recklessness. That's the fool's way!"

"I'll lay low a while."

"You can't lay low and not be meddled with. For one thing, the whole Clayton tribe'll know you're back."

"All Yank Arnold's money wouldn't buy a word 'gainst me from anyone of them!"

Maw Rodiker looked half-minded to say otherwise; and something of her opinion did come sharply with, "No matter what else,

it takes only two dollars to buy a gallon of white whiskey, and Tex Clayton can be heard a mile off when he's drunk. That's how I know he's Jerym's man—and so is Slim! There's no trustin' any Bevarts. No, nor anybody they hold a whip hand over!"

He said, "Jerym's too rich to need the money my scalp would bring."

And she snapped, "But maybe not so rich these days as you think. I hate Yank Arnold put'near next to Old Satan, but he'll fight! The Bevartses don't like out-an'-out fightin'. They'd rather sneak an' creep, like copperheads! So maybe Jerym would like to ease Yank Arnold's grudge by giving him your scalp!"

"Could be," he said indifferently, and looked about the room without taking notice of anything. Then he faced his mother. "All right, I'll tell you the big reason I am back." His narrowed eyes had a glint that gave her a startled shock, its cruelty was so unlike anything she had ever known of him. "Cora Arnold is coming to live out west again!"

Rodiker lifted his hand and the fingers were stiffened like claws. "When I take her by the throat she'll tell what I want to know!"

V

HIS folks were poor, but Maw Rodiker took \$10 from a broken dish on a shelf. Her, "You take this!" was an order, meaning, *If you've got a little something you won't be liable to do what's wrong to get some more.*

He rode off with Slim through the afternoon shadows, not taking the road but leaving by a back trail out of the wooded pasture; and, as they went down toward the long and wide Santsander Valley, rashness gathered within Rodiker. He said, "I'm going home with you," which wasn't as planned.

Mountain twilight overlay Slim's face. In saying, "No place you'd be more welcome!" he felt like a liar and in a way he was because the kind of welcome that Rodiker wanted and expected would not be there. Bess had tired of the pride she once felt in being known as the outlaw's sweet-heart.

She was a honey-pot sort of girl and did

no more than a honey-pot does to shoo away what she attracted. She was loyal in her way, but her way was not to nurse a lonely heart—not while the younger Bevarts boy was sweet on her.

When they came out of the timber a rising moon spread its thin light over the valley. Their horses paused to drink in a stream that ran on out in the flat, then went underground as if hiding; but cottonwoods marched like thirsty stragglers and reached for the hidden water, and that showed nesters where to put down wells. They hadn't much chance to prosper from such meager irrigation as came out of draw wells, but families of them stubbornly dug in and cattlemen believed they lived on branded beef. Always men who trudged behind a plough were inimical to men who worked from a saddle.

Slim thoughtfully asked, "Why've you changed your mind to ride on in with me?"

Rodiker looked ahead to where some fifteen or more miles away the speckled twinkling of Mohecla's lights was like a small cluster of fireflies, then he passed his hand inquiringly over the short thick beard as if feeling of a mask.

"I'll not be known, not on sight—not by anybody. Think so?"

"You sure enough look like a bush-jumper."

The Claytons lived some three miles this side out of town and on the high bank of the Santsander. Tonight there were four or five saddled horses before the doorway. One was Zig Bevarts'.

Slim said uneasily to Rodiker, "You ride on around to the stable. I'll send Bess out."

Inside the house a fiddle swung its squawky tune and there was the thump of booted feet, and swirling shapes passed by the open windows; then laughing shouts reached Rodiker as he rode around the house and past the woodpile where, by way of showing what a good worker he was, he had often chopped wood as if hired to do it.

He reined up near the stable and listened to the splash of tinkling from the mare's cowbell, and wondered if it was the same mare that had been gray with age when he was a boy. He could hear too, now dimly, the fiddle's chattering jiggle. Always he had found peace and pleasantness here.

and the shiftlessness his mother complained of was unimportant.

BELOW him the bluff broke abruptly into deep shadows, dark enough to seem bottomless; and he knew that the river's crooked way was marked by trees and willow thickets that crept along the edges of the wide bed and were sometimes overwhelmed by the winter floods.

Slim came from around front, leading his horse, and he said, "Come on in the stable. A birthday party of some kind for Bess. Tex is drunk."

Inside the stable Slim put a match to the lantern and offered tobacco and papers. "I borrowed the makin's. I told Bess you was out here. Near took her breath. She's coming soon as she can slip away. You goin' to stay the night?"

Rodiker rolled a cigarette thin and tight and drew on it as if drawing his breath after being long without air. "Depends. Who all is the company?"

"Zig Bevarts and some fellows. It's his tobacco. You keep it. I'd better get back. You stayin' the night?"

Rodiker glanced overhead toward the hayloft. It would be a snug place to sleep and close to friends. His horse stood outside with reins trailing. A strange horse, even if put in the stable might draw questions; and a strange man, if glimpsed, might draw questions that would be even more embarrassing to the Claytons.

"No. I'll ride on."

Slim put out his hand. "If I don't see you again before you go—"

Rodiker pocketed the makin's. "We're strangers when we chance to meet."

"Sure. I won't let on. I don't know how long this shindig'll last. Don't be surprised if Bess don't hardly know you."

He went out and the stable door swung to.

RODIKER heard light steps outside and watched the door. The lantern hung there and Bess, with long skirts lifted to step across the log threshold, pulled at the stable door and held her breath. Her brown cheeks were on fire; she was curious, with a flutter of dread too. He had been her sweetheart, her first sweetheart years and years ago.

The lantern was between them and she stared through its light and said, "You?" as if unable to believe that this big-shouldered rough-bearded man could be Jack Rodiker, and her uneasy voice was without welcome.

Bess was pretty; prettier than ever now with flushed cheeks, and loosened hair that was as soft and brown as dried corn silk. Her striped gingham gown had a billowy looseness. A double row of red beads that looked like coral added to the flush of her face as her brown eyes widened in an unbelieving stare; he seemed so old and had a haggard tiredness, his clothes were frayed and his hat shabby, his hair and beard scraggly as a bummers'. Only his high wide shoulders and steadiness of gaze gave him distinction; and she knew him readily enough, which made it seem the more incredible that he could have changed so much.

She came in slowly, letting the door close behind her, and whispered, "Why are you back?" Remonstrance was in her voice, and she was uncertain enough to seem a little fearful.

It was like reproach and unexpected. His back stiffened as he hooked thumbs in his belt, covering over soured feelings. His was a cherishing memory that hadn't let grow or change from the frolicsome girl who had teased and romped; but now he saw the change, for she was older and different too. The maturity gave her a sense of strangeness, and her startled anxiety seemed to express dislike of him, even fear.

Then her "I wouldn't have known you, Jack!" sounded as if a too late effort at apology.

Quietly and with bitterness he told her, "So it seems!"

The silence between them sagged from the weight of unspoken thoughts, and their eyes met in much the same bafflement as if they had lost their voices and were untrusting. A hardness that she had never expected lay over him, and the smoulder in his eyes made her afraid, but she was sorry for him—he looked so worn and tired and hurt.

Silence lay between them, but not for long because the door was opened with a jerk and a voice demanded in angered hoarseness:

"Bess, who is this man?"

"Why, Zig! How you scared me!" She tried a little laugh that wasn't easy because she was scared; and after that she smiled hard, drawing her lips frozenly, for the bare-headed Zig to see.

He was a chunky fellow with big hips and thick shoulders; he had the Bevarts darkness of skin, and the bull neck and knobby features that marked the family. He stepped over the split log threshold, and the door that wouldn't stay open unless propped closed behind him. He was glaring at Rodiker as he again asked Bess, "Who is this fellow?"

Rodiker's was a tightening anger at what seemed the man's intimate right to question her, more anger when she put out her hand soothingly on Zig's arm and said, "Why, I don't know who he is, Zig. He came to see Tex, and Tex you know is—isn't—so I—he is a stranger that I never saw before!"

Her face was as earnest as truth-telling could have made it, and Zig wrathfully believed her. He hunched his thick shoulders, glowered at Rodiker. "All right, fellow! Who the hell are you and what do you want?"

Rodiker didn't move, not even an eyelid. Bess, uneasy from the quarrel-sound in Zig's voice, begged, "Don't!" as she swiftly moved closer to him, and the billowy striped gingham stirred the litter about her feet.

Zig said, "Bess, go on out of here!" and put an arm about her with the naturalness of doing what he had often done. He indicated the door. "You go! I'll find out who he is and what he wants!"

Bess struggled from him and drew aside. "No, Zig, no! Don't have trouble!"

She indicated Rodiker's low-slung revolver. Zig, of course, removed gun and belt when he came into this friendly house, but he had put his cup to the liquor jug a few times and now bellowed at Rodiker:

"I've got a right to know why the girl I'm goin' to marry is in this stable here alone with you this time of night!"

All of Rodiker's weight came up on tip-toes to get behind his fist; and Zig jerked back, but the fist reached his chin and dropped him as club would have dropped him; and in going down the back of his head struck against the door. That, too, was much as if a club had hit him.

Rodiker slowly and absently rubbed his knuckles and stared at Bess with his thoughts on the surface of his eyes. Her hands were high on her throat and she said, "No! No!" whisperingly.

What she meant he didn't know and wouldn't ask, but her cheeks weren't flushed now; and though her eyelids flickered under his mistrusting gaze she did not turn aside.

"No!" she said again. "No, I wouldn't tell who you are—not to anybody, ever!" Her eyes begged before she asked, "You believe me, Jack? Don't you believe me?"

Zig lay as he had dropped, cheek-down in the dust with blood running from his nose, and the short neck had a twisted look as if broken.

Rodiker pointed and told her coldly, "He'll not believe you!"

"What can you mean?"

"When he comes to, he'll think it over and know you wouldn't have met a strange man here—not here in the stable! Not when Slim is home and could have come! You've lied yourself into a bad fix, my girl!"

His was a sodden anger, remote and cold and studied. He gave no acknowledgment whatever of her loyalty in protecting him; and his "my girl" made her furious.

BESS clenched her fists and said, "Go away! Get clear away!" Her hand swung toward the door. She said, "You'd no right to come here and put me in such a fix!" Her brown eyes gleamed and the flame-tinge was back in her cheeks as she told him, "I'd die before I'd let a friend of Slim's be caught, but I don't want to see you ever again! Now go away and stay away from me!"

He looked at her and nearly said that was how he wanted it too; but his lips stubbornly wouldn't move, so without speaking he stepped across Zig's body and pushed at the door, stooping to go out.

Outside, he gathered the dangling reins, swung into the saddle and at a walk rounded the corral, then picked a zig-zag way down the bluff and into the shallow river's bed.

Bess carried the lantern out into the moonlight, going with Zig into the corral where she avoided the mud about the trough, then set the lantern down and pumped.

Zig tramped into the mud. He sullenly

washed his face with cupped hands that he filled under the pump spout; and after that he wiped at his face with a large bandanna from his hip pocket. He wouldn't say anything. But Bess took the bandanna from his hand and with mothering care wiped behind his ears and neck, brushed at his hair, then rose on her tiptoes and kissed him.

"He hit you when you wasn't looking! Oh, cowardly!"

Zig said, "You know him!"

Her voice was swift and pleading with, "I don't know a thing on earth about him except he's one of Old Yank Arnold's new men! Or so he said!"

Zig growled, "You're lyin'!"

Bess said, "I'm not! I don't tell lies! Now you listen to me!" But indignation left her voice as, using the bandanna to wipe blood spots on the front of Zig's shirt, she explained:

"A while ago he rode right up to the back door and asked for Tex. You know how all sorts of men come. I said Tex couldn't see him, so he said all right, he'd talk to me. I told him my brother was home and to talk to Slim, but he said he didn't want more people knowing he was here. And he didn't want to be seen. There might be trouble. That's why we went to the stable. He'd come, he said, from Yank Arnold to warn us Claytons we'd get pushed into the river—women and all!—if we didn't stop helping you Beverts steal Yank's cattle! Oh, I was glad when you come into the stable! But he looked so horrid mean I was afraid to tell you who he was to his face—you, not being armed! What a coward he was the way he hit you! Now you see just how it was, don't you?"

Colonel Arnold's name fitted so plausibly into facts that Zig said, "Yes," believingly and with some uneasiness, too. Also, Bess's sympathy and the affectionate touch of her fingers eased the shock of Rodiker's fist.

"Like you said, he hit me when I wasn't lookin'! If ever I meet him again I'll beat him half to death!" Zig showed a fist. "Just to teach 'im nobody ever gets the best of us Beverts!"

A voice that jeered liltingly came over the fence: "Can't you two find any better place to spoon than in a mule corral!" That was seventeen-year-old Sue. "I've looked

high and low for you. Zig Beverts, I don't think much of your friends. They can't hold likker any better 'n a leaky cup and are trying to go to sleep all over the place. You come back in and wake 'em up! I want to dance!"

VI

RODIKER, in the river bed, kept to the shadowed side of the bluff, letting the horse pick its way through and around the tall dark clumps of brush, mostly willows. Some of the old flood marks were saddle-high, showing how the Santsander could rise.

He rolled a cigarette from the Beverts' makin's and liked the tinge of soreness in his knuckles; it meant that his full weight had gone into Zig's face.

He'd never before had trouble with any Beverts and, wondering what Old Jerym wanted of him, recalled his mother's "copperhead," which reminded him that there had always been talk of how the Beverts were a tricky bunch and Old Jerym a great finagler—as a Northern man would have to be to trade with the South during The War and not be hanged.

When Rodiker rode into Moheela the streets were empty, the town dark and quiet in the moonlight. He looked to the right and left, moving at a walk, the horse's feet nearly soundless in the dusty street. Much was changed but many things were unchanged, and memories stirred within him. The wide-reaching sycamore still grew before the hotel and the long water trough, as always, leaked and nourished the tree.

He got off and pumped himself a drink into the rusty cup on a chain, remembering the little Arnold girl he had helped into her saddle and she had crinkled her eyes at him. A black-eyed little thing, cute and pretty; but Yank Arnold's daughter.

A lamp with a low wick burned in the hotel office but the bar was dark, and he judged the time to be well past midnight. What a clock said seldom had any importance for him. He got into the saddle again and still at a walk turned on the next corner and rode along where there were some tall trees and the houses had palings in front of them. He left his horse under a tree and opened a latch gate that grated on

a broken hinge. His spurs jangled on boards that served as a sidewalk to the small porch.

He hit the door hard, knocking. Not hearing any stir within, he knocked again until echoes rattled within the old house.

When a woman's voice squawked at him from behind the closed door, demanding what he wanted, he asked for Mr. Bevarts.

"Who're you?"

"Somebody he sent for."

"What's your name?" Her sharp voice had the wire edge of habitual distrust; and Rodiker said:

"If Jerym Bevarts is so much coward he sends a woman to meet strangers in the dark, I want no dealing with him!"

The door's lock clicked, opening, but a chain was on the door to hold it against the sudden push of persons who might be dangerous; and a gruff voice said with no kindness, "All right, Jenny, you get back upstairs."

Her voice, going away, quavered resentfully that no good was to be had from men who came in the dark and wouldn't give their names.

There wasn't any lamplight and the moon's glow didn't reach onto the porch, but Rodiker sensed that a face was peering from behind the edge of the chained door. When the gruff voice dropped to confidential lowness, asking, "Who are you?" the answer came straight: "Jack Rodiker!"

That knocked a soft grunt out of Old Jerym Bevarts. He said, "Eh? Eh?" stammeringly. "You are? Why—uh—what's you want?"

"To know why you've sent for me!"

"Uh. Hmm. Well—er—wait a minute."

Jerym put a match to an oil lamp and held it up overhead as he peered through the chain-length's opening. Rodiker moved up close enough to be seen. The chain fell from its hook. Jerym said, "Come in."

When he went in, Jerym pulled the door to, then lifted the lamp overhead for a better look, the small deep eyes peering from under gray bushy brows. A hulking stooped man, with a sidling twist to his neck as if ever alert for what was going on behind his back. His thick nose had a beak-shaped curve and he had lost so many teeth that the nose came down over the upper lip; his sparse hair was gray; he had a bulging belly outlined by the nightgown of un-

bleached cloth that may have been clean but looked dirty. Jerym's mouth was tight as a steel trap and with no more than a sprung trap's kindness in its outline.

"I'd never known you. No, sir," he said, stretching his wry neck to peer into Rodiker's face. "You are a famous fellow now!" His eyes were intense and his lips moved, shaping a grin that looked as if a worm crawled on his mouth. With confidential knowing, "Yank Arnold thinks I hired you to shoot his brother!"

"So I've heard."

"That makes us need to stand together, eh?"

"It's took you some years to think so!"

Jerym, still holding the lamp, said, "Now, now, that's no way to feel about me." His pig-sized eyes were fixed on Rodiker, questioningly. "It's a big risk for you to come right into town like this, ain't it?"

Rodiker's thumbs went to his belt, his shoulders stiffened. "No more risk for me than you."

Jerym's "Eh?" was as if another grunt had been knocked out of him. The small sunken eyes had the colorless luster of wet pebbles. Frost-white stubble covered his face. He still held the lamp with both hands and raised it higher, the better to study Rodiker's look. "What's that you say, eh?"

"Why," Rodiker explained with matter-of-factness, "you sent for me. I have friends who knows that if anything happens to me, you'll be to blame!"

"Ugh, so?" said Jerym, and taking the lamp into one hand rubbed thoughtfully at his mouth. When his hand dropped, once more a smile wriggled there. "A good bluff. Yes, very!" He nodded approval and made a chuckle-sound. "Let's set and talk things over."

He led the way into the room off the entrance and put the lamp on an oilcloth-covered table that was used as a kind of business desk at home; account books were on it, ink and pens and letter paper of the Cattleman's Bank.

Jerym said, "I'll draw the curtains." They were already drawn but to make sure he went from window to window with whispering slip-slap of loose slippers.

Rodiker sat in a straight chair at the end of the table and rolled a cigarette with Zig's

makin's. Jerym came back and sat at the table, placed his hands on his knees and peered studiously.

"I thought I'd meet you out in the country some'eres. I never thought you'd come right into town!"

Rodiker had evaded all kinds of traps by doing what people never thought he would; and now said, "Here I am."

"W'y—er—yes. So you are. And a famous fellow!" Jerym reached down and scratched a shin.

"How did you know Slim could reach me?"

Jerym held up a crooked finger and looked mysterious. "Ah, but we are all good friends, us Bevartses, the Claytons, you. All of us can work together fine, eh?"

Rodiker rubbed out the cigarette on the sole of his boot and laid the stub carefully on the table. "What kind of things?"

Jerym wasn't easy to hook with questions, and again scratched his shin, then leveled out a forefinger. "We Bevartses are fore-thoughtful an' far-seein'!" He screwed down an eyelid as if he had made a confidential admission.

Rodiker tilted his hat back a little, crossed a foot over a knee. "All right, what's up?"

Jerym's chuckle was an ugly noise, having the rasp of malice as he evaded the question with, "Yank Arnold's goin' to put' near wish 'twas him you shot instead of Craig!"

Rodiker drew himself tight, made no denial, said nothing.

JERYM lifted his eyes to the ceiling, spoke reflectively. "Craig's widow has been lettin' the colonel run her ranch like it was her own." His look dropped to Rodiker. "Dougal—you remember Dougal—since his wife died, he's visited back in Ohio, courtin' Cora Arnold. And won't Yank have a fit? There'll be hell a-poppin'!"

Rodiker nodded. He liked the bitterness that Colonel Arnold must feel if his sister-in-law married a Bevarts. "Far-seein'" these Bevartses. Maw Rodiker had warned him, "They'll use your grudge!" Also he remembered her guess that Jerym might try to make a kind of peace by bartering Rodiker's scalp.

He asked, "When are they marrying?"

"Soon, soon!" Jerym chuckled. "After

the marriage, Dougal can take over what's hers. Wouldn't you like to see Yank Arnold's face when he hears about the weddin'?"

RODIKER studied that. Whatever hurt Arnold was all right and retributive. He said, "For all I care you can take Arnold's ranches away from him, lock, stock and barrel! But let's get down to cases. Why'd you send for me?"

Jerym moved the lamp to one side of the table and rubbed his hands together. They were big pale hands, with ink stains on the right hand's middle finger. Jerym hunched nearer and spoke with a kind of hissing softness:

"I'll protect you ever' way I can. You know that, don't you?"

"Would I be here if I didn't think it?"

"And them friends of yours," said Jerym mockingly, "who'll hold me to blame if anything happens to you—*tck tck!* Good bluff, eh?"

Rodiker thought, *Not so good!* but said coldly, "What do you want?"

"Eh? Why, I've been thinkin' things over and—" He stopped, fingered the adjustment screw of the lamp's wick, remained silent but his eyes searched Rodiker's face.

"Don't take all night. Let's have it, or I'll be on my way."

Jerym peered for a time before he nodded, "We got a sheriff that's a friend of mine." He took his bare feet from the slippers and went with stealth to the bottom of the stairs and looked up. He came back and explained, "A woman snoops!" After that he sat down and, hunched over in a way that gave his big shoulders a hump-backed look, stared thoughtfully at Rodiker before he said with murmuring quietness:

"My bank—I want you to rob it!"

Rodiker's face showed no more expression than a calloused palm. He took up the cigarette butt and relit it. A foot was across his knee and he spun the rowel, watching intently as if doing something difficult. Then he lifted his eyes.

"Aren't there any thieves left in the Santander?"

Jerym spread his palms. "Not just anybody can be trusted."

"How much?" Rodiker's voice was toneless.

Jerym put a hand to his chin, scratched delicately. "Umm—for a mornin's work, eh? Say—um—well, say one—no, say two thousand dollars?"

Rodiker's eyes were hard-set. He thought, *You're lyin'!* and said, "A morning's work? To cut and run and double-back and dodge with a posse swarming on my heels, and not a friend to hide me! A hardware store across the street where anybody can grab a gun and open up! You say two thousand. But how much will you say I took?"

"Sh-hh-h! Not so loud!" Jerym's pale hand moved silencingly as his head rocked this way and that with an anxious stare as if eavesdroppers might be in the shadowed corners of the room. Then urgently:



"I'll protect you ever' way I can! And have the sheriff look where you ain't. It's a business deal. Just business! Just between us!" A savage glint slanted off the wet-pebble eyes and the nearly toothless jaws came together like a snap turtle's. He studied Rodiker's silence and repeated, "I'll help you ever' way I can!" implying, or trying to, that his help was infallible.

Rodiker said nothing. There was no flicker in his eyes as he stared across the table. *Far-seein' the Bevartses? Hell, no!* Old Jerym had just shown the pips of cards he thought he was playing close to his belly; and Rodiker asked with slow fall of words:

"Business, you say, and *just* between us? And you'll protect me every way you can?"

Jerym studied as if he sensed something ominous in the way the question was shaped; but after all, it only restated his own promise, so he said:

"Yes, yes, that's it. My word on it! My solemn word!" He put his hand across the table to shake on it.

"Good!" said Rodiker, ignoring the hand. "This time it *will* be as big a risk for you as for me!" He stood up and his forefinger tapped the table as he said:

"Write it out! Write, I, Jerym Bevarts, having sent for Jack Rodiker, hereby promise him two thousand dollars to raid my bank because it is so near broke that it has to fail, and I want to make people think it was Rodiker, and not me, that got away with the money!"

Old Jerym had a shocked palsied stare; then he shook his head and grinned as if tiredly making the best of a bad joke. "No, no! That's goin' too far!"

Rodiker told him, "You promised your solemn word to protect me ever' way you can. No other way can give me so much protection. Write it out!"

"You think I'm crazy?"

"No, you're fore-thoughtful and far-seeing! And you can foresee how much protection you'll have to give me if I have something like that in my pocket!"

Temper came into Jerym's sunken eyes, and they were evil eyes. "I ain't a fool!"

"But thought I was!" Rodiker lifted his revolver, thumbing back the hammer as from over the top of the holster the muzzle pointed at Jerym, whose mouth popped open with the look of trying to yell and not a sound came.

Rodiker said, "I want it in ink. I want it on bank paper. And when the show-down comes you can say I made you write it at the point of a gun. Most people will believe you. But if your bank fails before it is held up, most people will know that I made you write what is true. And if I show it before your bank is held up, you'll be in a hell of a fix—the way people'll rush to get their money out!"

Jerym drew his neck down between his humped shoulders and peered. He didn't believe Rodiker would shoot but wasn't sure, for he was an outlawed man with the

name of having done desperate things. Never in his life had Jerym been so tricked and caught before. He had big holdings but he had big debts too, and many speculations hadn't been lucky. He wanted the bank to fail before the Bevartses got hold of Cora Arnold's property; otherwise he'd be expected to bolster it up and pay creditors. And he didn't want people to know that failure had been brought about by fraud and speculation. There would be curses and hatred of the Bevarts name, with trust and prestige gone.

Jerym's eyes left Rodiker's face and went to the revolver; it was steady on and the fanged hammer was cocked. He lifted his eyes that seemed lidless as a snake's again to Rodiker's face and was half-minded to refuse; but Rodiker's was the cold hardness of a man who had indeed done desperate things.

Jerym warned, "You never in your life done anything you'll be so sorry for!"

"Write, or be sorry your own self!"

Jerym said, "Damn your soul!" then took up a pen and pulled a stopper from the ink bottle.

VII

RODIKER left his horse and rifle at the lively stable then went back along the empty street to the hotel with the sycamore in front.

A cord dangled from a bell on the wall and he gave a jerk. The shallow clang brought an old man, whose eyes were blurred with sleepiness, shuffling out of the shadows. From behind the counter that served as a desk he pushed the register at Rodiker and handed him a pen. Rodiker signed. The clerk turned the book, peered at the squiggy signature and said, "Room seven, Mr. Jackson. Four bits, please."

Rodiker laid down the coin. The clerk leaned over the desk, pointed and spoke mildly:

"Don't make much difference this time of night, but the marshal don't want guns wore in town."

Rodiker said, "Thanks," took the key that was tied to a short piece of broomstick and climbed the unlighted stairs. He struck a match in the dark hall and went in to No. 7. It was hot and close and musty. He

raised the window and looked out, leaning over. He didn't expect to have to jump but he liked to know about where he'd land if he did. He undressed without lighting the lamp, had another cigarette from Zig's makin's and smoked on the side of the bed, wondering what Bess had said to Zig. Rodiker felt bitter toward her but not mistrustful. All Claytons had been like close kinfolks, a man might get mad at his kinfolks but treachery wasn't thought of.

He had a long restful sleep; and awakening with a dry mouth, drank stale water from the pitcher in the washbowl and judged that it was afternoon. Gazing at himself in the cracked looking glass, he fingered the dark thick half-grown beard and decided *Better not!* though wishing for a shave.

On the way downstairs Rodiker took off his hat and drew himself to one side of the dim stairs as a woman, coming up, passed; and she didn't seem to look at him but murmured, "Thank you." There was a satiny rustle about her, the vague fragrance of cologne, and though her veil was bunched along the brim of a small hat that had a feather in it, he didn't have a clear look at her face.

Outside he found rather a crowd on the veranda for the stage from Woodward had arrived and the town's people clustered about to look at who had come and hear news. Rodiker, loitering there with a shoulder against the wall, heard a passing man say to the fellow with him, "Funny, nobody was here to meet that Arnold woman!"

He strained his ears for more but that was all he heard. So far as he had seen, there was only one woman who might have left the stage; and his heart thumped like a fist knocking when he thought that on the stairs Cora Arnold had been close enough for him to have taken her by the throat.

The stage rattled on toward the stable and men drifted back to their stores or into the hotel bar, or over to the New York Store, where the postoffice was, to wait while the mail was sorted.

Rodiker went there, too, wanting a fresh shirt or two and underwear; and among the group of men waiting before the closed post-office window while the mailbag was being sorted was Zig Bevarts. His face had a dirty, discolored, swollen and bruised look.

Rodiker stopped short, eyed him, silently asking, "*Do you want more trouble?*"

Zig stared back sullenly as if ready for the trouble; but under Rodiker's gaze defiance faded from his eyes; they wavered down, paused on Rodiker's revolver and turned aside until Rodiker went along the counter. Then Zig went outdoors.

Soon a man came in with a marshal's badge on his vest. He spoke genially to men waiting for their mail, then stepped along toward the end of the counter where a clerk was wrapping Rodiker's two shirts.

He was a thin man, this marshal, with a long neck, droopy mustache, pale eyes and was so hipless that he wore galluses. In a friendly way, he said:

"You're a stranger, Mister. So I reckon you don't know that here in town we like for folks not to wear guns."

Rodiker listened politely and was ready to say that it was all right with him, which it wasn't, but the marshal added in mild earnestness:

"Funny the colonel didn't tell you."

"Colonel?"

"W'y, yes. It's him that raises so much billy-hell if one of the Bevartses men don't unbuckle himself as soon as he hits town."

Rodiker cautiously intoned, "Colonel Arnold?"

"You're workin' for him, ain't you?"

Rodiker played the hand as dealt and, poker-faced, asked, "How'd you come to learn?"

"Zig Bevarts said you was a new Arnold man. Just kicked to me about your gun. I sure make him take off his'n! Sorry you two outfits are so stiff-legged with neck hairs bristlin'!"

Rodiker smiled a little, a very little, as he unbuckled his heavy gun-belt, wrapped it about the holstered gun. "This be all right till I get back to the hotel?"

"Sure will." The marshal let his eyes run friendly-like up and down Rodiker's long body.

"They call the colonel 'Yank,' but he hires some Southern boys. I guess he found out how good they was from tryin' to whup 'em durin' The War!"

"You think I'm Southern?"

The marshal told him, "How you talk is, anyhow."

At the hotel Rodiker took off his clothes

for a wash and kept trying to figure why Zig Bevarts had told the marshal he worked for Yank Arnold. *Just his ornery way of lying, maybe.*

After the marshal had spoken to him in the store, Rodiker bought a soft buckskin belt; and now, when dressing, he ran this belt through the holster loop, then put the belt over his right shoulder and set the holster under his left arm pit. He tied the thongs which were attached to the end of the holster around his waist, then he slipped the revolver into the holster. When he put on his new blue shirt he left the three top buttons unfastened. The gun was long and the butt made a lump under his shirt, but the lump wouldn't show much after he put on his vest. He had high wide shoulders and his waist was lean, which helped to conceal the gun.

It wasn't easy to make a quick draw because he would have to reach down inside the shirt and lift the gun straight up from the holster and alongside his jaw, but at least he wouldn't be unarmed. It was a trick he had used before.

Even as he stood in front of the cracked looking glass and told himself he oughtn't to stay in town, he knew he wouldn't be riding out, not while Cora Arnold was maybe here within a hand's reach of him.

Downstairs he had a look at the dog-eared register but there wasn't any "Arnold" on the page, not any woman's name at all.

A MAN behind the desk had his hat on and was reading a newspaper. Rodiker asked who was the woman that had come on today's stage, and the man scarcely lifted his eyes from the paper to say, "Don't know. I'm not a clerk. I'm just helpin' out."

Rodiker went through the double doors to the veranda and turned toward a restaurant up the street, then right off changed his mind and swung about at the hotel bar's entrance, meaning to wait and eat in the hotel on the chance of seeing the Arnold woman again. The dining room doors weren't open yet, so he'd have a drink.

He cut from the street door straight to the front end of the bar that made an L to the wall. The bartender, a dumpy man with a round red face, touched the pig-tail-

tight curls of his back mustache, then set out a bottle.

In no time at all Zig Bevarts, followed Indian file by two fellows, came through the swinging doors and brought up half way down the bar where they stood side by side, not talking, but drank from the same bottle with Zig paying.

Rodiker took note that Zig didn't look at him, which was all right, but the two fellows kept sneaking glances toward the bar's L. They were strong rough-looking men and, though apparently they were not armed, Rodiker, cat-cautious, smelled trouble, guessing that Zig, having brought help along, was set to beat him up.

It wasn't quite dusky enough for lamps to have been lit when the supper gong rang, and at once there was a scampering rush for the side door that opened into the hall before the dining room.

Rodiker waited for Zig and his friends to go first but they stood like they didn't care anything about eating. The saloon was about empty when Rodiker started down along the bar and wasn't at all surprised when one of Zig's men spun about and made an encircling grab from behind to pin Rodiker's arms.

Zig, all set for just what, whirled and let drive at Rodiker's face as the third fellow yelped, "Get 'im, Zig!"

Zig didn't because the shaggy man who had grabbed from behind for Rodiker's arms found his own hands caught in a bear-trap's grasp as Rodiker ducked down with a bucking heave and threw the fellow forward, heels over head. He hit the floor like he had been dropped on his back from a beam and he hadn't any more breath in him than a busted bladder.

And even before the fellow hit the floor Rodiker had swung about, straightened and turned on Zig, whose lumpy face wore about the same astonished look as if the roof were falling in on him. But Rodiker, a quick-seeing man, hit the other of Zig's companions first because his hand had closed on the neck of the whiskey bottle and he was set to use it as a club. Rodiker's fist rocked the fellow's head back over the bar, then straightened him up with a belly punch and let him fall. The bottle fell too, and gurglegurgled over the floor.

When Zig saw that his two friends were

both going under he scrambled belly-down up on the bar, then on over with the look of frantically trying to get down behind it and hide; but the pudgy bartender yelled, "Look out!" He's after the gun!"

Zig's face was turned over his shoulder and had a spasm look of terror as he groped behind the cash box on the back shelf.

Rodiker jerked a button off his new shirt when his hand started for the concealed revolver; but it came to him that if he killed this Zig, however much in self-defense, he couldn't then evade questioning, and would be looked at intently by a lot of people, some of whom would know him, beard and all. So he slapped his hands palm-down on the bar, vaulting up; and as he went he swung his long saddle-hardened legs around and up in such a way as to hook his spurred boots' toes about Zig's short neck, then jerked him so hard that the gun dropped out of Zig's hand.

The pudgy bartender said, "Holy Moses!"

When Rodiker got down behind the bar Zig was hemmed in like a steer in a chute, and Rodiker batted him. Zig kept backing up until he came against the L at the front and was trapped. Rodiker let drive from the shoulder, throwing his knuckles against the discolored spot on Zig's jaw; and as Zig slumped to the floor Old Jerym, from right across the bar, shouted:

"Punch him good, Stranger! Punch him good! He deserves it! I seen 'em jump you!"

Men had forgotten supper and swarmed back in to see the fight and what they heard was Zig's father saying that.

RODIKER eyed Old Jerym with suspicious steadiness as Jerym lifted his voice to tell the barroom, "I seen it all! Was just comin' through the street door. That fool Zig of mine, and Pete and Mark here, picked on this stranger who was mindin' his own business!"

It had grown darker in the barroom and no lamps were lighted. Jerym was still talking loudly when Rodiker stooped to hands and knees, passed under the L and went out to the street. He didn't want to be stared at, and now wouldn't go into the dining room.

His mouth carried a crooked smile as he stepped along the sidewalk. *Fore-thoughtful and far-seein', the Bevartses!* Old spider-

shaped Jerym certainly was! Print couldn't have made it plainer that Jerym had instructed Zig to gather a couple of helpers and knock Rodiker senseless—or worse. And Jerym had lurked near so that he would have the first chance to go through Rodiker's pockets. When the plan didn't work out, the far-seein' Jerym at once announced that Zig had been in the wrong. That, of course, was to pull the wool over Rodiker's eyes. *He don't dare have me bad hurt unless he's close enough to get into my pockets first!*

Rodiker sat at a back table in the Busy Bee and was finishing a big supper when the marshal stood in the door and looked all about, then came toward Rodiker who thought there might be some trouble; but the marshal smiled, drew out a chair, sat down, pushed back his hat and pulled at his drooping mustache.

"Jackson, from how I hear, you sure cleaned up! That ought to make you ace-high with the colonel!"

Rodiker took a piece of dried apple pie in his fingers, bit off a mouthful, swallowed it with some coffee, nodded and said nothing.

"But Old Jerym Bevarts is a mighty fine man," the marshal explained. "He heard me asking around for you an' he said not to bother you. Said it was all Zig's fault on account of a lickin' you give him a night or two ago. Not many men would be that fair against their own son, now would they?"

Rodiker ate more pie.

"What I come for, Jackson, is that the colonel's daughter wants you. She sent for me a while ago because nobody showed up here in town to meet her. I told her about you—you bein' one of the colonel's men—and she wants that you come to the hotel right away. That's why I was askin' around to find you, but Jerym thought maybe I was takin' sides again you on account of the fight."

VIII

THE marshal went ahead on the hotel's dim stairs and walked down the hall to No. 4, a corner room facing Main Street, and Rodiker thought, *Maybe this is a trap!* and that stirred his wariness.

Trap or not, he wasn't being smart to come up here as one of Colonel Arnold's

men and be found out a liar; but he had seen the colonel's daughter on the stairs and, while he'd much rather she had turned out to be Cora Arnold, he couldn't help wanting to see her again. He had once held her in his arms; she had been cute and pretty years back when the sprained ankle made her faint and he brought the side-saddled horse from the stable. The dim glimpse he'd had of her on the stairs helped him to think she would be prettier now. He knew, or thought he did, that he was so changed in size, years and with a beard, that she wouldn't remember him, not from the brief meeting so many years ago when she was just a kid; and he told himself that maybe he could learn something from her about Cora Arnold.

The marshal knocked lightly and the door opened.

They were invited in, and the marshal pulled his hat and put on manners to say, "Jackson, this is Miss Arnold. She knows I'd do anything for the colonel, so she sent for me to ask about gettin' to the ranch, and I told her you was in town an'—"

The dark-eyed girl closed the door, not listening to the marshal, and she looked so steadily at Rodiker that he began to wish he wasn't here. She was small, white-faced, pretty, and her black eyes seemed judging him but without recognition. He did look rather a hard case, being big and in old worn clothes except for the the store-new blue shirt that had some buttons off. Scraggly hair lay around the back of his neck, and the thick untrimmed beard overlaid his face. His gray-blue eyes held the unwavering pin-point stare of one who must watch closely, think quick and be right.

She gazed at him, meeting his look and seemed doubtful until suddenly she put out her hand, crinkled her eyes in a curious laughing way and said cheerily:

"I am Kate Arnold and will you take me home?"

Without waiting for a reply she then turned and thanked the marshal, opening the door for him as she said goodbye, all with a kind of gracious impatience. Rodiker sensed that she might readily lose the graciousness if she didn't have things the way she wanted.

As soon as she closed the door she turned back and told him to sit down, adding rap-

idly, "I've been in prison for years and just escaped!"

Rodiker had a literal mind. He didn't believe what she said, but he didn't know what she meant and regarded her with a soberness that made Kate exclaim:

"Don't look so shocked! A 'ladies school' is a prison of a kind. Worse than any other kind! In a good lively penitentiary you have riots and fights and interesting companions! At least you're with persons who have done what they wanted instead of what Miss Mealymouths, who are supposed to do only what other people want! So will you take me home?"

Rodiker sat down and drew his feet back alongside the chair, hooked his hat over a knee. He had never seen another woman who could laugh so with her eyes as she did.

"Miss, I'm not working for the colonel and never said I was. Seems like Zig Beverts has told around that I was, maybe getting me mixed up with somebody else. And you didn't register today when you come."

"Didn't I, hm?"

"I looked to see who you was after passin' you on the stairs."

"Did you now?" Her eyes laughed at him but not in a way to make him feel uncomfortable. "But why should I register in a hotel my father owns? I used to be proud he did, but now it's run down. So Zig thinks he's said something bad about you when he said you were working for the colonel?"

"Maybe so."

"I am surprised Zig tried to fight you with only two men helping! That's really very brave of Zig! Who are you working for, Mr. Jackson?"

"I'm sort of a stranger. Just drifted in a day or two ago."

He liked to look at her; she still wasn't much bigger than a minute, and may have been older than he thought that time, years back, when she crinkled her eyes at him and said that she was bigger than she looked. She was slim and straight and quick, with lots of dark hair coiled about her head, and there was something of a race horse's glowing aliveness about her; but it was the sparkle in her eyes that interested and pleased him.

She said, "All right, Mr. Jackson, will you get a livery rig and drive me to the

ranch? I could drive myself but I'm not going to. Maybe I'm afraid! Years back East, having to be polite to everybody, takes the starch out of you.

"I like the smell of horses and brand-burnt hair," she said with a kind of rushing eagerness. "I like men with sweat and dust on their clothes! I like hot days and star-clustered nights and the yell-yip of coyotes talking scandal across the hilltops!"

SHE turned aside to peer into the mirror and put a hand to her cheek, then swirled toward him. "Just look at me! I'm as bleached as something that crawls out from under a wet log! And they told me back East that I ought to be happy because I'm not now brown as a Mexican! I played with Mexican kids till the colonel had the idea that I ought to be a lady!"

The earnestness of what she meant shimmered in her homesick jesting, and he laughed without a sound and liked her. She came nearer to him and said:

"It's not lady-like for a girl to ask a strange man to drive her fifteen miles, or nearly that, this time of night, but I want to go—I'll pay what you ask—and will you?"

The table with the lamp on it was between them and the window; the window was raised and its curtains were back to let in more air. When, hat in hand, he stood up, she wasn't an arm's length from him, and he shook his head but wanted to do as she asked. It would be pleasant driving nearly fifteen miles with her, but he'd be a fool to drive right into the colonel's home ranch; so he told her:

"I don't hardly see how I can."

"You aren't working? You want a job, don't you? All right, go get the buggy."

Those words weren't more than across her lips when a bullet smacked into the room, its thud jarring the door jamb. The bang of a gun seemed thin and far away.

A gasp was the only sound she made as she whirled toward the window and back again. A revolver was in Rodiker's hand and she hadn't any idea where it came from; then his hat fanned down over the lamp chimney and stayed there, bringing darkness into the room as he lurched forward, giving a shove to put her out of the line of fire if another bullet came. He crouched at a cor-

ner of the window and peered out. Kate scrouged close beside him and the faint fragrance of cologne floated into his face. "You or me?" she asked.

"Who'd shoot at *you*?"

"Nobody, I hope!"

"Me, of course. Zig's evening up!"

"I'm surprised! Your back wasn't toward him!" Her voice had a lively scorn but she was trembling.

"A rifle from the roof of that bakery across the street. Nobody's there now, but it's my bet that if you open the door and scream, Poppa Jerym will be the first man in this room!"

"Why would he be?"

"Because they're copperheads, the Beavartses!"

"Why, that's what the colonel calls them!" Her fingers closed hard on his arm. "If that's how you feel, you ought to be working for the colonel!"

"Be fine, that would!" he said ironically.

She stared tensely at him and couldn't see in the dimness; and anyhow his face was covered with the heavy smudge of half-grown beard that was like a mask. She wasn't sure of the irony, but she did wonder that he, with his Southern voice, would call somebody a "copperhead."

The gun's report hadn't caused any disturbance on the street; no outcry followed, no other shots were fired, and men who had paused to listen tramped along the sidewalk again and resumed their talk.

He said, "I reckon for sure now that I'd better not drive you anywhere. They seem to want me. May want me bad enough to follow. Or cut 'cross-country when they know we're going. You might get hurt. Like just now, you come as near gettin' hit as I did!"

He stood up, thrust the revolver into his waistband, took his hat, then, lifting the chimney, struck a sulphur match and put it to the wick. She moved away from the lamp and watched uneasily, dreading a second shot; but he told her:

"That fellow's scrambled off the roof by now. Afraid he'd be caught."

"How can you know?"

"I know how cowards act. And I can't

take you. I'm a stranger. And Southern. Even if we don't get shot at on the way out, Yank Arnold maybe won't like it for a stranger and a Southerner to be bringing his girl home."

Kate said, "So?" and lifted her head stiffly. "You want to know something?" Her face was slyly mischievous. "The colonel hasn't a dislike of all Southerners! I'm partly one myself! He met my mother in New Orleans and married her before the War was over! So there!"

"I never heard of that."

"How could you, just drifting in a day or two ago? Not many know. He doesn't tell much about his family. But he's a fine man. I love him. You don't think I could love a man that wasn't fine, do you?"

Again her earnestness was overlaid with the sparkle of pleasantry and the curious rimpling at the corners of her dark eyes; and he liked her though he said:

"No matter, I just can't take you. Why, if we are stopped on the road—"

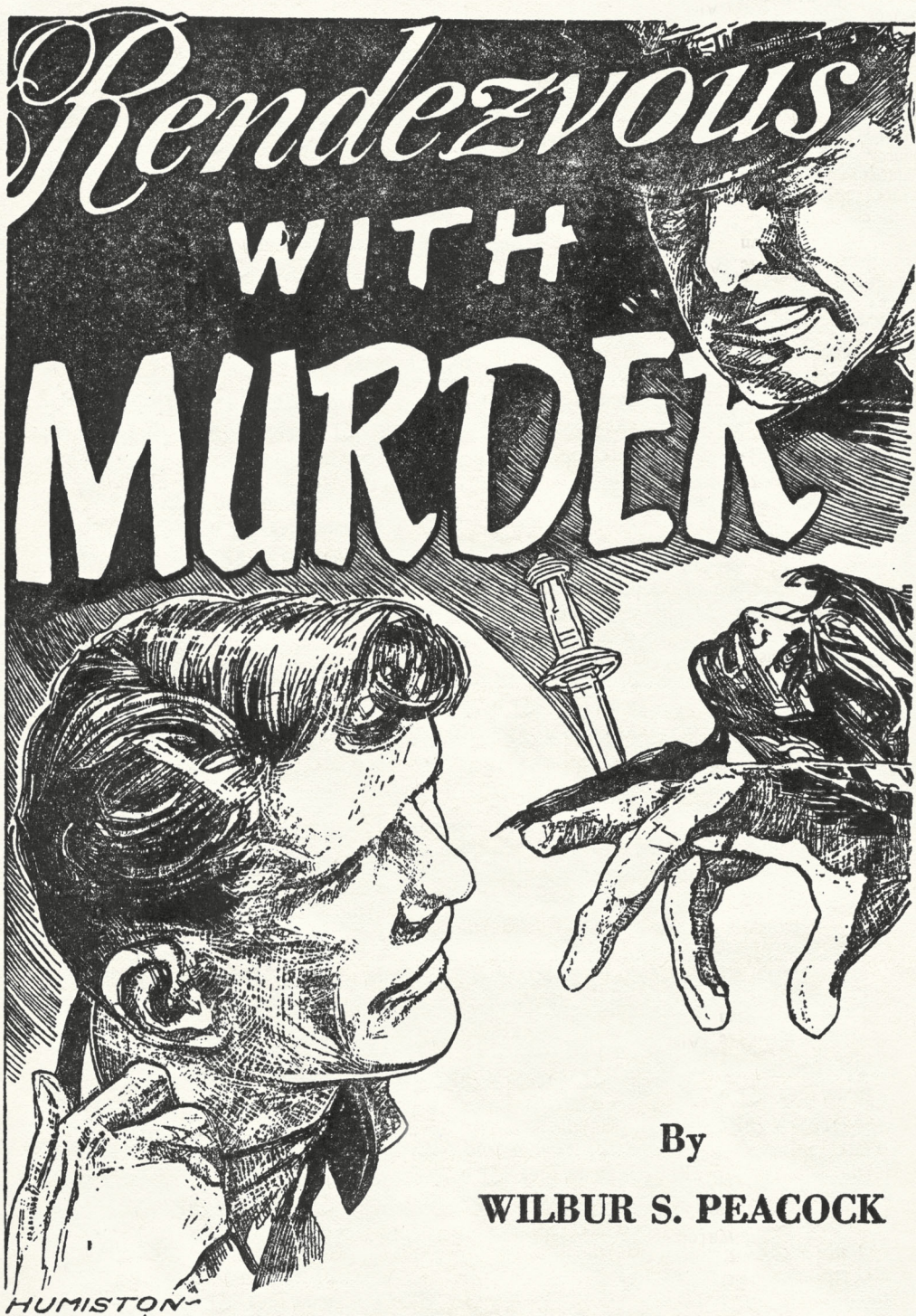
He didn't finish. She waited and when it seemed that he wouldn't say anything more, she exclaimed in the manner of seminary theatricals, "Oh, Mr. Jackson! How dreadful that would be! You are so small and weak and timid! You would just sit there with hands in the air and say, 'Please don't hurt me!'"

Laughter then tinkled at him derisively, but almost at once her face sobered and Kate snapped, "I never yet put my fingers in my ears so I wouldn't hear a gun."

Rodiker gazed solemnly at her; then laughed soundlessly. "You sure *are* lots bigger than you look! I'll go for that livery rig."

He went out and she watched the closed door with a bewildered stare; then turned to the alcove and dropped on a sofa. "I am bigger than I look," had been her little girl's way of maintaining that she was grown-up enough for whatever she wanted to do. The inflection he used implied that he knew it was what she used to say. A stranger in the Santsander, yet he called her father "Yank," the Beavartses "copperheads," and pointedly repeated her childish assertion that she was bigger than she looked.

(Part II in the next SHORT STORIES)



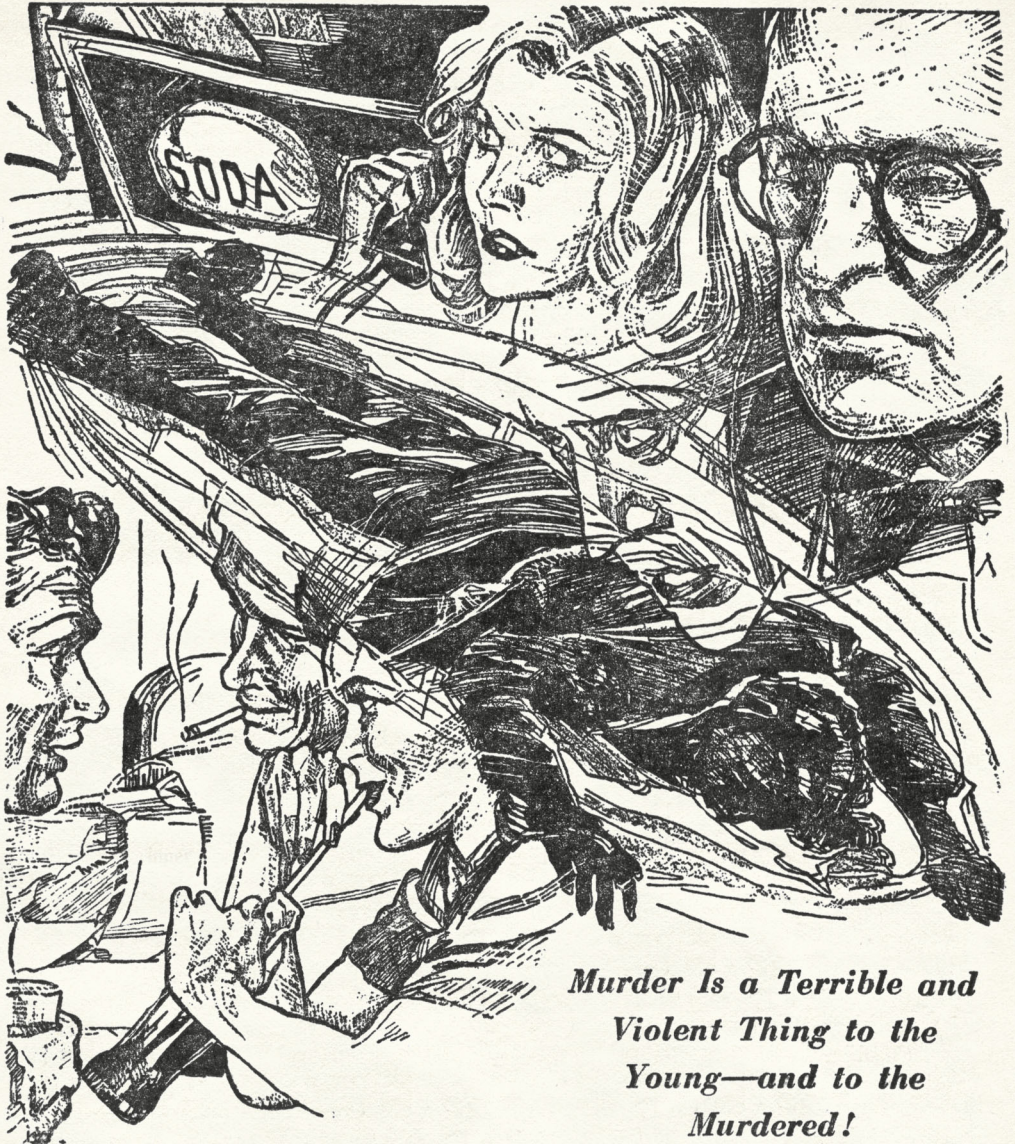
By

WILBUR S. PEACOCK

I DON'T ever remember a time I was as afraid as I was then. Mary Weisman was crying and being comforted by the gym teacher, other kids were grouped near the gymnasium door,

shock and fear in their faces. I just stood there, as I had since I first screamed, and I couldn't move. It was as though I was frozen, only my mind working.

I could still see Billy, even though the



***Murder Is a Terrible and
Violent Thing to the
Young—and to the
Murdered!***

police were all about. He was twisted like a broken football dummy, his mouth gaping widely, the blue fingermarks deep in his throat. He was dead, and I'd never seen a dead person before, and I thought I was going to be sick.

Mr. Dean, the principal, stood at my side, one arm around my shoulders, his eyes concerned when they looked at me. He'd tried to make me go inside, but I wouldn't move; and after a while, the police told him to let me stay.

Some detectives were taking pictures, and when they were through, another man squatted down beside Billy and made an

examination. More kids were arriving at the school; and finally, the police had the teachers herd them away. Only Mr. Dean and I stayed, and that was because one detective asked us to.

"Lieutenant?" the man bending over Billy called, and a detective came over and stood by him, looking down.

They talked for a while, the squatting man talking softly and pointing with his finger at Billy's throat. The lieutenant nodded his head now and then, turning to stare at me once, and I could feel the cold shivers coming again.

He wore glasses which were like shiny

mirrors, hiding his eyes. He was like a gray icicle, his suit, his shirt and tie and hat all gray. Even his shoes and socks were gray. He should have been funny looking, but he wasn't; he was somehow grim and terrifying.

After a time, he nodded, and his hands made a quick search of Billy's pockets. Billfold, some change, a knife on a key chain. He found a handkerchief and a folder of matches, and from Billy's hip pocket he brought out a cheap, flat cigarette case I'd seen Billy use before.

He opened the case, and I could see the homemade cigarettes inside, their ends twisted.

Four of them, maybe five, and I knew what they were, for Billy had tried to get me to smoke them once.

"Boy, what a buzz!" he'd said to me at Sandy's place. "You don't give a damn about nothing. And not a bit of danger, not a bit; you just smoke one like a regular cigarette—and then you don't care about nothing." His face had been flushed with anticipation.

Miggles, they were, or reefers, or long drags. Shredded brown leaves all rolled in a cigarette paper and selling at fifty cents each. I'd seen them before, not that I'd smoked them, though. I just couldn't see any sense in poisoning myself with marijuana.

And now a lieutenant of detectives held Billy's miggles in his hand, and they were as frightening to me as the crumpled body to whom they belonged.

"Okay!" I heard the lieutenant say. "Do a quick PM and send the report to my office. I'll be there about noon."

I knew then the squatting man was the medical examiner, and when I thought of what he planned to do to Billy, the playing field began to swim, a black haze crawling through my head. I went backward, and only Mr. Dean's hands kept me from falling.

Then other hands caught at me, and I was being carried, and after that I didn't remember things for a time.

Then bitterness exploded in my head, and I was coughing and trying to pull away, and gradually sense came back to my mind, and I saw I was in the nurse's office. She was holding a piece of cotton to my face,

and when at last I pushed her hand away, she smiled reassuringly.

"You'll be all right, Larry," she said. "Just lie there for a moment."

"What happened?" I asked.

"You fainted, son," a quiet voice said, and I saw then that the gray detective was at the side of the couch on which I lay.

"Don't move, Larry," another voice said then, and I recognized Mr. Dean.

"Sorry," I said, but I didn't feel sorry, I just felt sick. I wanted to cry, and I knew I couldn't. Kids cried, and I was seventeen.

THE detective pulled a chair close to the couch and sat on it. His glassed-in eyes stared at me. Then he smiled, and there wasn't anything fearful about him. His lips turned up, and the rigidity went from the planes of his face, and I was surprised to find I wanted to smile, too.

"I'm a detective, son," he said. "I'm Lieutenant Oliver. I've got to ask some questions. I expect the truth, of course, no evasions."

"Your story will be checked with others, so there's little sense in trying to protect Billy or any of his or your friends. If any of them have anything to hide, your evasions will just make matters worse for them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," I said, but I didn't really understand what he was talking about. Things were still whirly in my head, and I was glad I was lying down.

"Billy was murdered, you realize that," Lieutenant Oliver said. "It wasn't an accident. Somebody deliberately choked him to death."

"Yes, sir," I said faintly.

"Now," Lieutenant Oliver's words were slow and even. "Tell me exactly what happened this morning?"

"Well," I licked my lips; they were achingly dry. "I came to school early, because I'm gym monitor this week. It must have been about seven-thirty. I got the keys from the board and opened the cabinets and the back door. I stepped outside to see if it still looked rainy, and I saw Billy lying on the ground behind the bleacher racks. I bent over him, thinking he was hurt. Then I knew he was dead and so I screamed for help. Mike, the janitor, and Mr. Dean came running. I guess you know the rest."

Lieutenant Oliver nodded his head. "You and Billy were good friends?" he asked.

"Good Heavens, Lieutenant, you don't think—" Mr. Dean began, and went silent at the detective's swift turning of his head.

"You were good friends?" Lieutenant Oliver persisted, and I knew then what he was driving at.

"Sure," I said. "Sure!" I was shaking. "Look, I didn't kill him, if that's what you're thinking!"

I was scared, and I was beginning to get mad. Billy had been my friend.

"I'm not thinking anything, son," Lieutenant Oliver said. "Now, tell me the names of some of his other friends."

I sat up, feeling the dark giddiness again and fighting it off. My gaze went from the nurse to Mr. Dean and back to the detective.

"I don't like this," I said. "I've told you what happened."

Lieutenant Oliver nodded matter-of-factly. "I don't blame you, for I don't like it either," he admitted. "But, son, you've got to realize there's a job to do, Billy's murderer must be caught. I need your help."

"There was Frank Temple and Tom Carter and Jennis Brown," I said. "And he went with Mary Weisman and Dorothy Miller. I think those, and myself, were about his closest friends."

"Uh huh!" Lieutenant Oliver wrote down the names. "And were they together last night?"

"Well," I swallowed. "Billy and Jennis were together. I saw them at Sandys'."

"Sandy's?"

"A confectionery store a block down the street, Lieutenant," Mr. Dean explained. "I know Sandy personally, and the School Board passed approval upon him and his store."

"I see!" Lieutenant Oliver made more marks in his notebook. "Now, Larry," he said to me, "what do you know about these?"

H E LIFTED the cigarette case from his pocket and disclosed the reefers.

"Nothing," I answered.

"Do you ever use them?" His glasses were suddenly shiny blank panes again.

"No, sir," I said.

"But you know they are being smoked?"

"Yes, sir."

"By whom?"

I shook my head. "I can't tell you, sir."

Lieutenant Oliver nodded. "All right," he conceded. "Now, do you know where these cigarettes are bought?"

"No, sir," I answered. "I just know some of the fellows had them."

"They never gave you a hint as to the identity of the seller?"

"No, sir."

"Have you any ideas on the subject?"

"No, sir."

Lieutenant Oliver closed his notebook, pushing back his chair. He still smiled, and I could feel some of the tension leaving me. He was a cop, you understand, a tough cop; but strangely I felt no fear of him.

"That will be all, right now, son," he said. "I want you to come down to headquarters and dictate a statement this afternoon, though, and I may have a few more questions to ask. Meanwhile, take a day off from school and don't brood over Billy's death. It was a tragic thing; but understand this—killers can't win. We'll bring him in."

"Yes, sir," I said, and came from the couch.

Mr. Dean, his white hair a bit tousled, looking even thinner than ever, shook hands with me, his slender fingers almost lost in my clasp.

"Go home and rest, Larry," he said.

"Just go home and lie down for a while."

"Yes, sir," I said, and went out.

The shaking came back then, and I leaned against the closed door, wondering if it would ever stop, if ever I could close my eyes again without seeing Billy's dead eyes pleading with me to stop something already done. I could feel cold perspiration on my back, sliding in icy rivulets along my spine.

"Surely you don't suspect Larry, Lieutenant!" I heard Mr. Dean say, and I held my breath for the answer.

"No more than anybody else, at the moment," Lieutenant Oliver admitted. "You see, Mr. Dean, in real life, police work is a plodding arrangement of asking questions and sifting answers. It's tedious, but sooner or later somebody makes a slip—and then, well, it's up to a jury."

"But not Larry," Mr. Dean persisted.

"He's one of our best students, a crack athlete. I know personally he's a decent boy."

I leaned against the door, almost crying. *The old fool*, I kept thinking, *the old fool*. And I meant nothing derogatory in my choice of words.

"We'll see," Lieutenant Oliver said quietly. "Meanwhile, if you don't mind, I'd like to question the people whose names I've jotted down. I'd like to have them sent here at intervals, say, of ten minutes apart."

"But what could they—" Mr. Dean began.

"Mr. Dean," Lieutenant Oliver's voice said patiently, "this is police work, with which I am afraid you are none too familiar. However, I will tell you this: The boy was murdered by being strangled with a right hand, which was small. It appears the boy had been smoking marijuana before he was killed, although only an autopsy can tell us that for certain. Obviously he was not alone in the school yard last night. Therefore, I must ask questions. Does that satisfy you?"

"Well, yes, but— Very well, Lieutenant, I'll have the students sent down one by one."

I didn't wait for any more. I fled along the hall, my feet drumming echoes from the walls. A proctor tried to stop me at the front door, and I brushed past him and went running across the campus. I was crying then, dry savage sobs tearing at my throat.

I was crying and I was running then—and suddenly the fear was back, as though I were being chased by an unseen figure whose hand was reaching for my throat.

II

SANDY'S was empty of customers. Only Sandy was there, sitting at his end of the soda fountain, head bent over a copy of a Sunday funnies section. He looked up as I came in, and I was glad I had chosen this place for sanctuary, for his round face was familiar and reassuring.

"Hello, Larry," he said, and his very calmness was soothing. "Been having a pretty rugged time of it?"

"Yes," I said, "hell, yes! Sandy it was terrible!"

"Yeah!" He nodded his head, his bald spot shiny, like an island surrounded by rusty seaweed. "I was in the first war; I saw things like that." He came from his seat, watching me sit on one of the stools. "What you need is a cup of coffee and a couple of aspirin."

"Sure," I said automatically.

He found a bottle of aspirin on the backbar and placed it in front of me. As always I was fascinated. He laid a cup on a saucer and filled it with steaming brown coffee. He placed it before me, then lifted a pitcher of cream from the ice chest.

"That'll do it," he said, and caught my gaze.

HE FLUSHED, and I felt like apologizing for the fool I was. I'd been watching his hand again, his right hand, which was a thing of pink-toned rubber, without life, without volition, something dead.

And then he laughed, as he always did, as though there were nothing strange in a man's having a hand and forearm of rubber, without bones or flesh.

"It's okay, Larry," he said. "You know, sometimes I look at the thing the same way, sort of seeing it for the first time, you might say."

"Sure," I said, and stirred sugar into the coffee.

Sandy was still smiling as he climbed into his seat, but I felt strangely sorry for him. He wasn't young now, white salted his hair about the bald spot. He was big, well over two hundred pounds, and except for the arm, still muscular and hard. He'd done about everything a one-armed guy could do, I guess, anyway, his stories claimed he had.

"Forget it, Larry," he said.

I nodded, and took the aspirin, washing them down with coffee. Sandy stared at the funnies, not really seeing them, and I knew he wanted to ask questions, but was afraid of my reactions. So more to ease myself than to satisfy his curiosity, I told him what had happened. He listened, nodding from time to time.

"Yeah," he said at last, "that's about what I heard." He scowled. "Billy was a nice kid, except when he got a bang on with those reefer."

I looked up. "Any idea who was selling them?"

He shook his big head. "Search me," he said. "I don't know. I think I'd kill the guy who brought them in here. Anyway, I've warned you kids about them often enough."

A man opened the door and came through, then walked back to the fountain. "Choc shake," he ordered, "and a cheese sandwich."

"Right away," Sandy said and went back to the sandwich block.

I HAD to watch, as I always did. He used the knife with his left hand, pressing on the block of cheese with his right. The unreal hand had no muscular movement, of course, not even one of hidden cables, but Sandy used it well.

He sliced a layer of cheese, then drew the knife for a second stroke. The false hand slipped then, and the knife took away two fingers as neatly as if he'd planned it that way.

"*Gah!*" the man at the counter said, almost strangling.

"Damn!" Sandy said, then looked at the customer. "Hey, I'm sorry, Mister. Take it easy. It's not me; it's just this dummy flipper of mine." He wriggled the mutilated hand.

"Oh!" the customer grinned weakly, color ebbing back into his face. "Well, uh—" he finished, "I just happened to remember an appointment. Forget the sandwich and shake."

He slid from the stool and was gone.

Sandy shook his head. "Haven't done that in ten years," he said in irritation. "Damn such stupidity."

He picked up the truncated fingers in his good hand and came back to the counter. "Cement job," he said after a moment, then grinned at me. "Want to play surgeon?"

"Doing what?" I asked.

"Wait a minute." He went to a side cabinet where school supplies lay in gaudy disarray on the shelves. Sliding open the glass door, he took down a bottle of rubber cement. "We'll stick 'em back with this."

I had to laugh. The thought was grisly, yet I had to laugh. He was so casual about replacing lost fingers, the whole thing was funny. After a second, he grinned, too.

THEN I opened the cement bottle and put a coat on the stub of each finger and on the slashed ends of the fingers. When the rubber was tacky, I pressed them back into place. There was no laughter in me then, though, for the synthetic hand felt cold and weirdly hard, like the dead flesh of a child's doll. I loosed it as soon as I could.

"Thanks, Larry," Sandy said, and rubbed away crusted cement, leaving scars in the rubbery flesh exactly as though the hand were real and just healing from an accident.

"It's okay," I said, and laid a dime on the counter. "Think I'll go home," I finished.

"Take it easy," Sandy was saying as I went out the door. "Anything I can do, just let me know."

"Yes, I will," I said. He was rubbing his damaged hand gently as I closed the door.

I stood in the sunshine, undecided for a moment. Here it was I'd said goodbye to Billy and Jennis only the night before. Now Billy was dead and Jennis was a suspect like myself. Not that I could ever convince myself that Jennis was a killer; he was just another fellow, one I'd double-dated with, a guy who played a swell forward on the basketball squad. Remembering his laugh and his friendliness, I couldn't imagine his murdering anybody.

"Hell!" I said bitterly, and started the walk toward home.

Mom was in the house, and I knew she'd heard about it, but she didn't say anything, and I went on upstairs to my room. The bed was made, but I flopped down on it, anyway, staring up at the ceiling and trying to make sense out of everything that had happened.

A fly crawled along the light cord, then whirled away. Sunshine spilled across the bed, and I shut my eyes, and instantly Billy's body was back, tortured and flung in a heap.

I opened my eyes and stared at the crossed foils on the far wall. They were like the X in newspaper pictures. I looked away. I couldn't figure it, couldn't figure it at all. Billy was a bit wild, I admit, but I couldn't imagine his getting into a scrape which could end only as it apparently had. He was just like a lot of the others, wanting

excitement, even at some personal risk. He wasn't angelic, and there really wasn't a devil in him. He was just a friend I'd gone to school with for ten years.

I couldn't rest, so I went to the bathroom and washed my face. My eyes looked red, and my hair wouldn't stay combed, rising like a yellow brush over one eye. I kept wondering what I would look like if somebody twisted his fingers into my throat.

I went downstairs, and Mom called for me to eat something. I said, no, thanks, and left the house, walking fast toward the bus-line, waiting on the corner until the first bus arrived.

I took a seat in the back, behind a man who smelled like barber's lotion, and tried to forget all that had happened. But I couldn't, and so, after a time, I gave up and just let my mind think anything it wanted to think.

At Main, I pulled the cord and climbed out the rear door, waiting for the light to change before walking toward the big brown building which was police headquarters.

IT WAS strange how nothing had changed. People still went about their business, carrying packages, hurrying, talking to one another. Newsboys brayed their papers at the corners, and a cop was a blue-coated semaphore in the center of the street. I think I realized then how small one person was to the world, and the knowledge shocked a bit of the blackness from my mind.

I went past the jewelry shop and the Banker's Building, and went about the corner to police headquarters. A couple of squad cars were outside, and two men were on the steps, looking at a paper and talking quietly.

I went past them and through the swinging doors. The room was big, doors leading off to either side, and farther on, a corridor was at my right. I walked to the desk where a uniformed cop sat and told him I was supposed to see Lieutenant Oliver.

"Holden, Larry Holden?" he said, running his finger down a sheet of paper. "Oh, yeah, here it is." His eyes swung up and over me very impersonally. "Take the elevator, Holden, to the fourth," he said. "Lieutenant Oliver's office is the second door to the left."

"Thanks," I said, and went toward the corridor.

The elevator deposited me on the fourth floor, and I waited a moment outside the lieutenant's door, squeezing up my courage, frightened a bit now. This was new to me; the only other time I'd been at headquarters was to pay a two buck fine for parking Dad's car too long in a restricted zone.

Then I turned the knob and went in.

"Hello, Larry," Lieutenant Oliver said from behind the only desk in the room. "Sit down and I'll be with you in a moment."

There were two chairs, and I chose the one closer to the desk. Lieutenant Oliver was filling out some sort of a report, and his pen made scratching noises on the paper. The room was small, a couple of hunting pictures on the wall, a huge green filing cabinet behind and to one side of the desk. Other than that, the room was a bare buff cubicle, two windows facing the street.

At last Lieutenant Oliver thrust the report aside and leaned back in his chair. The light made his glasses shiny blanks I couldn't see through, but his voice was warm and friendly.

"Feel a bit better?" he asked.

"Some," I admitted.

"Good!" He nodded. "You'll be all right by tomorrow morning."

I wanted to ask him how the hell he knew. I wanted to wipe the smile off his face. He was talking about me and my friend, my dead friend, and he was spouting platitudes.

"Sure," I muttered. There wasn't any point in ranting around.

"Look, Larry," the detective said, "have you thought of anything you might add to your story?"

"Huh uh!" I shook my head. "I came here only because you asked me to."

He opened a drawer and held out a leather glove. "Try that on, Larry," he said.

"Why?" I was suddenly tense, as though the glove held acid.

"Just try it." His tone was mild, but there was no brooking his request.

I shoved my hand into the glove as far as it would go. It was far too small, like a woman's glove, and my hand was big, a football nestling just right when I tossed a pass.

"It's size five, Larry," Lieutenant Oliver said.

"So!" I tossed the glove onto the desk, brushing my hands. "So who cares?"

"I do, Billy's parents do," Lieutenant Oliver said. "Billy was strangled by somebody with a size five hand, the laboratory says." His head tilted a bit, like a parrot observing something. "Now do you care?"

I hammered the arm of my chair, my voice so hard and angry it startled me.

"Of course I care, you know I do!" I said, almost crying. "Why can't you leave me alone? I'll sign the statement, but I can't tell you any more than that."

"Take it easy, son," Lieutenant Oliver said quietly, and put the glove away.

I subsided, ashamed of my actions, but not regretting the words. I watched a pigeon strut outside the window before bursting into sudden flight.

"How's Sandy's hand?" Lieutenant Oliver asked.

I blinked, trying to realize what the words meant. Then I had to laugh.

"Look, Lieutenant," I said, "he's got only one hand and it's half again the size of mine. The other's a dummy, a chunk of pink rubber. He couldn't kill a fly with it."

"I know," the detective admitted. "I just heard he lost two of his fingers this morning in an accident, that was all."

BUT THAT wasn't all. I realized then that the thought had been hidden in the back of my mind. Handless men wore prosthetics which could do everything human but hurt and bleed. Sandy could have killed Billy, using another artificial hand, one strong with cables and shoulder straps.

But as though he read my mind, Lieutenant Oliver shook his head.

"It wasn't Sandy," he said. "There were fingerprints on Billy's throat, fingerprints our lab managed to bring out and develop. Billy wasn't murdered by an artificial hand; he was killed by somebody whose hand was incredibly strong and which was small enough to wear a five glove."

I sighed then, tiredly. The noose was narrowing slowly about the killer. Question by question, fact by fact, the police were plodding toward their objective.

I was glad Sandy was out of it. I liked

him, and he was a pal to the gang, loaning a buck when it was needed, expecting payment and getting it. I couldn't remember a time he hadn't been behind the fountain of his store; he was like a school fixture.

"Of course, though," Lieutenant Oliver interrupted my thoughts gently, "he could be selling the reefers."

"Oh, for God's sakes!" I exploded.

Lieutenant Oliver laughed, and the sound was as warm and friendly as his smile.

"Being a cop hurts a man," he said finally. "I'm suspicious of everybody." He pressed a buzzer. "Suppose we get on with your statement, then you can go home."

A secretary came in, and I dictated my story.

Lieutenant Oliver and I waited until she returned with three typed copies which I signed and she witnessed. Then I shook hands with the detective, and was just starting to say goodbye when the phone rang.

"Excuse me," Lieutenant Oliver said and answered the call. "Oliver here," he said. "Uh huh . . . yes. . . All right, bring him in."

He cradled the receiver, face tight in thought for a moment, then looked up at me. I swear he could do the trick to his glasses at will; they were glare ice again, his eyes hidden.

"That was Tracy," he said to me.

I waited, not really caring.

"He just picked up Jennis Brown," Lieutenant Oliver finished. "The boy was trying to run away. Tracy picked him up at the bus terminal. Jennis has just confessed he killed Billy."

I had no chance to speak then; Lieutenant Oliver was politely showing me though the door. The panel closed, and I stood in the hall, hearing his voice give quick staccato orders over the phone.

Billy—Jennis, I was thinking. Jennis—Billy!

"Dear God!" I whispered, and went down the hall.

III

MOM and Dad tried to talk at dinner, but gave up after a time. I just didn't feel like talking, and no matter where the conversation started, it swung to Billy's death. Dad had the evening paper, and

there was a big scare headline on the front page, along with several pictures of Billy and Jennis and the school. I knew my name was there, but I was glad my picture hadn't been printed.

After dinner, because it had to be done and because it gave me something to take my mind off Jennis, I did homework, spreading my books and papers out on the living room table. Dad was in his chair before the radio reading the paper and glancing up at me now and then. I knew he'd talk about everything before long, and so I pretended I was studying hard, just trying to postpone the talk.

Mom was clearing the table, humming to herself as she always did. I knew she had talked to Dad when he had arrived from the office, and I was grateful to her because I could wait a while before telling again about Billy and the police.

The doorbell rang, and I went to the door, opening it. Mr. Dean smiled and said, "Good evening, Larry. Would you mind talking to me for a few minutes?"

"Come in," I said, and took his hat and coat.

I HADN'T really realized how small and frail he was until then. His head barely topped my shoulder, and his hair was cotton white. His thin sensitive face was gentle, but alive now with some indefinable purpose.

"Good evening, Mr. Miller," he said to Dad in the living room, and shook hands.

"Sit down," Dad said. "My wife will be out in a moment."

"Thank you." Mr. Dean sat on the overstuffed chair, dwarfed by its hugeness, his slender fingers playing absently with the antimacassars on the arms.

"I wanted to talk to Larry," he said apologetically, but with a queer note of urgency in his tone which tightened my nerves. "I know he is upset about Billy, but there are questions which must be answered."

Mom came into the room then, shaking hands and greeting Mr. Dean. She sat on the couch, waiting, and the silence was oppressive for a moment. I wanted to leave, to go to my room, but somehow I didn't dare, so I leaned against the door jamb, watching Mr. Dean.

"I wanted to ask you, Larry," Mr. Dean

said, "what you know about the sale of marijuana cigarettes at the school."

"I don't know anything," I said defensively.

Mr. Dean's voice hardened, and I suddenly realized the man was neither as soft nor as old as I had thought.

"I want honest answers, Larry," he said quietly. "Federal investigators were at the school today, trying to find those answers. You will be questioned undoubtedly." He pursed thin lips. "Now I believe I can save everyone a lot of trouble if you will give me the names of the boys and girls who have been smoking those cigarettes. Too, you must know where they can be purchased."

"Mr. Dean," Dad said, "aren't you being a bit high handed with the boy? After all, your job is to run the school, not to act as an investigator about something which is none of your concern."

Mr. Dean flushed, his small hands clenching. "It is my concern," he said heatedly. "Oh, I know I'm not an officer, but I am the principal of the school." He licked his lips. "Mr. Miller," he finished, "I've spent thirty-five years of my life at Liberty High, and I intend to stay there a good many more. What concerns the school concerns me. I've helped that school grow from fifty students to more than three thousand. It is my life work, and I do not propose to see it injured by a bunch of irresponsible hoodlums who drug themselves by smoking marijuana and then murdering people."

"But—" Mom began.

"Mrs. Miller," the principal broke in, "I do not feel that my questions are out of order. You, certainly, feel justified in questioning Larry as to what he does at various times. You have a responsibility to him. Well, I have a responsibility to a great many people, the students, the parents, my teaching staff and myself." His hands knotted into fists. "I know for a fact that Billy was making efforts to enlist other students into smoking marijuana; I remonstrated with him several times. Now he is dead, and I think it is time some of the students, Larry in particular, help stamp out this vicious practice."

"Well, son?" Dad said.

I shifted uncomfortably. Squealing wasn't nice; it was dirty, yet I could see the justice of Mr. Dean's words.

"I don't know who peddled the reefers," I said. "Billy and Jennis and some of the others smoked them."

"But you didn't, did you, Larry?" Mom said.

"No, Mom," I said, and she sighed a bit and sat easier on the couch.

"You do have suspicious as to who the seller is?" Mr. Dean asked.

"No, sir," I said. "Nobody ever mentioned his name to me."

"But you can find out?"

I scowled. "I could try," I admitted.

"And give me the name?"

"I suppose so."

Mr. Dean nodded, relaxing a bit, some of the thinness leaving his lips. He forced a smile, but there was still a difference between the way he looked now and the manner he had at school.

"I would consider it a personal favor, Larry," he said.

Dad moved his legs, the newspaper crackling a bit. He frowned slightly at me, and I could almost read his thoughts.

"Are you shielding anybody, Larry," he asked.

I shook my head. "No, sir."

HE TAPPED the paper with a forefinger. "It says here that Jennis Brown is being held, having confessed causing Billy's death. Now Billy and Jennis are your friends; surely you must have known they smoked these—these reefers, and surely they must have tried to talk you into doing the same."

"Billy did," I muttered.

"But you didn't?" Mom said.

"No, Mom," I answered.

Dad fumbled for his pipe. "And neither they nor anybody else gave you a hint as to where the cigarettes could be bought?"

"No, sir," I said. "I—"

The brrrr of the hall phone broke into my words, and I turned and stepped out of the living room, going to the phone.

"Hello," I said.

"Larry?" Mary Weisman's voice sounded shrill and harsh. "Larry, I just remembered something, and I don't know what to do."

"Remembered what?" I asked.

"I just remembered that Billy left a party one night to buy some of those miggles. I went with him, but I forgot all about it when the police talked to me today. Now

I'm afraid to tell them. They'd think I lied before."

"Well, what can I do?" I asked. "Look, Mary—"

"The address was four thirty seven Blanchard Road; Billy said he was seeing somebody named Adams."

"Adams?" I said. "Four thirty seven Blanchard Road?"

I could hear the music from a juke box, and kids were talking. She was almost whispering now.

"You've got to tell the police," she said. "I'm afraid to."

"Look," I said, "there's nothing to be afraid of. Just—"

"Please, Larry?"

"All right," I said.

"Thanks, Larry," Mary said and hung up.

I STOOD a long moment in the hall, trying to figure things out. I could hear Mom talking to Mr. Dean, but I gave no heed to the words. I didn't like it, didn't like it at all. Everything seemed to be swinging back to me. First, the cops questioned me, then Mr. Dean wanted me to spy for him, and now Mary Weisman had asked for my help.

I went back into the living room. Mr. Dean was just saying goodbye, and he shook hands with me.

"I want you to know I appreciated your help, Larry," he said. "This is something too big for any of us to handle individually; we've got to work together to keep our school and city clean." He turned to leave. "I'm sorry to have troubled you," he finished. "Good night."

Then he was gone, and after a moment we heard his car start with a grating of gears and pull away down the street. I hesitated, wondering whether to tell Dad what Mary had said.

"You going out now?" Dad said.

I nodded. "I'll go talk to some of the gang," I said. "I—"

"All right," Dad said. "And, Larry, when you return, I think we'd better have a talk."

"Be careful, Larry," Mom said.

"Sure," I said.

I turned and left the house, catching up my hat and jacket from the hall closet, and then standing on the porch while I put them on. Stars were splintered ice in the

sky, and somebody was burning Fall leaves, the odor brisk and exciting.

I went fast down the walk to the corner, then swung left for half a block and entered the drug store. The proprietor looked up and waved a friendly hand, and I nodded at him before entering the phone booth.

I dropped a nickel in the slot and dialed a number.

"Desk, police headquarters," a bored voice said.

"May I speak to Lieutenant Oliver?" I asked.

"Who's calling?"

"Larry—Larry Miller."

"Just a minute." There was silence, then the voice came back on the wire. "Sorry, the lieutenant is out."

"Thanks," I said and hung the receiver on its hook.

I stood for a moment, wondering what to do. Despite the urgency of the moment, I almost laughed. Manuscripts were racked in my bedroom bookcase, stories I'd written and sent out, only to have rejected. Always the hero went intrepidly about his detective work and to hell with the police.

But this was something different than anything I'd written. Everything was different. The police weren't hard-boiled, anxious to pull a third degree. There were no murder suspects; the killer had already given up. And as for talking to Adams about marijuana, well, I didn't have the slightest of ideas as to what a person would say to him.

Yet something had to be done, and I was the only fellow who could do anything at the minute.

I left the drug store, walking fast to the bus stop. A yellow came along, marked "Blanchard Road" and I climbed on, slumping into a seat. The bus hurtled along, making few stops, and at the Blanchard turn, I pulled the cord and got off, standing in the glare of the street light for a moment, figuring out about where Four **Thirty Seven** would be.

Most of the buildings were private homes, but a few apartment houses had been built, towering over their neighbors. I went North, watching the numbers, and when I came to the address, I walked up the steps and studied the names below the letter boxes. C. H. Adams was in apartment 2A.

I tried the door and found it unlocked.

I went through, hurrying toward the stairs, feeling a scared tightness in my stomach now, driven on, not knowing yet what I would say.

The second floor was lighted, the walls freshly painted, chairs standing neat and perfectly spaced at several intervals along one side.

A radio was playing in 2B, and when I stopped outside Adams' apartment, I could hear him moving about inside.

My heart was jumping in my throat when I pressed the buzzer. I swallowed, hard.

"Who is it?" Adams called.

"Me—Larry Miller, Mr. Adams. Can I see you for a minute?"

"What about?"

"Well," I looked around, expecting to see people at doorways, listening in. "it's personal."

"Okay!" the voice said. "Just a minute."

A key clicked in the lock, then the door swung open. There was no light in the front room, only a glow from where another door was half-open.

"Mr. Adams," I said, "I wanted to talk to—"

I was stepping forward. I walked into a blow which threw me against the door, twisting me around. I tried to call out, and a second smashing blow at the side of my face dropped me to the floor. I tried to fight, and blackness was crowding my brain.

The attacker smashed at my face again, and I felt all sense leaving me. Then hot breath was on my face and I could feel the pressure on my throat. Agony pulsed in my chest, red flaming agony as though I were smothering in deep water.

"Nosy!" a voice whispered from far away.

Then a rocket exploded in my head, and I knew nothing more.

HE WAS dead. I knew it, and I lay on my side and watched his slack face draining a stream of clotting blood onto the rug. It was ugly and vicious, and I came to my hands and knees, trying not to be sick, feeling nausea cramping at my stomach.

There was light in the room now, streaming from a table lamp. The door to the hall was closed, the key still on the inside. I came upright, leaning against the wall,

wanting to scream like a girl, but unable to make a sound.

He was a little man, brown hair thin at the top, and despite death, there was a look of sly cunning still on his features. He lay on his side, one hand outflung, the other hidden beneath him, and I could see where the knife had slashed at his chest and throat.

"Oh, dear God!" I whispered.

I'd seen him before, but hadn't given him much attention. He'd hung around the school, and now I knew why. That had been his business, hanging about schools, for he'd been peddling reefers.

And now he was dead, a bone-handled pocket knife in his chest.

I sucked in my breath, seeing the knife. I'd seen it before; I'd carried it for a year. It was my knife, and now it was sheathed in a body's chest.

I FOUND the bathroom and I was sick. And after the spasm was over, I washed my face, seeing the bruises on my throat, wondering why my attacker hadn't slain me.

And then I realized I had killed Adams. There was no logic in the knowledge, there was just the simple belief that I had wielded the knife. I had been attacked, and I had somehow taken out my knife and slashed Adams' life away. I clung to the lavatory, weakness in my legs.

I had to get away. I knew that, and nothing else mattered.

I went back to the body, bending over and looking at the knife again. I saw the shred of celluloid clinging to the ripped shirt and automatically plucked it free with my left hand.

It wasn't celluloid; it was the arched tip of a fingernail, a spot of dried blood at one pointed end.

It wasn't mine; my hands were all right. And when I looked at Adams', I found that it wasn't his. I knew then that I hadn't killed Adams, that my attacker had been the murderer.

I reached for the knife. I had to have it, had to take it with me, for the police were tough and shrewd, and they could trace it to me without trouble.

The knife stuck. It had wedged in bone, and I tugged desperately. The door vibrated from knuckle blows, and a voice called:

"Mr. Adams, Mr. Adams, is everything all right?"

Panic struck me. I jerked at the knife and it came free so fast I lost my hold, the knife flipping clear across the room and dropping behind the couch.

I went after it, and the hammering on the door came louder. I heard the rattle of the knob, and I knew then I had no time to retrieve the knife. Without hesitation, I plunged for the bathroom, slamming and locking the door behind. And even as I twisted the key, I heard the woman's scream rising higher and higher, breaking and starting, until the building held nothing but a shriek of alarm.

I ripped down a curtain, sliding through the window onto the fire escape. There was another apartment across the alleyway, and lights were springing into life behind dark windows, as the woman screamed. I raced along the fire-escape ladder, feeling the counterbalance give. And then the weight of my body had swung the ladder to the alley, and I plunged away, hearing the squeal of metal on metal behind as the ladder rose again in level balance.

I ran, I darted down the alley like a rabbit chased by hounds. A man called out at the alley entrance, but I gave no heed, darting away from him, running as I had never done before in my life. My lungs were on fire, and a deadness was in my legs, yet I forced myself to go ahead, racing a block down the street, then swinging into another alley.

I ran for ten minutes, ran until I could breathe no longer, until I had to stop, leaning against a wall, fighting for breath. I was shaking, and the fear in me was sheer agony. A dead man lay back there, and my knife was in the room, and a woman had seen me dart to safety. I was it, I was tagged, I wouldn't have a chance when the police figured things out.

I almost cried. I was scared and tired, and I didn't know what to do. I saw then that my left hand was still clenched, and opening the fingers, I saw I still held the torn fingernail tip. I shivered, seeing it, then thrust it into my side pocket. It was a clue, it might mean the difference between life and death for me if I could find the person it fitted.

I tried to reason things out, and there was

only a jumble of tangled thoughts in my head. I wanted to go home, but I didn't dare. Dad was fair, but he was the kind who would want me to surrender to the police. And I knew the police would never believe my story. I thought of a dozen places I might hide, and I realized hiding wouldn't solve anything. I had to do something better than that; I had to know what the police were doing.

I thought of Mary Weisman then, and as instantly as that I knew who had struck me down. Only she had known I was going to Adams' apartment, only she had had his address. It had to be her, my mind kept saying, it couldn't be anybody else, for nobody knew I was going there.

I looked at the bit of fingernail again. It had torn almost straight across, clinging to the skin long enough to come free stained with blood at one end. It was delicate, narrow, and it had been buffed and polished. It was a short oval and was translucent in the alley lamp's light.

I put it away, thoughts spinning in the vortex of my mind. I had to find Mary, to question her and look at her fingers. And then, when I found the damning truth of what I already suspected, I had to get a confession from her.

It was still early; my watch told me that. She'd probably be with the gang at Sandy's.

I CAUGHT a passing taxi, flagging it down, not caring about being seen here in the neighborhood, wanting only to reach Sandy's as soon as possible. Ten minutes of riding placed me a block from Sandy's, and I went along the walk, hugging the store shadows, my breathing tight and hard in my throat.

Light spilled yellowly from the confectionery window, and I edged up to it, peering in. Two couples were dancing to the juke box music, and others were at the fountain, joking with Sandy and drinking from frosty glasses he filled so competently.

I saw Mary. She was at one side, almost at the end of the magazine rack. I tapped on the glass with my ring, and she looked up, frowning a bit in consternation. Then she recognized me, and she came outside.

"Larry," she said, "did you tell the police?"

I drew her into the dark shadows of a

doorway, fighting to keep my voice down, shaking now from tension and fear and worry.

"He's dead," I said brutally. "Adams is dead."

"No, oh, no, Larry!" I could see the white blue of her face.

I had a grasp on her arm, and I realized then how wire strong she was. I'd played tennis with her, and I'd seen her fence, and I realized she was fully as strong as a boy.

"Somebody knocked me out when I knocked on Adams' door," I said. "And when I came to, Adams was dead, stabbed to death with my knife."

"Who, Larry, who?"

"You!" I said savagely, and caught at her hands. "Damn it, Mary, only you knew I was going there."

I twisted her about, catching her hands and bending them brutally into the light from the confectionery window. I hadn't known until then how small her hands were, nor how strong. They fought me, but I held them still.

"What are you doing, Larry?" Mary cried.

"Hold still," I snapped, and looked at her nails.

They were short, too short. All of them had been filed back almost to the quick. They were narrow and polished and she had destroyed their beauty by filing them away.

"Smart!" I said, and dropped her hands. "By God, you're smart. You ripped away a nail, and so you file all of them."

"You're crazy, Larry, let me go!" she said, but she was huddling away from me in the doorway, her eyes wide and frightened in her pale features.

"Not too crazy," I said. "We're going to the police, and you're going to tell the truth. You're going to tell what happened. You——"

She screamed. It sounded like the scream in Adams' apartment. It rose in a wavering cry, and I went forward to shut her up.

Then feet pounded on the walk, and I whirled to see a man coming charging from across the street. There was no time for thinking, there was no time to figure things out. Instinct took over, and I whirled, breaking into a full run.

"Stop, stop or I'll shoot," the man bel-
lowed at me.

I ran with every bit of speed I could
manage. A gun went off behind me, and a
bullet ricocheted with a banshee wail from
the store front. Then I was at the corner,
racing down the side street.

I had a minute's start, and that was all
I needed. I ducked across the street and
through the hedge surrounding part of the
school yard.

I still ran, but I was on grass, and I was
hidden by the hedge. I heard the man race
down the street, and then I was past the
side of the school, and I was alone in the
night.

"*You're it,*" my thoughts kept hammering
at me. "*You can't prove the fingernail came
from Adams' apartment. She'll say you tried
to kill her because she knew you were go-
ing there. It will be your word against the
evidence of a murder knife and her story of
how you attacked her. You it, Larry!*"

And I knew my thoughts did not lie.

IV

I DON'T remember much of the follow-
ing hour. I ran and I walked, alternat-
ing, wanting only to get away, yet not know-
ing where to go. I had no money, only a
bit of change, and so I could not get away
by bus or train. Too, by now the police
would be looking for me.

I was afraid to go home. I knew Mom
and Dad would help, but the police would
be there, too, and so I was afraid. Every-
thing was mixed up in my mind; I didn't
know what to do. I was like a squirrel in
a cage, going nowhere, just running, and
when I stopped, all freedom would be gone.

I thought of Mr. Dean then. I had to
have help, help of some kind. He was
smart, he was experienced, he could tell me
what to do.

I began walking to his place.

Traffic was light, the night growing late
now. I passed a few pedestrians, trying to
walk naturally, trying not to arouse sus-
picion. A police car came along the street,
and I ducked behind a tree, shivering, fear
like vinegar in my throat.

I came to the principal's home. It was a
small house, set back in a wide lot, and the
garage was by itself at the end of a con-

crete drive. The car was at the garage door,
waiting.

I went up the walk, feeling the beating
of my heart. If Mr. Dean failed me, then
there was no place else to go.

I walked softly onto the porch, stealing
along to peer into the window. Maybe po-
lice were here, too.

But only Mrs. Dean was in the living
room, placidly rocking before the console
radio, knitting needles flashing whitely in
her hands. There was a sense of peace in
the scene which stilled the crawling of my
nerves.

I pushed the door bell, and when the
lights came on, I forced a smile.

"Yes?" Mrs. Dean said.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Dean," I said,
and my voice was higher than usual. "I'm
Larry—Larry Miller, and it's important."

Her head was already shaking. "Not to-
night, Larry," she said. "I'm sorry, but not
tonight."

"But—but it's important," I said desper-
ately.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Dean said again. "Mr.
Dean had an accident and he's in bed, rest-
ing."

"An accident?" I said.

"Yes!" Mrs. Dean shook her head sym-
pathetically. "He crushed his hand in the
car door."

"Crush—" I swallowed. "You mean he
smashed his fingers?"

"It was terrible," Mrs. Dean said. "He
almost ripped away the end of one finger,
as well as cut the others. After the doctor
dressed his hand, Mr. Dean went to bed."

I was remembering something then, re-
membering something which I had com-
pletely forgotten. Mary hadn't been alone
in knowing I was going to Adams' apart-
men. Mr. Dean had known it; he had sat
ten feet from where I talked on the phone
and he had heard everything I had said.

"Maybe I can help you?" Mrs. Dean
asked.

I shook my head. "No thanks," I man-
aged to say. "It—it really isn't that impor-
tant. I'll talk to Mr. Dean tomorrow. Good
night."

I turned and almost ran from the porch.
The door closed and the light went off,
and I was pacing down the walk, fighting
to bring coherence to my thoughts.

Mr. Dean could have killed Adams. He could have knocked me unconscious and then murdered Adams with my knife. The nail tip could be his, and his smashing his finger in the car door just a cover up.

But why? I sought an answer and could find none that made any sense. He was a respected man, the principal of the finest high school in the state, a church work—

I got it then.

I knew then why he could have killed. I remembered his small body and his slender hands. I recalled the fire which came to his eyes when he talked about the school he had built from nothing.

He could have killed to protect his school. He could have murdered because he thought Adams was responsible for bringing disgrace to Liberty High. He could have done that, and I sensed he might have done it—and I *knew* he had done murder for that very reason.

He had murdered Billy because Billy was striving to get others to smoke reefers. He had killed Adams because he was the source of the cigarettes. And he had framed me because he needed somebody to take the blame for Adams' death.

It was that simple.

I was still walking, not noticing where I was going. Unanswered questions still were in my mind, and I had to have the answers. The police were not fools; Lieutenant Oliver knew what he was doing. And yet he had told me Jennis Brown had killed Billy. If that were so, then Mr. Dean had killed Adams for some reason I couldn't fathom.

The lighted apron of a filling station was across the street, and I crossed the street and entered the station, asking the attendant if I could use the phone.

"Go ahead, kid," he said. "It's a pay phone."

I thumbed through the directory, finding Jennis' number, then dropped a nickel and dialed.

"May I speak to Jennis?" I asked, and relief surged in me when Jennis came to the phone. "How come?" I asked. "I thought you were locked up."

His voice was tired and somehow ugly.

"What's it to you, Larry?" he said.

"Look," I said. "Oliver told me you had confessed."

"To hell with him. I had a fight with

Billy last night, that's all. We were boogered up, and I thought maybe I had hurt him. I got panicky and ran, that's all." His voice was hard. "What business is it of yours?"

"Thanks, Jennis," I said, and pronged the receiver.

The station attendant was staring at me, and I forced a grin. "School initiation," I said.

"Yeah, sure!" I could feel his eyes on my back as I went out the door.

I caught the bus on the corner and rode toward the center of town. I was going to the cops now, going with my story and the piece of the fingernail. Maybe with my story and laboratory evidence Mr. Dean could be forced to confess.

THEN all resolve faded from me, and I was shaking again. The bus route was past Mr. Dean's home, and a police car was at the curb, white and black, deadly in its very lack of viciousness. I caught a glimpse of the driver, and a policeman was at the door, talking to Mrs. Dean.

"You can't prove a thing," I whispered to myself. "If they don't believe you, it will mean prison, at the very least."

I didn't know what to do. Men are brave when bragging. Story-book heroes never falter. But when the real thing happens, a fellow gets mixed up. I knew what I should do, but I just couldn't bring myself to give myself up.

I pulled the cord and climbed down the steps and stood in the street, watching the bus pull away.

It was still, the city sleeping about me. It wasn't yet midnight, but this was a residential district, and only a few homes still had lighted windows. Liberty High was two blocks away, and I walked this street every day, going to classes, talking with other students, sometimes racing along in some jalopy.

But the scene didn't seem natural now. The streets were too quiet, nobody walked along, there was no sound. Shadows reached for me, and I felt the hammering of my heart. Hidden watchers might be about, cops waiting for me to return, maybe.

I tried not to think. I went along the walk, going cautiously, ready for instant flight. There was a twitching in my left

eye I couldn't control, and a clammy sweat stuck my undershirt to my back. I was about to the end of everything; I couldn't take much more.

There was a light in Sandy's, not the brilliant one which meant he was open for business, just the backbar lights he left on when he closed. I edged up to the confectionery door, wary as a wolf, and peered through the glass.

Sandy was there, sitting on his favorite stool, laboriously jotting figures into an account book with his good hand. A cigarette glowed in an ashtray before him and a bottle of beer was uncapped beside the book.

IRAPPED on the glass. His head snapped up, and he squinted at my shadow on the glass. Then he slid from the stool and came across the room with quick strong steps, his shadow sliding ahead and crawling up the window to blur my face. The lock clicked, and then Sandy had pulled me inside, his heavy face intent and concerned.

"What the devil are you doing here, Larry?" he snapped, and thrust me toward the fountain. "Get out of sight," he finished. "Police were everywhere not an hour ago."

I ducked behind the fountain, squatting on my heels, not knowing whether safety was here or not.

"I need help, Sandy," I said. "I swear to you I haven't done anything."

Sandy slid onto his stool again, swinging his great head for one last look at the door, then bending it as though working on the book. His voice was even and unhurried.

"I'm your friend, Larry," he said, "but that doesn't mean you can put me on the spot like this. The cops say you killed some man named Adams, and Mary Weisman said you tried to attack her just outside. What the hell's got into you?"

I caught my breath. "Look, Sandy," I said, "I was framed for that murder. I——"

"Oh, sure," Sandy said skeptically. "Somebody else worked on Adams' throat with your knife, somebody else was chased away from Mary Weisman by a cop shooting a gun. Oh, sure, I believe that."

"It's the truth, I swear it!" I said. "You have got to believe me!"

Sandy shook his head. "You go to the police, Larry," he advised.

"No!" I could see the ice pick on the low shelf, and I shivered, realizing the thoughts which ran about my brain. You have got to help me, Sandy."

Sandy doodled with his pencil on the open pages. His face was hard, his eyes swinging toward me as though trying to judge me and my actions.

"What can I do?" he asked. "Lord, Larry, I'm just a fellow who runs a confectionery stand."

"I've got a clue," I said. "I don't know what it means exactly, but I've got a clue."

"To what?" Sandy's eyes were suddenly intent.

"To who killed Adams, and maybe to who killed Billy." I dug in my pocket and laid the fingernail tip on the account book, sliding my hand into sight, dropping the nail, then crouching back.

He frowned at the nail, touching it with a pencil tip. "What the devil is this?" he asked. "It looks like part of a fingernail."

"It is," I said. "I picked it off Adams' body; it came from the killer."

"No!" Sandy said in disbelief.

He picked the tip up between thumb and forefinger, holding it into the light. It looked strangely small and frail, held as it was on the tips of his huge fingers. His eyes wandered from the nail to me, and then he laid the tip upon the fountain.

"What does that prove?" he asked.

"It proves a lot," I said. "The police are smart; they can tie that nail up with the killer. The police lab works wonders; and once the police have a lead, they'll knock a confession out of the person who lost that nail."

Sandy shrugged. "It makes sense," he admitted. "But you can't just go looking at everybody's hands; too many people live in this town."

"Not too many," I said, and my throat was tight. "Two, just two."

"Yeah!" Sandy lit a cigarette, the smoke roiling oilily toward the ceiling.

"Mary Weisman and Mr. Dean, the school principal."

SANDY blew smoke. "You're crazy kid," he said scornfully. "Mary Weisman is a fine girl; she'd no more walk into Adams'

apartment and kill him than she'd fly." He scowled. "Anyway, if I remember right, she was jerking sodas for me about the time Adams was killed."

I swallowed, not whipped yet, saving the best for last. "Then it's Mr. Dean," I said. "Listen. I went by his house and talked to his wife. She said he'd smashed his hand in the car door, almost losing a finger tip." I came upright. "You hear me, Sandy, I said he smashed his hand."

"I hear you," Sandy said, unmoved. "So he smashed his hand; so I lopped off two fingers. So who's the killer, him or me?"

"Don't be stupid," I said. "You couldn't have killed Billy or Adams, not with but one hand. But Mr. Dean could have—and he could have smashed his hand to cover up the loss of the nail."

SANDY'S eyes lighted, and he swung his head to face me. "You might have something there, Larry," he said. "But how you going to prove anything. The cops aren't going to listen to you."

I smashed my fist on the fountain, anger blinding me. I didn't notice Sandy's false hand there, didn't realize I had slammed it with my fist, until I felt the squirming rubber and heard Sandy's startled squawk.

"Hell, I'm sorry," I said.

"Forget it," he said, and rubbed the back of the dead hand. "Forget it." His voice grew hard. "And get down out of sight!"

I squatted again.

"What'll I do, Sandy?" I asked. "Like you say, I can't just go to the cops."

"Why should Dean kill either Billy or Adams?"

I told him why; I piled the words of reasoning one on the other until doubt began to fade from Sandy's face. He crushed out the cigarette, then ran his broad palm over his shiny bald spot.

"It makes sense, the way you figure it," he admitted. "But I'm no cop." He shrugged. "Anyway, what can we do?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

"We could talk to Dean. He'd deny everything of course." He snapped the fingers of his good hand. "Maybe this might work," he finished. "If we could get something with his fingerprints on it, I could take it to the cops for checking with the prints from Billy's throat." He shrugged.

"But where'd we get anything with his prints?"

"The school," I said in sudden excitement. "He has a lavatory in his office. There should be a glass, a drinking glass, there."

Sandy smiled. "That's it," he said in growing conviction. "All we have to do is get something like a glass from his office." He turned his head to study the front window. "Look, you sneak out the back," he finished, "and meet me by the gym door. I'll close up in the regular way and meet you in about five minutes. Okay?"

"Okay!" I agreed, and pocketed the slim bit of bloody fingernail again. Then I went into the back room and out through the door.

The moon was full risen now, almost on the decline. Outlines were hard and black, and the faint whisper of a breeze made me realize I was soaked with perspiration.

I went along the alley, keeping in the shadows, and when I was at the street, I hesitated momentarily, then made a break for the campus. There was no sound behind, and I went through the hedge, then walked more slowly toward the gymnasium building.

A night bird whirled by like a floating leaf, and a prowling cat stared with shining phosphorescent eyes, then fled into blackness. I was alone, and the fear in me was a solid dragging weight.

I went around the gym, remembering now how I'd found Billy less than a day before. He'd been almost where I stood now. I stepped away, hiding at the back of the piled bleacher boards.

Minutes crept by, and I was beginning to wonder if Sandy had failed me. Then I saw him coming along the side path, bulking huge, almost monstrous, in the moonlight, one arm swinging, the dead one hanging stiffly at his side. I was so grateful to him then that I almost cried from sheer relief.

I kept out of sight until he was almost up to me, then stepped from concealment. His face turned to me, and I could see that he was smiling.

"We're safe," he said. "Nobody saw us come here, unless you slipped up."

"Not me," I said hoarsely, trying to keep my voice down. "I didn't see a soul."

"Good!" He swung toward the path

which led to the main building, then paused. "You'd better let me keep that nail evidence," he said as an afterthought. "If anything happens to you or it, the evidence will be safe with me."

"Sure," I said, and reached into my pocket. Sandy reached for it, and suddenly I was holding my breath.

"What's the matter, kid?" Sandy asked.

I licked my lips. I was thinking then, not with the blind panic I'd had before, but with a line of logic I couldn't deny.

"Your hand," I said. "You reached out with your rubber hand."

Sandy laughed, but the sound was strained and harsh. "Hell, I'm always doing that," he said. "Force of habit, I guess. After all, the arm's only phony to my elbow."

"But you *reached!*" I said.

Sandy bent his head. "So I reached," he said. "So what?"

"So you told me you lost that hand thirty years ago. You couldn't carry the reaching habit for so long a time."

Sandy was silent. Then he spat, laughing softly. "For God's sake, Larry, stop talking nonsense. So what if I did reach out from habit."

"You can't reach out with dead hands; they don't feel, they can't grasp—they're dead."

"But——"

I was remembering something else, many things, and I was going back step by slow step.

"You knew Billy had fingerprints on his throat," I said. "You knew Adams had an apartment and that his throat was cut. You never asked me why I went to see Adams." My voice dropped. "You knew those things, Sandy!"

"All right, so I knew." Sandy was coming in, big and bulking in the moonlight. His face was clear, like chiselled stone now, eyes watching me as I moved back.

"How'd you know?"

"The cops told me."

"No, they——" I was remembering something else. You heard Mary call me, Sandy," I said. "I heard kids' voices and the juke box over the phone. You knew I was going to Adams' apartment."

"You're crazy, kid," Sandy said, and there was no smile in his face or voice now.

"You killed them, Sandy," I said, and I looked at his dead hand. "I don't know how, but you did." I was almost at the building wall now, trapped between boards and wall, Sandy at the entrance of the space. "You can't get away with it, Sandy." I was almost whispering. "The nail tip will burn you."

I SAW it then. I saw it coming, and I knew then what Billy must have felt just before he died. I knew now how I'd planned a rendezvous with murder for myself.

"You're smart, kid, too smart."

Sweat was running down my face.

"Don't do it, Sandy," I said, and my hands went back, searching, seeking something I could use as a weapon.

He stripped away his coat as I watched, then rolled up the sleeve on his dead arm. There was no sound except the whistle of my breathing. His legs were wide planted, braced, and I knew I could never get by his great body.

"Too smart," Sandy whispered. "Too smart like Billy was. He caught Adams talking to me out here. He was boogered up on reefers. Adams had cheated him, and he got brave and thought he could blackmail me out of reefers whenever he wanted them."

"You backed Adams!" I said.

"Hell, yes!" Sandy's face was shiny. "I backed him. I made dough, good dough, out of you snotty-faced kids. But Billy got too smart. He followed Adams and then he braced me. I broke his neck."

I was watching the dead hand. It was huge, like the other, and now it was lifting on its elbow hinge, moving with an uncanny life.

"I killed Adams, too," Sandy said thinly. "One runner I had, just one, and I had a hold on him he couldn't break. I could have sent him to prison for life. Then he got smart."

"He figured things out and came up with an answer. I was it, I was tagged, and I didn't like it. But I didn't know his hideout; I found it out only when Mary Weisman called you. I left the store and barely beat you to Adams' place. I knocked him out, then let you in. After that, it was easy. I knocked him off and left you for the fall guy. I——"

"You yelped," I said. "When I hit that phony hand, you yelped."

"Yeah!" Sandy said, and a dry chuckle came. "You hurt me."

"Hurt that——" I broke off, rigid with further shock.

HE TOOK the hand and forearm off like a glove. He stripped it away, and when I saw the monstrous thing which was his right arm I was almost ill.

It was dainty, feminine, childlike. It was horrible by contrast with the rest of him. And the fingers moved and writhed, stretching, freed of their rubbery prison.

"It's a hand, kid," Sandy said bitterly. "It's part of me, a stinking child's hand on a man's body. It's always been there; it quit growing when I was a kid. But it's strong, kid, believe that, it's strong." His voice lifted. "There's a nail missing, kid, that nail you've got. Give it to me, kid."

I screamed then and tried to get by. I threw myself forward as though I was running interference, and Sandy was a brick wall I couldn't pass. He threw me back with casual ease, and I fell against the boards, half upright.

"We'll wind it up here, kid," Sandy said then, moving in. "I'll finish it here, and then I'll take a trip for a couple of months. I know a Doc who'll take the arm and hand off." He curled the fingers of the child's hand. "I won't miss it, not at all."

I plunged at him, saying nothing now, battering with my fists to get by. I didn't make it. He caught me with his good hand, the great hand, and the fingers clamped on my shoulder like a vise.

I went down, tripped by his leg. Then he was atop me, and I was remembering that this was the way Billy had died.

The fingers came then, tiny perfect fingers, endowed with a vicious blind hatred against my life. They reached for me, their owner bending forward. And then they were on my throat, crushing, squeezing, and agony raced like liquid fire into my brain.

"Nosy!" Sandy whispered viciously.

I felt the light; I didn't see it, I felt it like a blow. Voices hammered at me; and then I was free, Sandy lifting to turn and run, his voice like a bellow of abysmal hate.

Then a gun made racketing noises in

the night. A man screamed, and then there was no sound.

I gasped for breath, gasped and felt the tearing of air through my throat. Hands caught at me, lifting me into a sitting position.

"Easy, son, you'll be all right," a quiet voice said, and I saw then that the man was Lieutenant Oliver.

"He killed 'em," I gasped. "Get Sandy."

"We got him," Lieutenant Oliver said; and when I followed the line of his gaze I saw Sandy's body.

I saw the hands, then, too, three of them. Two were of the same size, but one was detached and deflated like a cotton wadded glove.

And the third was a tiny childlike thing, fingers still clenched in futile murder rage.

Then the night tilted and dropped me into its depths, whirling and whirling, and there was nothingness.

THERE was light and warmth, and faces were beginning to lose their grimness. Lieutenant Oliver was talking, and his voice was quiet and restrained.

"We figured you could turn up something, Larry," he was saying. "You had your own gang, and we knew they'd talk, and maybe you'd lead us to the man who sold the reefers. We had a tail on you, but you lost him outside Adams' apartment, when you escaped down the fire escape."

I swallowed, remembering that terror which had been mine.

"We didn't suspect Sandy of anything, except maybe being the mastermind behind the reefer peddling," Lieutenant Oliver went on. "Our man saw him lose two fingertips, and that convinced us Sandy couldn't have killed Billy."

"I told you Jennis Brown had confessed, thinking you'd be spurred to greater action in running down the reefer peddler. But after Adams was killed, we lost track of you for a time. Then you appeared at Sandy's and talked to Mary Weisman. You thought she'd killed Adams and tried to force a confession. One of my men stationed there interfered and you ran again. Next you appeared at Mr. Dean's home, and Mrs. Dean called us after you had gone. We didn't find you again until you reap-

peared at Sandy's. I had cops everywhere in the neighborhood then.

"We let you talk, thinking maybe you and Sandy were working together. When you sneaked out the rear, a detective followed you. Then when Sandy left the store, two detectives and myself followed him. We found that Sandy was going toward the school, and we saw you meet. We crept around the building, covered by the stacks of boards, and heard your final talk. After that, he attacked you, and we had to shoot."

I rubbed my throat, grinning wryly. "You 'most came too late," I said.

Lieutenant Oliver nodded. He was all in

blue this time, suit and tie and shirt and socks, and even with shoes of darkest blue.

"I had to wait, you understand," he said. "I had to hear what was said."

"I understand," I admitted.

"Good!" Lieutenant Oliver smiled. "I'll send you home in a squad car. Tomorrow, there will be a few more questions."

I looked around at the cops, and there was sympathy and understanding in their faces. I cried then, cried like a kid; and after that I was going home, and the fear was gone with Sandy's life.

"Hurry," I said to the squad car driver, and ahead were the lights of home.



All in the next **SHORT STORIES**



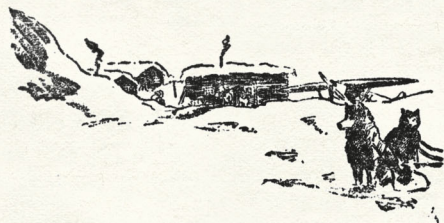
One way to break up a party is to have
the last dance led by a dead man!



"Killers on the Make"

A novelette of that Cajan lawman
of sorts—Henry Pou

by **NEIL MARTIN**



"The Jumping Toad" **H. S. M. KEMP**

"Scare the guy; get him worried," said
the Corporal of the Mounted. "We want
the toad to jump our way—when he
does jump."

"The Blind Alley"

WILLIAM L. ROHDE

ALSO

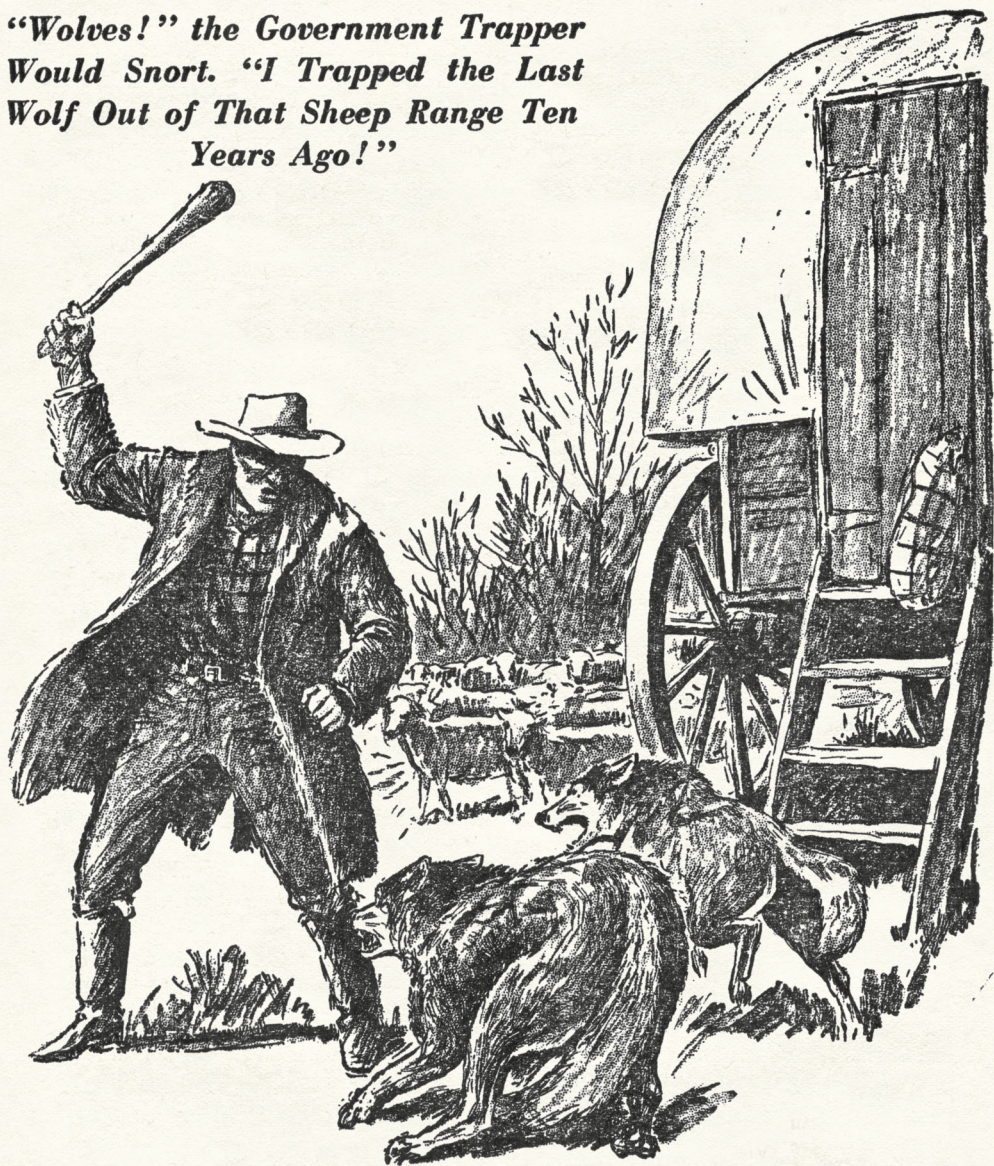
WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

DAY KEENE

CLAY PERRY

GORDON RAY YOUNG

*"Wolves!" the Government Trapper
Would Snort. "I Trapped the Last
Wolf Out of That Sheep Range Ten
Years Ago!"*



THE WOLVES

By ROSALIE BODRERO

THE high country was clear and cold on the morning in late June that Abel Purdy first saw the two wolves. On the slopes, the scrub juniper was coming along strong and green, but snowbanks still lay like damp white blankets in the gullies beyond reach of the sun.

Sitting on a boulder where he could look down on his sheep cropping the blue-stem in the valley, Abel listened to the murmur of water seeping down from the melting snow above. There were eight hundred sheep in the band, Merino drop ewes with their six-week-old lambs, good do-ers in the mountains provided they were kept below the line

of retreating snow. He had timed his coming right, Abel was thinking. There was standing feed on the southern slopes, and so little chill to the wind feeling its way down from the towering granite spires, that he laid off his goatskin greatcoat and stood erect to let the sun warm his back.

It was as he stood up that he saw the wolves. Only a hundred feet down the ridge, they looked like two grayish dogs, a big one with its nose raised to the breeze, and a smaller one, the female, sitting on her haunches with her tongue hanging out. Even as he watched, the female rose and trotted out of sight. In the next instant the male followed, and the ridge was again as devoid of life as if the two wolves had never existed.

Although he had driven sheep in the high mountains for five summers, never before had Abel Purdy seen a wolf at such close range. What a story to tell Suzy, his wife, back at the sheep wagon down in the timber. He grinned. And what a joke to tell on the government trapper when they got back to the settlement three months from now. The trapper was a little hot-tempered man, with a sense of his own importance.

"Kingdom Come!" he'd snort. "I trapped the last wolf out of that sheep range ten years ago."

Abel would shrug. "Think I'd mistake a coyote for a wolf?"

And because Abel was known as an observant young man who minded the truth, people would nod knowingly. Then someone would be sure to ask whether the trapper really earned his pay, or did he hole up in some snug cabin during the spring?

Now if only he hadn't fallen and smashed his rifle beyond repair a few days back, he'd have shot the wolves for the bounty. He pictured himself walking into the courthouse and slapping those two scalps down. There'd be a flurry of looking into dusty books for a law passed in his father's time, and a Stock Association reward nobody had taken the trouble to write off the records. The gray-skinned clerk with his quill pen and paper cuffs would come down from his high stool to squint fearfully at the woolly bits of hide with their stiff ears and sightless eyeholes. But in the end, the commissioner would snap shut his book, look up over his gold-rimmed spectacles and nod, and Abel

would walk out with the money. Enough, maybe, to buy a locket for Suzy, and a mouth organ for himself. Abel could see it all as plain as day. If only he hadn't busted his rifle.

He sat down on a rock and yawned, wishing the day would end so he could get back to his wagon and his wife.

THE barking of his dog brought him to his feet, and he ran down the slope a few yards, startled. The sheep were everything he owned in the world, but it was the dog he looked for, for the dog was his right hand. Below, where young alders marked the watercourse, a knot of sheep was milling, and the dog was heading for them. But a gray form streaked from the alders and the sheep scattered, breaking for the safety of the main flock. All but one. The wolf took that one in mid-stride, crashing into its shoulder and laying open its throat.

Abel was yelling now, leaping down the slope, the iron hobs in the soles of his hand-cobbled brogans biting into the damp turf. But the dog got there first. The wolf reared up from its kill, chopped once at the dog, whirled away from Abel's yells and shot back into the thickets. The dog yelped and sat down to lick its flank.

There was nothing Abel could do for the sheep. He caught the dog and examined the slash. Deep, he reflected, but clean. The leg would be stiff for a day or two.

"Good dog, Ring," he said and rubbed its ears. "You chased him off, didn't you, boy?"

Turning to the carcass of the sheep, he realized he was trembling. Partly with anger, partly with exertion. But also, he was aware, a little from apprehension. For he had found out something. Seen a hundred yards down the ridge, the wolf had appeared the size of a large coyote, its mate small as a fox. But close at hand the wolf turned out to be twice the size of the dog. The dog weighed forty-five pounds. Abel whistled. The wolf might go almost ninety pounds.

He'd watch more carefully from now on, he decided, always near enough so that if the wolves returned and the dog closed with them, he could rush in before the wolf tore loose. And he needed a stout club.

After he's drawn the sheep and hung its carcass in the shade to cool out, Abel whittled a billet of spruce with a knot at one end.

He encouraged the dog with whistles and motions of his arm to circle the band and keep it out in the open. But as the day wore on and the sheep cropped and played and baa-ed among the half-buried rocks scattered across the valley, he began to feel that he'd allowed himself to be overly concerned. Remembering the terrific burst of speed the wolf had called up when man approached, he chuckled, thinking by now the wolves were miles away, tongues out and tails tucked up between their legs. As the afternoon sun began to sink behind the mountains, he worked the band down the valley to the clearing near the wagon.

There was still light among the trees, enough so Abel could see his wife waiting beside the trail in her long flowered dress with its clinging bodice, her bonnet slung by the ribbons from her hands. At sight of the pliant, childish grace of her, any apprehension he had felt during the day dropped like an unwelcome burden from his shoulders.

"I saw something while you were away, Abel," she called out. And at the sound of her voice, he smiled. He'd been afraid that a girl of seventeen would be timid in the loneliness of the high mountains. They'd only been married a few weeks. But perhaps because she put her trust in his young strength, it had been like a holiday for her. Each evening when he returned with the sheep, she'd tell him of something strange and surprisingly different that she'd seen.

There had been her first sight of the friendly jays, those blue camp robbers that boldly stole any bits of food she left uncovered. Another time she'd discovered a family of chipmonks living in a cairn of rocks nearby. Striped mice, she'd described them. And one day she had gathered an apron full of the delicately pale and deadly poisonous Destroying Angel mushrooms.

"Tired of me already, Suzy?" he'd joked as he threw them out. "Tomorrow I'll show you where to get all the Boletus we can eat. They don't look as appetizing, but we'll live longer."

Yes, every day there was something new and wonderful for his new and wonderful wife to describe to him. He came up to her now and put his arm around her shoulders, laughing at the way she tried to match his long strides.

"Tell me what you saw today, Suzy." He spoke to her as he might to a child, for though there was only four years' difference in their ages, he knew himself to be vastly older in experience.

"I saw two wolves." She looked up at him gravely, as though wondering if he would doubt her. "I really did, Abel. I was carrying water and they startled me. I—I ran, Abel. They followed right to the edge of the clearing and stayed there, watching me. They only trotted off when they heard you coming."

HE FELT himself stiffening, and he moved her arm from around his waist, as though he was afraid she might feel the small chills chasing up his spine.

"I wouldn't have been afraid, Abel," she said, stoutly, "but you were so far away."

There'd be other times, he was thinking, when he'd be so far away. Not that there was any danger for her, he assured himself. Even in winter, he'd heard the old-timers say, when the wolves were starving and running in packs, they hadn't the courage to attack man. Of course, there were other stories—almost worn out in the telling—of somebody who had followed a trail in the snow, coming at last to the scattered duffel, the snowshoes with webbing chewed away, the scuffed trampled place where the man-tracks abruptly were no more. It made good telling whenever two or three toothless old liars gathered around a stove to reminisce. But it didn't alter the fact, he told himself now, that wolves didn't attack man.

They'd only followed her because she had run.

Sitting on their haunches in the open at the edge of the clearing, they had not been afraid. Of him they were afraid. But the girl was in the category of small things that ran while wolves pursued.

He reached for her hand. "What have you got for supper, Suzy?" he asked. And at his matter-of-fact question, he saw concern drop from her face.

When he had finished his meal, Abel pushed the plate away and leaned back in the bunk. It was snug in the wagon, built like a cabin on four wheels, with a tarpaulin roof stretched over the bows. The pot-bellied stove glowed comfortably at one end of the wagon, and the tallow candle threw

soft light on the girl's hair as she fed scraps to the dogs.

"Now what happened to you, Ring?" she asked, watching the dog favor his injured leg.

Abel was thankful that the light was too poor for her to see. For he didn't want to tell her what had happened to the sheep and the dog. Above all else, he was thinking, he wanted to keep Suzy as she was, happy and unafraid, placing her trust in his strength.

Here, in the wagon, was everything he'd ever dreamed of, he reflected. The girl he loved, a dog that anticipated his every command, his own band of sheep whose subdued babble drifted in like the far-off mutter of wind in the tree-tops. He had been unbearably happy.

But tonight he was tight with uncertainty.

THE wolves had killed today, and they would kill again. He could see his band shrinking by ones and twos. The ewes, fidgety with their lambs, would drop off their feed. By summer's end, the wolves could cost him his whole year's work.

The dog scratched at the door and Suzy leaned over and let him out into the night. Quietly she gathered the dishes and rinsed them in the basin bubbling on the stove. Watching how her lips were compressed, he realized that she was again preoccupied with the wolves. It was as though the whole friendly world she had built up for herself these last weeks in the mountains, was shattering around her. She'd be terrified every minute he was away.

He'd stay close to the wagon for a few days, he decided then. There was still some feed at the edge of the timber, and she'd get over fright, knowing he was close at hand. Anyway, he assured himself, when the wolves found out that he was around the flock, that the dog was always on guard, they'd drift away. They might even be gone now.

It would be comforting to Suzy now to know that he'd be near tomorrow, and he turned toward her. But before he could speak he heard the screaming of his dog. For a moment he stared into his wife's wide questioning eyes. Then he swung out of the wagon and snatched up his club.

There had been a fire burning in the center of the clearing near the wagon.

By its flicker, he made out the eyes of the sheep huddled in tight groups, stamping timidly, jerking their heads from side to side as they peered into the darkness. He found the dog a few yards beyond the fire. What was left, for he had to look twice to make sure it was the dog. He retched as he turned back to the wagon and picked up a spade where it leaned against a wheel. He was shoveling dirt into the hole when he heard the wolf's triumphant bellow roll down on the cold air through the timber, setting the short hairs on Abel's neck to bristling.

Suzy was sitting on the bunk as he climbed back into the wagon. She raised her face from her hands, her lips moving wordlessly. Then, "Was it Ring?" she asked faintly.

He put his arm around her, drawing her close as she smothered her sobs against his chest.

"But they're gone now, Suzy. The wolves have gone. They're way off up the valley."

"Poor Ring," she whispered. Then she looked up. "Today, when I was alone, Abel, the wolves ran right alongside me—"

Tomorrow, he assured her, he'd fetch up the horses and they'd go down to the settlement. She'd drive the wagon while he herded the sheep. He'd get another dog and a gun, and when they returned, he'd hunt the wolves down and shoot them in their tracks.

"Why, in three days," he said confidently, "we'll be down in the farm lands." He knew all the short cuts of the trail. He knew them well.

But he didn't know the wolves.

WHEN the dog was dead, the two wolves had loped up the canyon. Abel was wrong when he guessed the weight of the wolf at ninety pounds. The male wolf was seven years old and he weighed a hundred and eight pounds. Where he set his forepaw down in the damp mold, he left a print broad as the palm of a man's hand. He ran lightly, even up the slope, for he was in his prime and rawhide lean. He held his head low, the two black spots over his eyes giving him a perpetually puzzled look. The wolf had come a long way from the remote valley where he had been driven, years before, by the guns and traps of stockmen. Recently he had had to leave there, he and the barren female, because the deer had been cleaned

out by a plague. And so he had come here. And there was food here in plenty, of a kind the female had never seen before, for she had been whleped in the far-off valley. They had come a long way, but the trek was ended.

The male wolf slowed to a stiff walk as he approached the place where he had killed the sheep. From the back of his neck to the root of his tail, the long hair rose as he swung his muzzle toward the carcass hanging high above. He circled warily, for he had once been caught in a trap and lost a toe pulling free. Because of the strong man taint, he shouldered the female away when she reached out to lap at the blood congealed on the ground. From his cub days, he remembered the burning agony of a poorly made strychnine-suet pellet that he had swallowed and thrown up only just in time. Since then, he ate only when he killed.

The sweet smell of the sheep's blood made the male wolf's stomach gurgle, and after he had scratched dirt on the wet ground where the sheep had been slaughtered, he loped downhill again toward the wagon.

By the moon's glow, he saw three ewes standing some distance away from the main band. The wolf slipped through the grass almost on his belly until he had them cut off. A vagrant breeze carried his scent to the ewes, their heads snapped up, and one stamped and ran a little distance from the wagon. The other two followed.

The wolf closed in again, cautious, his ears twitching as he listened for a sound from the wagon. Again the sheep moved off. In five minutes they were two hundred yards from the wagon. The wolf stood up boldly then. For a moment the ewes held their ground. Then they whirled, stupified with fear, and with tiny scampering of hooves fled up the dark recesses of the canyon. The wolf followed at an easy trot.

The bitch wolf had sat down in the clearing to watch her mate drive off the three ewes. His actions, puzzling at first, for she couldn't understand why he didn't kill here where they had killed the dog, finally became uninteresting. For there was a compelling fragrance coming from somewhere. A thirst, but not for water—a hunger, but not for food—was tormenting her, and something looped over a wire bore the essence of it. It lay like black ribbons just out

of reach as she stood on her hind legs and drooled at the odor of it. It was the harness, draped over a wire beyond reach of porcupines. Salt was what she craved, and the leather was saturated with the dried sweat of the horses.

Gathering herself, she leaped lightly and pulled it down. Then she stretched out her tongue and licked greedily. In fifteen minutes the harness was slick and clean. Lying down, she opened her jaws, slid the leather tugs well between her teeth and bit down. Rich juices ran back into her throat. Again and again she closed her mighty back teeth on the traces. When she arose, the harness lay in useless lengths.

She stretched herself luxuriantly then, walked under the wagon and lifted her nose to the floor boards to sniff the warm smell of the woman sleeping in the bunk a few inches above. The crest riffled excitedly on her shoulders remembering the way the woman had run down the path before her earlier in the day. She smelled out the place where the dog had died, scratched once indifferently, and set off up the canyon to find her mate.

THE discovery of the harness chewed to bits the next morning seemed almost too monstrously cunning to Abel. Staring at the shredded pieces in his hand, he decided Suzy mustn't know. Not until he got the horses down from the pasture. He'd tell her then. She could ride one horse, and he the other. They'd leave the wagon here until they returned.

Ready to fetch the horses, he walked to the wagon. "Suzy, you stay right by the wagon," he said seriously. "If you even hear them, get inside and bar the door."

"You be careful too, Abel. If they came after you—" She covered her mouth with the back of her hand, appalled at her own thoughts.

"I just wish they would." He shook the club. "Once let me get in reach with this—"

It was two miles to the box canyon whose open end he had fenced for a pasture. And suddenly he became apprehensive for the safety of his horses. After all, the wolves had killed a sheep in broad daylight. They'd killed his dog right outside the wagon and chewed up the harness only a few yards from where he'd been sleeping. Uncon-

sciously he began walking faster, until he vaulted over a log that lay across his path, and landed almost on top of a half-devoured carcass of an ewe. In the stream bed below, he saw the sodden bodies of two more sheep. For a moment he stared incredibly, the club gripped in his hand, shivering as though a chill wind was blowing down the canyon. For it was evident that while the wolves had killed and eaten one sheep, they had killed the other two for sport.

Then he began to run up the trail, blindly and stumbling with impatience, cursing himself for his simple-mindedness in leaving the horses so far from the wagon. He was winded to a staggering shuffle as he came to the bars of the fence. A few yards beyond, he saw his horses swing their heads up from the belly-deep grass. Thank God, he thought, and leaned heavily against the gate.

His legs were stiff as he mounted one horse and jogged back down the trail leading the other. The mountains, he thought, seemed ominously high, pressing on him, shutting him in like the walls of a cage. And he knew that panic was taking hold of him. For he was trying not to listen to an insistent voice in the back of his mind that kept repeating the story of the place in the trampled snow where the man tracks ended. And there was another story, too. The one about Angus McPhail's daughter. But then, she'd been only a child, lost and alone when the wolves ran her down. Wolves didn't attack humans, he repeated, parrotwise. Of course, if they came on a child alone—Angus McPhail's daughter, the voice told him, had been twelve years old. And big for her age. As big as, as big as—Suzy.

He was drubbing his heels against the fat ribs of the horse, hurrying it into a grunting trot, still a quarter of a mile from the clearing, when he heard the faint scream rise thinly on the mountain air.

For a shocked moment his mind was unable to function. Then one picture stood out boldly in his mind. A loud choking cry welled from his throat as he flailed the horse with the club. "Let me be in time," he played. "Dear God, let me be in time."

Over the thudding of the horse's hooves; he heard the sharp rendering of dry wood as he swept within sight of the wagon. The wagon with the wolves worrying something by the door. He threw himself from the

horse and ran, aware only of the terrible urge to kill with the upraised club.

So furiously intent were the wolves at their work that he was almost upon them before they would let themselves be distracted. He grunted as he swung at the male wolf, but it was already leaping aside and the club beat ineffectually against the wagon and caromed off against the ribs of the female. She yelped and drew back snarling, while the male slid away in a gliding trot to the edge of the brush.

Abel forced himself to look down and relief rose and choked in his throat. For whatever he had imagined the wolves were rending, it was the mattress from the bunk, stuffed from within into a hole that had been ripped in the panel of the door. For a moment he steadied himself against the wagon. Then he hammered with his fist.

"Suzy! Answer me, Suzy!"

He heard the bar being pushed free, and he swung open the door. In the dim light, he saw his wife sitting slumped on the floor, leaning back against the wall for support. He was stunned at the marks that fear and horror had graven on her face. She stared for a moment, as though only half sure he was with her.

"Abel I fell, and hurt my foot. They came running, trying to cut me off from the wagon." She stopped, sobbing for breath. "They're devils from hell, Abel. They tore the hole in the door, and when I stuffed it with the mattress—" She put her hands over her face and rocked with a silent agony that terrified him more than her tears.

Closing the door, he knelt beside her and pulled her head on his chest. "It's all right now," he said thickly. "We'll go out on the horses. Right away, Suzy."

He felt her fingers dig into his forearms. "The horses?" she said. "Abel, listen!"

The drum of hooves came to his ears as he dashed open the door. The horses were lumbering across the valley, the wolves snapping at their heels like mongrels chivvy-ing a couple of milch cows. As they disappeared among the trees, Abel felt suddenly weak and puny, impotent to battle against the tireless persistence of the wolves. He turned back, avoiding her eyes, trying to hide the fear he knew must be written on his face.

Suzy was pulling off her shoe, and when

he saw the swollen ankle, he reached down and touched it gently.

"I can't walk on it, Abel," she said.

He poured water from the bucket into the basin on the stove, then opened the firebox and stirred up the coals. He'd have to think now. Intelligently. The horses were gone, and he couldn't go after them. He couldn't leave Suzy alone here. Not again. Yet he had to get her to the settlement—

The water was steaming and he dipped into it with the dishcloth and wrung it out. He could carry her to the settlement, he was thinking as he bent down and wrapped the hot cloth around her ankle. And set her down on the ground, he asked himself, if the wolves closed in? If he turned to face the male, the female would slip in behind and tear her to pieces. From somewhere, in the confusion of his thoughts, he was hearing that wolves didn't attack humans. But they were words he no longer believed. And then it came to him, almost as a minor matter, that sometime earlier, without realizing it, he had made his decision to abandon the sheep. To abandon everything but his wife. It was not difficult now to imagine that they would be lucky to get away with their lives.

He lifted Suzy from the floor and set her gently on the bunk. And as he leaned over her he saw her eyes turn toward the wall, her lips part as she listened.

"They're back," she said tonelessly.

He moved to the doorway and looked out. The female wolf was stretched out after her run, panting, her lips drawn in a monstrous grin that he wanted to smash from her muzzle. The male wolf squatted on his haunches a few yards away, looking at him with that false puzzled look caused by the twin spots over his eyes. For a long moment their eyes locked. And then Abel thought of the broken rifle. The wolves might brazen it out, just out of reach of a man with a club. But a rifle might be a different matter. Reaching behind him, he quickly picked up the rifle and threw it to his shoulder. The male wolf became just a gray blur streaking for the brush. The female sat up suddenly, but only to watch the strange and undignified departure of her mate. Pointing the rifle at her, Abel yelled. She snapped him an indifferent look, glanced again at the spot where the male had disappeared, then settling down, she stared straight at Abel.

Never saw a gun, Abel said, half aloud. Then he saw that the male had returned, watching intently from the brush, his yellow eyes turning from the female, to the man with the gun. For a few moments he watched, then stepped boldly back into the clearing, bristled the hackles on his neck and threw himself down in the dust.

As Abel set the gun back in the corner he felt Suzy, standing on one foot, press against him to look out.

"They won't go away now, will they?" she asked. And then, in a small, matter-of-fact voice. "It's me they want, Abel. They're afraid of you, but not of me." Her voice dropped to a mere whisper. "It's me they want," she repeated.

EVEN as she spoke, the male wolf sauntered over to the sheep band. He stood there now, looking them over, as though bored with inactivity. Bored, while waiting for the woman in her flowered dress and poke bonnet. That was the woman as far as the wolves were concerned. Abel was thinking. The man was the greatcoat and the club. Suzy was right, they were still afraid of him. But the woman in her dress and bonnet—

He moved back, closing the door. "Suzy," he whispered, as though fearful the wolves could hear his words, "what's the biggest dress you've got?"

"My red one." She was looking at him curiously.

"Not the red one. One like—Suzy, take off the one you've got on. Quickly. And split it up the back."

Suzy knew what he meant now. And the activity of preparing for his plan, the plan itself, however doubtful, was bringing them confidence. Yet he could see the fear in her eyes as she ripped the sleeves to go over his arms.

The dress covered him, at least in front, and the rip up the back gave his shoulders freedom. Then reaching under the bunk, he pulled out his brush knife.

"I wanted the club before because it had a longer reach. But if I can get close to them—" He drew his thumb along the chopping edge, then tested the point of the hook that jutted out from the back of the blade. "Boned sharp as an axe. Now if I can get close—"

"Abel!" Suzy said. "Oh, Abel, be careful!"

He smiled down at her, tying the strings of her bonnet under his chin, then hid the knife in the folds of the skirt.

"Stay inside, Suzy," he said. "And bar the door."

As Abel stepped out of the wagon, the female wolf stood up and cocked her ears. Her head twisted sideways, she moved forward a doubtful step, then pattered in a wide arc to catch the wind and disappearing behind the wagon. The male was beyond the smouldering fire, but as Abel stood motionless, he lowered his head, walked stiffly around the fire to within a few yards of Abel, then sat back on his haunches and stared unblinkingly. For a moment nothing happened, a moment so long that Abel began to doubt that his disguise was effective. It was time, he was thinking, for the female to appear on the other side of the wagon.

At that moment the male's eyes flicked down to the level of Abel's legs, and with the movement Abel knew that the female hadn't gone around the wagon. She was under it. He leaped away, and as he did the male rose and snarled at the movement toward him. Abel's fingers gripped the knife in the folds of the skirt, waiting for the wolf's charge. Instead, the wolf backed, and Abel's heart sank, for the wolf was keeping out of reach. Again Abel approached, and again the wolf backed, one step after another. Then he put his paw down squarely in the smoldering coals.

He sprang immediately and Abel slashed out with the knife, the wolf twisting away. His teeth chopped as he passed, and Abel could feel the fire of them along his arm. But it was overshadowed by the fact that now he had the wolf cornered against the fire. The wolf rose again, and at thought of the torture of his wife had undergone, Abel brought the knife down with all his strength between the flattened ears. The wolf crumpled, and Abel turned, ready for its mate.

But the female was at the wagon, ten feet away, gathering herself to spring. While above her, standing in the partially open doorway, ignoring his warning to stay inside, was Suzy. Raising the knife, Abel reached the doorway in time to catch the female in mid-spring. She thrashed to the

ground, screaming as the dog had screamed, until Abel lifted the knife and struck again.

He was trembling as Suzy's voice reached him, her words running together in her urgency to explain.

"I had to open the door, Abel. I had to—to keep her here, while you killed him."

Dropping the knife, he jerked the bonnet from his head and sank to the step of the wagon.

The clearing was suddenly still, the dust settling to the ground. It was all over, Abel reflected. Except that there was more than fatigue weighing him down. And he was only beginning to comprehend the full measure of it. For after what Suzy had been through, it was too late to expect her to come back here again when he returned from the settlement. And already he was starting to feel the ache of loneliness ahead. Even in death, he thought wearily, the wolves had won a victory, had taken Suzy from him.

Numbly he watched her ease down in the doorway beside him and brush back the hair from her face. And though her hand, reaching out for his, was trembling, her voice was steady, and very sweet.

"I'll have to buy some cloth when we get to the settlement," she was saying. "To patch the mattress. I'll patch it up real good, Abel. Good as new," she continued stoutly. "Soon as we get back—"

He looked at her questioningly. But Suzy had already turned and was looking through the doorway, her womanly thoughts concerned with the disorder inside.

Tightening his arm around her, Abel looked up at the towering granite spires. To his ears came the contented blatting of a sheep that had found its lamb. Then his eyes came to rest on the wolves.

What a joke on the government trapper, he thought.

"Kingdom Come!" the hot-tempered little man would snort. "I trapped the last wolf out of that sheep range ten years ago."

And only then would Abel reach inside his greatcoat, bring out the two scalp, and slap them down on the counter.

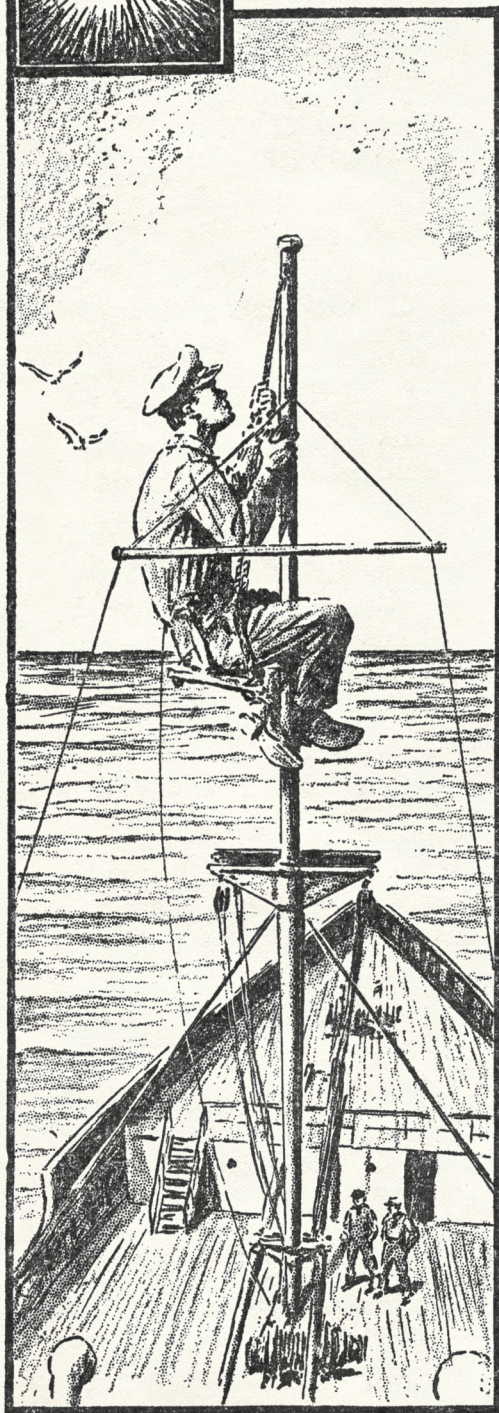
"Call those coyotes?" he'd ask.

Abel smiled. The bounty, he was thinking, would pay for a new gun and a dog. With enough left over, maybe, to buy a locket for Suzy, and a mouth organ for himself.



REWARD OF KNOWLEDGE

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER



It Might Have Seemed a Trick Question in Seamanship, but the Presiding Officer Knew That There Was an Answer All Right

"**T**HAT was a stinking question you asked young Henry, Dad."

Peter Clavering sat upright in his chair as he made the declaration, stared with stern accusation at his father. Captain Clavering grinned back at his son. He settled more comfortably into his own overstuffed chesterfield, took a meditative pull at his pipe, reached for a glass of whiskey at his elbow. He could afford to be at his ease. For him the days of studying, of passing examinations, were long since past. Now he was the examiner, and youths like his son came before him in fear and trembling. He tried to help them over the worst stiles. He was a little sorry about Henry Watkins—still, the lad hadn't known his stuff, and that was all there was to it.

"It was a stinking question."

"Was it? It was quite fair. I suppose that Henry thought that because he served his time with you, because he's running around with Pat here, that I was going to let him off lightly."

"I only wish you had, Father," put in the girl. "Now he's got to do this six months' sea service you gave him, and it'll be *ages* before we can be married."

"When I was a junior officer," replied the old man heavily, "it just wasn't done to get spliced before you had your Master's ticket. A Second Mate's ticket wasn't regarded as sufficient qualification for the job. However, if he comes up before me again next time I'll pass him—if he knows his seamanship."

"You are a beast, Father. You should

try to remember that you were a junior officer yourself once, to forget that you're a Ministry of War Transport Examiner."

"I was remembering—" murmured the old captain, but his daughter ignored him. She wanted to know what the question was that had condemned her future husband to another half-year of possibly riotous celibacy. A woman of an old seafaring family, she had always known that the sea is the deadliest rival that a woman can have, had shuddered away from any contact with, or knowledge of, the oldest mistress of men. But now some absurd technicality had upset her plans for the future. She wanted to know what it was. She demanded of her brother, "What was this famous question, Peter?"

"It was a honey," admitted the young man with grudging admiration. "As Henry told it to me, when we were drowning his sorrows and christening my ticket last night, it was like this: He was supposed to be officer-of-the-watch of a steamship lying at anchor in a tideway. Everybody—and I mean everybody—but he had gone ashore. The fires were cold, and there was no steam. Then, for reasons best known to himself, he decided to send down the telescopic foretopmast. Alone he was supposed to do it. But how?"

The girl wrinkled her brows.

"I don't know anything about ships," she stated flatly. "I don't want to. But surely it would only mean lowering away on a rope or something. What would he want power for? He's sending it down, not heaving it up?"

"Tell her, Peter," ordered the old man. "You tell her. Captain Evans has given you your certificate and I can't fail you now. Let's hear you explain it."

PETER flushed. He cleared his throat noisily. He said, haltingly, "You see, Pat, it's like this. A telescopic topmast is so called because it fits down inside the tubular lowermast like the drawpiece of a telescope. It may be made of wood, it may be made of steel—but in either case it weighs plenty. And all this weight is held by a kind of spike, called the fid, which is pushed through matching holes in both top and lower masts. It would be impossible to drive it out unless you took the weight

of the topmast first. And there are wooden wedges knocked into the space all around the topmast where it fits inside the lowermast. They help to stop it from falling down inside, too—"

"So you have to raise it a bit to get out this—fid, and the wedges. And you'd want power on your—your— You know, those little engines you have around the deck for hoisting up cargo and stuff. But how would you raise it?"

Peter coughed again. "There's a sheave in the heel of the topmast. A sheave—a sort of pulley wheel. There's a piece of chain rove through it all the time, from forward to aft—just a short piece. The dummy heel rope. Well, you take the end of a wire mastrope aloft, make it fast to the end of this piece of chain, pull it through the sheave. Oh—and it should lead *up* through another sheave on the lowermast itself. Anyhow, you heave it through, shackle it to the other side of the mast. You knock out the wedges. You slack up your stays and backstays. Then you take the mastrope to the winch, heave just enough to take the weight of the topmast off the fid. You knock out the fid—and lower away as required."

Captain Clavering took his pipe out of his mouth.

"Good enough," he said. "You forgot your mastcoat, though. And—you used a winch."

"Yes, sir. I used a winch. And I had the bosun and the dayworkers and all the watch on deck to bear a hand. And the carpenter knocked out the wedges and the fid. And the job was done without any fuss or bother, and there wasn't any damage done and nobody got killed."

"Peter!" The examiner's tone was mildly reproving. "I stipulated that there was no power on the winches, that the officer doing the job would have to do it single-handed."

"And I say it can't be done, sir."

"It's just as well, young man, that we aren't allowed to examine our own sons. You'd get six months if I had you. What seamanship did Captain Evans ask you?"

"The usual stuff, sir. Sea anchor, towing, jury rudder—"

"All book stuff. Things that have been done, time and time again, by all kinds of people in all kinds of ways. And every one of 'em's in print. But your friend Henry, in

his hypothetical ship, *bad* power. He had all the power in the world under his feet—and he was too blind to see it.”

“I suppose, sir, that he had a cargo of uranium? That he should have made an atomic pile?”

“Yes,” went on the old man, ignoring the jibe, “power. Such an obvious source, too. And somehow we never get around to using it. None of us. But I knew one man who did.”

He knocked out his pipe into the fireplace, refilled it from his pouch. He lit it carefully. Not until it was drawing well and smoothly did he continue.

“Yes, there was one man. Hall was his name. Samuel Hall we used to call him—although I don’t think that that was his Christian name. He was a slovenly old man, very fat and lazy. He was mate of a tramp—and I remember that somebody once made the crack that he was a tramp of a mate. I will say this—the old beggar knew his job. The trouble was that he couldn’t find anybody to do it for him. He’d come down in the world, and lost interest. Master in sail he’d been, one of the crack clippers. Though you wouldn’t have believed it if you’d seen him when I was shipmates with him.

“He never went ashore. He was too mean, afraid of spending money. Still—he was willing to keep nights. That suited the Second Mate and myself—I was Third—down to the ground. We never spent a minute longer aboard than we could help. We always went ashore together, and the senior apprentice, a wild youth called Kelly used to come with us. The nights we had——”

“Father!”

“All right, Pat. I’m not going into details. But you told me to remember the dear, dead days before I was Senior Examiner of Masters and Mates, and it’s just what I am doing.

“Parker was the Second Mate. A six-footer, with red hair, he didn’t give a damn for anything or anybody. Especially for Hall, his superior officer. There was the time when Parker came back and found that Hall had been in his room and ‘borrowed’ his gold watch. What a tongue lashing he gave the old beggar! And the old mate deserved it—he was a human magpie, our Samuel, a snapper-up of considered trifles. He’d have taken the money from a baby’s money box—

provided that the baby was about five miles away being pushed along in its pram by its nurse. There was the time in Alex, when he won about fifty gallons of that really posh R. N. gray enamel—and he never used it. For all I know that paint is still in *Sabina Grove’s* forepeak—and she’s been at the bottom these many years.

“She wasn’t a bad old girl, the *Sabby*. The better class of tramp, she was, owned by Grove’s of London. She spent most of World War I loafing around the Mediterranean on Admiralty charter. A hired transport, I suppose you’d call her. It was stores here, ammunition there, and sometimes mules or horses. And she was a lucky ship. We did see a sub, once, but he must have been a panicky kind of bloke, for one round from our popgun aft sent him into a crash dive. We tried to claim we’d sunk him—but My Lords Commissioners wouldn’t play. That hurt Parker—he was gunnery officer.

“WELL, the war was over at last, and *Sabby* was in Port Said. She was bunkering there and picking up some odds and ends of government cargo, and then she was going home to be handed back to her owners. It wasn’t a long stay in port—only three or four days. And the last night in Parker and Kelly and myself were ashore together. It was a slightly quieter night than our usual—we were sailing at six the next morning.

“We finished up in some low café. I’m afraid I can’t tell you just where it was, Peter, although I could take you there. Not that you’ll be missing much if you never find it. But for the three of us—we were still young and silly—it represented the glamor of the Orient and all that kind of thing. The glamor, in this case, consisted of three bedizened hags that came and tried to sit on our knees, that lifted their skirts to give us what they fondly hoped were tantalizing glimpses of secret charms, they wanted us to buy them drinks. *You* know the racket, my boy—colored water for the ladies at champagne prices. But we weren’t playing. Our temporary girl friends were too shopworn even for three such romantics as ourselves.

“There was a piano in one corner of the room, and a Negro sailor from one of the American ships was banging out what, I believe, is now called boogie-woogie or some

such foul expression. He was good, that boy. And his playing made the air shake, so that the tobacco smoke, in its convoluted clouds, quivered. Two white Yankee seamen drifted in and tried to dance with a couple of the local *houvis* on the pocket-handkerchief-size floor. Then some Diggers wandered through the door and parked their carcasses at a table not far from ours. Our three women gave us up as hopeless and made a rush for the new arrivals. Then, no longer having to fight them off and keep their grubby little paws out of our pockets, we were able to have a look around us.

"I should say that the place was about three-quarters full—and with the usual crowd for dumps of that kind. Allied servicemen of all services and nationalities, sinister-looking Arabs sipping their coffee, greasy Levantines, the inevitable women. And, at the next table, by himself, drinking slowly a very small beer, was a type that wasn't at all uncommon in those parts of the world in those days. You must remember that this was towards the end of 1918.

"He was tall, and thin,, and had a beard. He was dressed in what had been some kind of foreign uniform—officers, by the cloth and cut—from which the epaulettes and other marks of rank had been removed. You could see the darker material where they had been. It was well-pressed and brushed, however, and the man inside it had a sort of seedy, threadbare spruceness. He looked up from his miserable drink, saw us watching him. He got up from his table, walked slowly to ours. He paused, made a sort of stiff little bow. He said, 'Pardon.' And then—'English? Officers?'

"We admitted that we were—all but Kelly, who wanted to make an argument of it. Parker told him quite nastily that he mightn't be English, but that even a senior apprentice is not a junior officer and has no right to have his letters addressed in that way. Then he asked the stranger to sit down and have a cognac with us. So we had a guest. I wasn't too pleased about it. I could see the touch coming a long way off, and had an idea that the evening would be even more expensive than it would have been had we been nice to the pretty ladies. Oh, we were all told in those days to hate and fear the wicked Bolshies and to regard the Whites as saints and Crusaders—but I

don't like being touched. As plenty of your young friends will tell you, Peter, I hate giving anything away.

"BUT the touch seemed a long time coming. The Tsarist officer seemed merely to be content with our company, our cognac. The more he drank the more morbid he got. He went on about his Natalya, how she had managed to escape to England and how he was trying to join her. Then he got up and wandered unsteadily to the piano, asked the pianist to play Two Black Eyes. That cost us a double cognac for the Negro—but he played the request item and played it well, and then ruined everything by giving us *The Internationale* as an encore. Our friend didn't know whether to fight or cry—but a fight we didn't particularly want; not with sailing time only a few hours off—so we managed to restrain him. So he cried.

"I was feeling quite sorry for the man then, was almost hoping that he would ask for something. Just a small loan to tide him over a difficult time—the usual thing. He finally got around to asking for it—a loan and a favor. The favor was that he should stow away aboard our ship. That we didn't mind granting. As long as he kept his trap shut when he was found, as long as we kept *our* yardarms clear, it was no skin off our noses. And once we were away from Port Said he'd be sure of getting to England, found or not, and no magistrate would be anything else but lenient.

"The loan—just a small loan was what he wanted. Just enough to pay his debts, the debts of a Russian, a Tsarist officer and gentleman, in Port Said. Parker, a little reluctantly, put his hand into his pocket. Would three pounds be enough?

"That hurt our friend again. It was inconceivable that a boozing companion of Grand Dukes, a confidant of Grand Duchesses, should have incurred such a trifling, an absurd debt as a measly three quid. No—it wouldn't be enough. Not nearly enough. There was Alexei, ex-Colonel of the Imperial Guard, who had fed him and clothed him all the time that he had been in Port Said. There was Sabrulous, at whose bar he had enjoyed unlimited credit for drinks. There was Ahmed, the Bengali tailor. Of course, he hadn't dreamed that English officers and gentlemen would be so

poverty stricken. He was sorry for us, and he was really grateful for our offer—but it wouldn't be nearly enough. It meant that he would have to stay and stew in Port Said, and that he wouldn't see his Natalya again for a long time, or ever—but we must understand that it would be impossible for him to leave the place without having discharged his debts. He was sorry—but that was the way it was.

"Well, we all of us carried quite a lot of Sterling around in those days. The Pound English in World War I was what the Dollar American was to be in World War II. It was good in any part of the world. It was handy stuff to have in one's pockets if one landed into any kind of scrape. And the kind of scrapes that we landed into were the kind out of which you can buy your way.

"I had fifteen pounds tucked away in the pocket of my belt. It was a lot of money in those days. In terms of entertainment, beer, what you will, it was a small fortune. I was sorry for the Russian—really sorry. But, after all, we had as good as offered him a free passage to England. If he let his absurd scruples stand in his way—well, that was his funeral.

"But our friend hadn't finished yet. Perhaps, he said, we wanted a security. Amongst officers and gentlemen it shouldn't be necessary—but the English, he had always been told, were a nation of shopkeepers. In some ways he respected them for it. It meant fair dealing on both sides. And would we come through to the men's room?

"There was no harm in that. I could see that Parker—he always had one eye to the main chance, did the Second Mate—was getting interested. Kelly got to his feet first, led the way to the Gents'. The three of us followed. We carefully shut the door after us. Kelly—who was the biggest—leaned against it. As a matter of fact somebody did try to get in shortly afterwards. We must have been popular. But what our friend showed us took our minds well away from the squalor of our surroundings, from what was going on on the other side of the door.

"He fished inside his uniform and brought out a small case, or box. It was old—looked as though it had been knocking around the world for more years than ten times our combined ages. It was lined inside with black silk or velvet or something—and in

this soft, dark nest was the biggest diamond I've ever seen. It was bigger than a pigeon's egg—I'll swear to that. It seemed to gather all the light in the place—and there wasn't much of it—to intensify it somehow, and throw it back at us. There was something a little uncanny about it, something more than a little evil. It was the baleful light thrown by a distress rocket over the foundering ship that had been the empire of the Romanoffs.

"But we can't—," said Parker at last. "We can't possibly——,"

"But you must, my friends. A security only. You are officers and gentlemen—and who can I trust if not you? In your care it is safer than in mine. And it is not my own, this stone. It belongs to my friend, Prince Boris Dougareff. The proceeds from its sale in London will help to finance the crusade of our glorious White army against the Bolshevik hordes."

"THERE was a lot more of the same kind of thing. Frankly—we were scared. That stone was too damn' big. A king's ransom? It was an emperor's ransom—no less. We didn't want the responsibility of it. We would have been chary about taking it as a gift. Jewels of that sort do things to everybody who comes into contact with them. They should be cut up into small chunks just the right size for cheap engagement rings. As they are—they bring far too much temptation into the world.

"And the White Russian went droning on and on about security for the paltry loan we were going to make him. We didn't want the security. We held a tarpaulin muster, there in the toilet, and raised fifty-five pounds among the three of us. There was some paper, but most of it was gold, and it looked cheap and shoddy and dull against that winking, scintillating thing in the box. We tried to make him take the money on his word alone—but he just wouldn't play. He was full of the Quixotic sense of honor that one so often finds in these people. So, in the end, Parker took the stone, stowed it carefully in the inside breast pocket of his jacket, stuffed a couple of handkerchiefs down on top to make all secure.

"We wanted to get back to the ship, then. We didn't feel safe where we were. In our own little world, in our native habitat, we might feel secure. But not here. That

damned box in Parker's inside pocket was far too conspicuous. To port he looked like himself—but to starboard he was like—what's the wench's name?—Jane Russell. We wanted friend Ivan to come back with us. But no—there was the little matter of the debts he had to settle. That he insisted upon. He could not possibly—as a Tsarist officer and gentleman—evade his responsibilities. And so on and so on. So we more or less compromised. We hammered out a plan whereby he was to come alongside, aft, in one of the Arab boats in two hours' time. We'd have a rope over the side ready for him. We'd have some place ready where he could hide himself, a store of tinned food if Kelly's master key still fitted the Chief Steward's storeroom. To that he agreed.

"And so we went out. The place was much as we'd left it. The three Diggers had left with their light-o'-loves—but the Negro sailor was still pounding the piano, and there were the same, mysterious Oriental types—or their two brothers—at some of the tables, the same servicemen and girls at the others. The Negro waved to us as we went out, gave us a few bars of a swing version of Rule Britannia. Then, outside the café, we parted from the Russian. We never saw him again."

CAPTAIN CLAVERING paused to refill his pipe. His son lit a cigarette.

"It was a good story, Dad," he said carelessly. "And how does it finish? I suppose that with your share you were able to afford to go to school for years and years and years—and so get your Extra Master's ticket and rise to your present exalted state."

"I worked for my Extra certificate, you young puppy. I worked for all my certificates—which seems more than the present generation of junior officers is willing to do! As for the ill-gotten gains—I'll be coming to them in a few minutes."

"As I said—we never saw Ivan again. The three of us waited up for him after we got back aboard, and then it was time to go on stations, and still no sign of Ivan. From the bridge I could look aft, and I could see Parker bending far out over the stern to see if the screws were clear. My heart missed a beat then! It was very reluctantly that I tore my regard away from the stern and back to what was my proper business—the engine-

room telegraphs. Anyhow, we got away, and then we were sliding down the channel, along the breakwater, past the big statue of old de Lesseps. As far as the diamond went our Russian friend had, as you say these days, had it.

"But those big stones are cursed. They shouldn't be allowed to exist. They'd corrupt a bishop—taint him, tempt him to lies, theft, murder. There's far too much money locked up in a little piece of crystallized carbon that'd go into almost any pocket. And none of us were bishops—I know what I was thinking. I was glad that the Russian hadn't made it. For all I knew he might have been murdered by the Arabs for his—*our*—money, or the long arm of the Bolshevik Secret Police might have stretched out all the way from the Kremlin to crush him. I should have been a little worried, more than a little sorry for the man, for his Natalya alone and waiting in London. I should have been—but I wasn't, and I hated myself for it. I still do.

"We managed a council of war at about five that evening. Parker and I were off watch, but Kelly, as Senior Apprentice, was a sort of Acting Fourth Mate and kept old Samuel's watch for him. But he managed to get down from the bridge on some pretext and we all met in the Second Mate's room.

"I didn't feel quite so bad when it turned out that the others were more or less of the same mind as myself. Nobody admitted anything—we all talked big about trying to get in touch with Natalya in London, of making enquiries at the White Russian Embassy (or whatever it was they'd have) but we knew, all of us, that Natalya would be damn' lucky if she ever saw anything of the price of the diamond, that the White Army would be even luckier. After all, Parker pointed out reasonably, it wasn't our quarrel. And a large sum paid into the war chest of the Tsarist generals might well prolong a bitter and bloody civil war and lead to even more suffering and loss of life. I pointed out that it might make it shorter—especially since the Bolshevik regime was bound to collapse in a matter of months, or weeks. Don't be so sure, Parker told me. The Reds, he averred, were here to stay—but he didn't believe it any more than I did.

"But it wasn't morals, ethics or politics that really concerned us. Our immediate task

was to find a safe hiding place for the stone. It had to be secure from the curious eyes of stewards, from the itching fingers of the old mate. Parker proposed that he sleep with it under his pillow—it and a loaded revolver—until midnight. At twelve o'clock, when he came on watch, he would hand it over to me. And I could have it—and the revolver—until morn. Kelly we exempted. He shared a room with the other three apprentices.

"So we arranged it that way. Parker handed the box over to me at midnight, in the chartroom. I opened the lid and sneaked a look at the diamond. It seemed out of place there, on the bridge. It belonged in throne rooms, or on the forehead of some heathen idol. Our lighting was all wrong. It needed either the blaze from innumerable candelabra, or the dim, uncanny illumination of the temple. Our shaded chart lamp was too prosaic. Still—it was a pretty thing.

"**T**HEN I went down, with the box secure in the inside pocket of my reefer, with the revolver heavy against my thigh. I shut and locked my door before I undressed, made sure that the port was properly screened. Only after the stone was under the pillow, and I in my pajamas, did I open the door and put it on the hook. I should have liked to have left it locked, but that would have aroused far too many suspicions.

"Funnily enough, I slept well. I didn't dream, even. And when I was called in the morning I wondered, just at first, what those hard lumps were under my pillow. But I wasn't long in remembering. The Second Mate came in then, and we arranged to go through to the bathroom one at a time so that the other could sit on the diamond.

"It was after breakfast—when both Parker (he with the thing back in his pocket) and I were getting our eyes sights—that Kelly came up to the bridge. He, with real ingenuity, had solved the problem. He had found a virtually inaccessible hiding place, one that would be safe from both crew members and Customs rummagers, and one that would be, all the time, under the surveillance of the officer-of-the-watch. Although, Acting Fourth Mate and junior watchkeeper of the morning and dog watches, he was supposed to work with the other apprentices in the forenoon. The job set the lads this day by old Samuel was the painting

down of the foremast. In addition to the painting there was a signal halyard to replace. Kelly would be going aloft in the bosun's chair. Whilst replacing the halyard he would secure the box to the top of the truck.

"It was a brilliant suggestion. It relieved us all of a lot of responsibility. It would do much to dispel the shadows of distrust that were already beginning to creep into our minds. All that remained to be worked out was the actual mechanics of the job—and that was simple. A long, stout screw driven through the bottom of the box, the stone replaced, the box well lashed with seizing wire—and that was that. Other screws could be driven through the wire lashing of the box to secure it to the wooden truck. It would have been better, perhaps, to have lashed the box itself to the truck—but that might well have caught the eye of either the Mate or the Old Man.

"Parker and Kelly went down—and a little later I saw the apprentice coming out on the foredeck. The breast of his dungaree shirt was bulging. But there was nobody to see—only myself on the bridge; the other three apprentices who were working with Kelly were dim-witted lads and interested only in their meals. The bosun and the crowd were working aft, the Old Man was in his room making up his Portage Bill, the Mate was, as usual, pressing his settee cushion. I heard later that Parker had done the job of lashing and fixing the screws, locking himself in the lavatory for the purpose.

"Kelly threw the gantline of the bosun's chair around the drum of a winch. He and his three mates heaved on it until it was just clear of the deck. Then Kelly got into the chair, bent the end of the new signal halyard to his belt. One of the others went to the winch controls, the other two tended the gantline. For a few minutes I wondered. It was out of character. Kelly was the kind of lad who'd go hand over hand up a stay for preference. Then I realized that such gymnastics were not to be risked with that precious box not too secure inside his shirt.

"The winch driver opened the valve. There was a cloud of white steam in the cold air. The winch creaked and clattered. And then Kelly was swaying up the swaying mast, at that moment, the most important man in the ship.

"At a shout from him the winch stopped. His chair was almost up to the block through which his gantline was rove. Slowly, carefully, he eased himself up so that he was standing on the horizontal of the chair. With one hand he reached and took a firm hold on the jumper stay. With the other, his right, he fished inside the breast of his shirt.

"**I** LOOKED down at the other apprentices. They were not looking up. They were standing, gossiping, around the drum-head of the winch. One of them got out some cigarettes. They all lit up. Normally, I should have bellowed down at them, told them to watch out for their mate up the mast. But that—at this time—was the very thing that I didn't want them to do.

"When I looked up again Kelly was screwing the box onto the top of the truck. Then his screwdriver came out of his pocket and the other, additional screws. The job didn't take long. He finished it off by pretending to be doing something to the sheave in the truck through which the signal halyards passed—scraping away old paint or something. He rove off the new halyard. He bawled down to his mates, who bent a pot of mast-color and a brush on to it, heaved them up to him. He settled himself back into the bosun's chair, started slapping paint on the mast as though he hadn't a care in the world. I felt happier myself, and so did Parker, who had come up to join me. The treasure was as safe as it would have been in the Old Man's safe—safer. Nobody could possibly lay hands on it without at least one of us knowing. And we all trusted each other again.

"I won't bore you with the details of the homeward voyage. It was just another voyage—that was all. It was going to be the last one that any of us were going to make—and that knowledge, perhaps, made it go the faster. *Sabina Grove* was only a ten-knot tramp—fast enough for those days—but it seemed no time at all before we were roaring up Channel, before we received our orders to put into Falmouth and anchor.

"The Old Man jibbed a bit at paying out Channel Money—but he lived at Truro and wasn't too displeased at the turn events had taken. The Agents said that it would be all right for him to go home until sent for and so—after whacking out a couple of quid

each to all hands—he left us. The beach, as always, looked very tempting—and it wasn't long before there were two or three launches hanging around our gangway offering to take the boys ashore for a small consideration. The firemen were the first to rat. They just downed tools, got more or less cleaned up and left in a body to convert their two pounds into liquid assets. The engineers didn't see the point of staying when there was nobody to keep steam up for them—so they went. The bosun, carpenter and the crowd just didn't see why they should be the mugs—and so on.

"We—the three of us—had all intended to stay aboard. But there was a letter that I especially wanted to post—and the only way to make sure that a letter *is* posted is to put it in the box yourself. It was a rather important one, as a matter of fact—to a girl I knew who was something or other in a firm of West End jewelers. Oh—I wasn't *telling* her anything. But I was making a few guarded enquiries, using some cock-and-bull story that we'd concocted for the purpose as a smoke screen. Then Kelly—the town looked very inviting—thought that he'd like to look up all the dope he could find about diamonds in the Public Library. We were so absolutely ignorant in these matters. We hadn't the vaguest idea as to what the thing was really worth. Sometimes we thought that a third share would just run nicely to poultry farm, sometimes we dreamed dreams and had visions of two-thousand-ton private yachts.

"**O**LD SAMUEL seemed rather peeved when the pair of us announced our intention of hitting the beach. He was definitely hostile, in fact. But Parker said that *he* was staying, and that he'd keep the bridge until such time as either of us returned. So the old mate retired to his room, grumbling under his breath, and we hailed one of the waiting motorboats.

"While it was coming alongside, Parker said what we were all thinking—'So *he* doesn't know—' 'How could he?' I asked. 'You don't know our Samuel like I do,' said Parker. 'But even if I were to come ashore with you the stone'd be quite safe.'

"We all looked up at the foremast. There was a steel ladder up to the cross-trees, the head of the lowermast—and that was all.

We just couldn't see the fat old man going hand over hand up a stay—not even if the Kohinoor and the Hope diamond had been sharing the nest with our little bauble. And there was no steam, no power—even if he should find somebody to drive the winch for him. The stone was as safe from his greedy fingers as it would have been on the moon.

"We went down the ladder into the launch, which shoved off. We waved goodbye to Parker. The boat put us down at the steps, and the boatman told us the way to the Post Office. We got the letter off all right, and one or two telegrams. Then we asked the way to the public library. There were far too many pubs to pass en route—and we didn't pass 'em. By the time we got to the library it was shutting up shop. So we had a meal at a quiet restaurant, and then set off back to the ship. There were too many pubs on the way—and you must remember, Peter, that in those days it was very few vessels in which you could have your beer, your pink gin or your cocktails before dinner. Anyhow—Parker was aboard, and old Samuel Hall couldn't possibly get up that mast. Even if he knew what was up there.

"It was well after dark by the time we got at last to the steps. Not that it was properly dark—the moon was almost full and the sky was clear. The cold air sobered us up a little, and by the time the boat was halfway to the anchorage our rosy, alcohol-induced dreams were fading. But we weren't quite sober enough to take more than a brief, passing interest when another motorboat, bound the opposite way, passed us.

"She didn't look right, somehow, the ship. We put it down to the effect of the moonlight, to the absence of all lights—save for one feeble hurricane lamp by the gangway—around her decks. Still—she she looked, somehow, queer. We didn't like it. We almost forgot to pay the boat off when he had us alongside, and we were up that gangway as though we hadn't fed for a month.

"There weren't any lights in the officers' flat—although there was a smell in old Samuel's room to indicate that the oil lamp had been blown out not so long ago. But there weren't any lights, and there wasn't any sign of life either. I went back to the gangway and got the hurricane lantern so

as to make a proper search. Then the absurdity of it all suddenly struck me. The Mate and the Second Mate would be on the bridge.

"So we went up. The oil binnacle lamps were lit, but there was no light in the chartroom. We shouted. There was no answer. I went into the chartroom—and there, on the settee, was Parker. He was dead to the world. We bawled in his ear, shook him, even got one of the fire buckets and poured water on him—but he was right out. If it hadn't been for his regular, too heavy breathing we'd have thought him dead. Kelly found a cup and saucer on the chart table. The cup held the dregs of tea. We both sniffed at it. It had a funny smell.

"Then we forgot Parker, and ran outside. We both saw at about the same time why the ship had looked odd—queer. The whole length of the foremast should have been silhouetted against the night sky. But it wasn't. The topmast was down, the truck level with the platform of the crosstrees. Stays and backstay made an untidy tangle of gear around the lowermast. We knew, without going aloft to look, that the diamond was gone.

"There was that launch that had been coming from the ship as we were returning from the town. It had been taking *somebody* off. But who? I must confess that I had wild visions of a flying visit by the Bolshevik Secret Police, of Parker drugged and old Hall murdered, of bearded, booted agents sweating and straining on hastily improvised tackles and purchases, the while singing some wild, outlandish chanty.

"But they must have left some evidence.

"SO WE left Parker in his drugged sleep on the chartroom settee and went down to the foredeck. We climbed up to the crosstrees—but all we found was the square of darker, unpainted wood on the truck where the box had been. We tried to find out how the job had been done, then. The mastrope was neatly coiled at the foot of the mast. There were no extra blocks or purchases out—not so much as a gun tackle.

"So they—whoever *they* were—had used power of some sort. We took the hurricane lantern and went down to the stokehold. No fires, no steam. The furnaces were barely warm. And if the fires had been made

up again for the job they'd hardly have been out already.

"And we couldn't find the old mate, old Samuel Hall. We turned the ship upside down in our search. It seemed illogical, somehow, that Parker should have been merely drugged and old Samuel murdered.

"It was himself that did it!" cried Kelly suddenly. "He brewed a pot of tea for the Second Mate on that old oil stove of his, and it stinking. And hasn't he the key to the medicine chest?"

"Kelly was right, of course. The old mate had done it. But how? How? We checked everything, tried to find out what gear he had used—and we just couldn't find the answer. And when Parker at last came round he knew as much as we did. And all the time the solution to the problem was riding serenely in the sky, plain as a pike-staff—and we couldn't see it."

"You couldn't see it," said the girl bitterly. "You—the future Examiner of Masters and Mates! And yet you failed Henry because he couldn't see it either!"

"Henry had failed himself, my dear. Long before I asked the question I'd decided that he was going to get six months' sea service. It was a sort of last chance. If he'd used his block and come up with the right answer—then he was a better man than I was at his age. He'd ha' got his Certificate then—and deserved it. But he had his last chance—and didn't take it.

"Well—the affair of the telescopic topmast was a nine-days' wonder. We had an awful job convincing the Old Man, when he came back, that we'd had no part in it. As soon as we got steam—which was the next day—we sent it up again, so nobody but ourselves saw that square of unpainted wood on the truck.

"Then—it must have been all of two years later—I was in London as Second Mate of the *Lillian Grove*. Kelly, funnily enough, was with me as Third. (Luckily the examiner hadn't asked him *the* question when he sat for Second Mate!) And who should walk aboard, as Night Watchman, but old Samuel Hall. He was as shabby and down-at-heels as ever, and obviously had no income other than that which he received for sitting in the galley, smoking his pipe. And he wasn't pleased to see us, either. It may

have been guilty conscience—but it seemed more as though he was bearing us a grudge.

"We hustled him into my room. Oh—he was willing enough to talk. He regarded his feat of single-handed seamanship as one of the highlights of his career—the highlight. He was careful to impress upon us that it wasn't the kind of thing that could be done—imagined, even—by the inferior breed of sailor now being trained in steam.

"First of all he'd slackened his stays. Then he'd loosened the wedges. The mast-rope he rove off—as we already knew—in the orthodox manner. But he didn't take it to a winch, but to the warping drum of the windlass. He put the windlass into gear. Oh—there was no steam. There was—to the unobservant—no power. But Samuel knew that there was power under his feet, power in the sky—power that, should the cable part, would have sent *Sabby*, all eight thousand tons of her, careering up the harbor at at least three knots. It takes quite a lot of power to move eight thousand tons.

"Working very carefully, he knocked up the brake. The cable started to run out, the moving parts of the machine to move, the drum to revolve. Samuel put the brake on again in a hurry. He took his hammer and went up the mast—but the heel of the topmast wasn't high enough yet, the fid was still jammed. He clambered down and back to the fo'c's'le head, took off the brake again. This time he got it just right.

"All that he had to do then was to surge his mastrope around the drum until the topmast was down as far as it would go—it wouldn't, of course, go all the way as he hadn't bothered about the stays or the hounds band. He squared things up a bit so as to make it all the more mysterious, collected the diamond and then waited for the boat that he had ordered earlier to come and take him off. It gave him, he said, quite a nasty turn when he saw us coming back. He's counted on our staying ashore longer.

"But I really think that he was glad to see us this time. He'd been wanting, for a long time, to tell somebody about it. It's true that knowledge is its own reward—but only, perhaps, when there's at least one other person to tell you what a devilish fellow you are."

"But the diamond, Dad—the diamond!"
"Oh, *that*. It was made of glass."

Second Sight—and the New North



GOLD AT RED SANDS

By C. F. KEARNS

RED SANDS B. C.
July 3, 1948

Inspector Jones,
District H. Q.
Prince Arthur, B. C.
Dear Chief:

IN DUE course—which means right away—you will hear weird tales of one Con Shannon, lately novice constable of the British Columbia Police and briefly stationed at this lost, lone outpost hard by the Alaska border. You will

not take any official action because I am quitting before either you or the higher powers have a chance to fire me. But if—for your own peace of mind—you want to know the plain unvarnished truth, read carefully from here on.

It was just the other day that you—ah—installed me here. Quite a place, Red Sands. Real rough and ready, raw and rude. Mosquitoes, bull dog flies, a scorching sun and the damndest uproar of air compressors, Diesel bulldozers, roaring trucks and pounding hammers where the spikes were binding

green lumber into habitations and workshops. The ground was churned into a soupy quagmire and altogether it was the most unpromising spot this side of Hades.

Remember how you laughed and said, with an airy wave at this crass blister in a greening sea of spruce forest:

"Cheer up, Son. Here is your New North. You are just in time to grow up with the country. You are present at the birth of a new city. The motif of this place is men, machinery and motion." You didn't mention the mud or the mosquitoes. "That's one reason we are giving it a raw recruit, a husky six footer like you, for seasoning. And here is Mr. Tregellis, Resident Manager of the Red Sands Mining Company. He is also the Magistrate and Coroner."

I recall that you did all your introductions from the landing float. You weren't getting any mud on those well polished boots. Then you climbed back on the plane and left me alone with this Tregellis. This hefty, middle-sized, middle-aged boss man with the cold eye. Two cold eyes. He said briskly:

"Okay, Kid. I was expecting an older man. You look sort of immature for this frontier police business. Up at the end of the main street you will find a new shack we have set aside for a police office. Fix it up any way you like but don't bother me unduly. We have a big job on hand. A rush job."

Executive type. Talked like an army sergeant of supply. Needless to say he aroused all the worst in me. I took my sleeping bag in one hand and my two grips in the other and I tried to keep to the narrow board walk at the top of the riverbank where the street slanted up into the woods. But I was wading in deep mire before I got clear of the turmoil of industry and found the shack. It was at the edge of the wooden wilds that reached right over into Alaska, across a ridge of hills.

Nothing de luxe about my quarters. After the sun got at the green boards the cracks would do for rifle slits. But the roof was tight and there were a couple of windows. No furniture. None at all. I mean there wasn't any. The waterworks consisted of a snowwater creek fifty yards away and the rest of the plumbing fixtures could be found in the woods.

I parked my stuff and sort of swum back

to the beehive where I bought some necessities. Hammer, nails, a saw, an axe, a tin stove and stove pipe, water bucket, cooking utensils, gasoline lantern and a couple of folding cots and some bedding. I thumbed a lad with a truck to deliver the stuff. Don't holler when you get the bill—I only charged up the stuff that could be classed as furniture and fixtures. Any personal stuff, including groceries, was my own expense. I hope you don't think I should have built a fire outside and taken a drink from the creek, like a horse, when I felt thirsty.

I had plenty to do to get organized and I didn't see Mr. Tregellis for some days when he drove up in a jeep and came around to the back of the shack where I was making a leanto out of poles. I split the poles down the middle and then put other half poles on top of the cracks with heavy roofing paper between. He chewed a cigar and surveyed my handiwork without any enthusiasm.

"Where did you get that roofing paper?" he demanded. "And that planed lumber?"

"I just liberated it," I said. "And why didn't you finish this shebeen when you started it. Didn't you have any carpenters? I could build a better hovel than this with a shovel. When I get through here you can charge us rent with a clear conscience."

"You could build—" He half-choked. "Why you—you gabbling cub, you aren't dry behind the ears yet. Hereafter you ask somebody in authority before you help yourself to company property. And why have you been keeping out of sight?"

"Look, Mister," I said. "I'm busy. I'm trying to fix up this joint so that it will not only be a credit to the community, but so I can get a little comfort out of it myself. I had one meal down in your camp boarding house and I practically bought a share in the firm. Also I paid a princely ransom for such items of food as I got at your company store and I'm due to start looking into the meaning of this word "Extortion."

HE DISREGARDED me. My remarks, I mean. He jerked his head towards town.

"This is business. Your business. We have a lunatic working on the bull gang. Pick him up and have him certified and I will make out the commital order and you can take him out."

That was Jake with me. A trip to civilization was not without its appeal. I put on my tunic and went down with him in the jeep to the center of activity. He pointed out a husky-looking lad who was skipping a barrow full of wet concrete. As we watched he ran the load up a steep board incline and upended the barrow with an easy, feline grace, as the book says. I took due note of this and hoped he might be nice and tractable.

Tregellis said the afternoon shift would be coming on shortly and went off. I hung around and presently a whistle blew and the gang dropped their instruments of labor which were immediately grabbed by the oncoming crew. I planted myself in the way of this goofy guy and sort of impeded him.

"Hello," I said. "I'm a cop. I'd like to have a talk with you. What's your name?"

"Baptise Pierre Louis Fitzgerald." He showed his white teeth and he was a clear-cut specimen with a line of dark toothbrush mustache and big dark eyes and a sort of a tan complexion. "And for why would you have speech with me? Is it because I am tuned in with the radio. Hey—you think I'm crazy? Me!"

"Could be," I told him. "Anybody that lives up here by choice can't be normal. Where you from? That name of yours sounds Scotch."

"Ah, my friend!" He clapped me vigorously on the shoulder and loosened a couple of back teeth. "It is a long story, the lineage of Baptise Pierre Louis Fitzgerald. Attend me closely and I will tell you."

"Wait up, Baptise," I said soothingly. There were a lot of eyes on us, no doubt hoping to see some action. "Come with me and we will talk long and intimately. I'm really more interested in your actions than in your genealogy."

HE WAS quite willing, so we went up to the shack—the police station, if you will—where I build up the fire and made toast and fried some eggs, which same are akin to nuggets at the price charged locally, and I let him talk after priming him with a few leading questions.

The result was I decided that he was either the marvel of the age or else he was just plain bugs. He claimed he was radio active, with a sort of an inbuilt radar. He was susceptible to the influences that float around

in the ether. Also he could detect minerals in the bowels of the earth. Seems he had been a member of a mine demolition squad during the war and he had got so good at it that he could disregard the mine detector and find the hidden explosives by just listening. And but lately he had used one of these Geiger instruments with a pitchblende prospecting crew, but that he had been bounced when he insisted that he was more efficient than the instrument was.

All of which sounds a bit woofy but I pretended a deep interest and he presently confided that he could tune into other people's minds or project his vision and see what was happening at a distance. I was getting a bit fuddled myself about this time, so I told him to tune in on my inspector at Prince Arthur and tell me what went on.

He clapped his hands to his head and concentrated. I suppose it was concentration because there were beads of sweat on his brow and the muscles stood out rigid on his bare arms. Finally he spoke:

"I see a fat man with a uniform and ribbons but they are last war. He sleeps with his boots on the desk and leaning back in his chair. A young fellow in uniform punches the typewriter with two fingers and swears at the fat man but not loud enough to wake him."

That jolted me. He sketched a faithful picture of our office. I said "Okay" and Baptise opened his eyes and looked like he had tried to lift a weight far beyond his strength.

"Ha. You believe me now? I am radio active? I can read the ether?"

"I sure do, Bat," I said. "But the heck of it is I'm afraid the doctor won't. He will say that you have a couple of cogs misplaced and they need to be shoved back into position. In short, my lad—by the usual standards—you are a mental case. Comprée?"

He compréed all right and he wasn't very happy about it. He explained that this gift, as he called it, had been a long time developing and that it had started by a jump he had made, when he was a paratrooper. He landed in or near a secret factory in Germany where they were trying to beat us to the atomic bomb. They had a real dinger of a fight on their hands before the place blew up together with a lot of the surrounding country. He was eventually picked up by

some of Patton's men, miles away and mixed up with a haystack, and so to hospital where nobody paid much attention to his story. It was after this episode that he was on demolition work for a time.

His whole attitude begged me to believe him. I began to weaken. I began to get ideas. What if maybe—just maybe—some of his fixation wasn't wacky! I said:

"You would be a good man to take prospecting, Baptise. You might find me a gold mine."

"Ah!" He held out his hand eagerly. "I like you. Sure. We go."

"Yeah." I felt as if I was kicking a trusting, friendly pup. "We go. We go to see the doctor at the hospital."

THE doctor's name was Marshall, youngish and seriously confident. He interviewed Bat alone while I cooled my heels in the hall. Shortly he called me in.

"Typical case, regrettable," he said softly. "And progressive. Have you got the necessary papers?"

"I think a good sock on the jaw might effect a cure." I handed him the certificate form. "He isn't so batty. How about some of this psychoanalysis stuff that we read about? I had a friend or two in the army that were out on a limb as far as he is but nobody worried about it."

Dr. Marshall smiled gently and asked me if I had ever studied diseases of the brain, which sort of put me in my place. I said, "How about having him demonstrate this projected vision stuff? Could be easy enough to check on it."

"And what would that prove?" He regarded me as if I were sub-normal.

"Well," I argued, "certain prominent people have practically insisted that they can do the same as Bat says he can, but nobody rushes them off to an alienist. How do you know he isn't peddling us a yarn?"

He forbore to answer, just handed me the certificate duly filled out that Bat was of unsound mind and listed the symptoms. As we went out I explained to Bat.

"This here paper," I said, "is a certificate that the Doc thinks you should go to a mental hospital and receive treatment. The magistrate will now make out an emergency committal order. But you still have to be examined by another doctor before you can

go to the Provincial Mental Hospital down at the Coast. Get me?"

"Sure." Bat grinned widely. "You are my friend. What you mean, if I keep my mouth shut this other doctor he does not know if I am crazy or not."

"You got it, Bad. Now we go see the magistrate."

We got past a battery of office people to Tregellis' office where he was studying blueprints with an alert man in high boots and breeches. The name was McDonogh and he was the resident engineer, which means he was second only to Tregellis in local circles. He was thirtyish, well set up and a hearty sort with a handshake like a steel clamp. Tregellis read the medical certificate and filled out the committal order. Bat was on his way.

We went around to the big company boarding house where Bat gathered up his belongings, a suitcase, packsack and a rifle. I examined the firearm and frisked his stuff until I found a box of shells. Bat was amused.

"You are a careful man, Curly." Everybody calls me Curly sooner or later. Must be my hair. "You think I shoot somebody?"

"Taking no chances," I said. "That's why I've lived a full life in my twenty-three years. Tomorrow we will fly to Prince Arthur where you will see the fat man who slept at the desk. But now we will collect your wages to date."

THEN I found the next plane wasn't for three days—they were missing a call on account of repairs or something—and the steamer route was too slow. So that left us with a bit of time on our hands which I didn't regret. I could use a handy man around the premises.

We loaded up with fresh groceries and I braced Mr. McDonogh for the loan of some tools and he obliged with a full carpenter's kit. Also some cheese cloth, wall paper and planed lumber. Bat was a willing worker and clever with his hands so we got busy making furniture and shelves and such like. Come supper time the first day Bat suggested that we take in the dance.

"Dance!" I said. "Where are the women?"

"Ah, you don't know this town yet, Curly. There are three nurses at the hospital and a school teacher and quite a lot of the

bosses have their wives here. Also some *tres recherché* girls from up and down the river. Maybe they have a slight touch of the native in them but it is a piquancy. Hey, we go?"

Why not? I was supposed to circulate on behalf of law and order. So we sluice ourselves down the water bucket and Bat smoothed the wrinkles out of his suit and we shaved and off we went, keeping to the edge of the bush to avoid the mud.

Still plenty of activity going on. Men repairing machinery under flood lights and motors and dynamos and compressors keeping up a constant oomp, oomp, oomp. There is no beer parlor or liquor store here but the odd bootlegger must flourish because there was plenty evidence of joy water around. I didn't get unduly excited about that. Just as well to get the lay of the land before upsetting the customs of the community too suddenly.

A boardwalk ran on either side of the single business block fronted by the post-office, general store, poolroom, bowling alley, general offices of the Company, and the hospital. The hall was above the store and was a big place an entrance hall flanked by cloak and washrooms. Out behind was a kitchen and the orchestra was on a stage with the movie screen behind them. A few potted palms with plenty of bunting and colored lights gave the proper atmosphere of relaxation even if the seats were just smooth benches shoved back against the walls.

I was mistaken about the lack of ladies. There were a lot of them, mostly young and easy to look at although they were outnumbered about five to one. I plunked down the four dollars admission—I owed Bat that much—and the doctor was at my shoulder. He said, softly, slanting a significant glance at Bat:

"You are either very trusting or else you take responsibility very lightly."

I shrugged and let it go at that, remembering how he had rebuffed my well intentioned advice the previous day. Bat started dancing right away and somebody spoke my name. I had to look twice to recognize Mr. Tregellis. He was a different man in a dinner jacket. His expression was different, I mean. Not so much of the big boss about him. He gave me a friendly grin and presented me to his wife and niece.

Mrs. Tregellis had a streak of gray at the temples and dark, warm eyes and a white smile that made me feel right at home. She had been plump and pretty, one time, and she was still plump and pretty. So much I gathered before I really got an eyeful of Pam Whalen and I nearly took the count. To say I was disconcerted is a gross understatement. She was exactly the kind of a girl I never really expected to meet and I was completely unprepared.

Tregellis was talking and I am sure Mrs. Tregellis was saying something but I heard never a word because I was trying to speak to this incredible, glowing girl and all I could do was to make moaning sounds. Seems silly, doesn't it? But that's the way it was.

I was losing control fast so I took Mrs. Tregellis' hand and we were dancing. She said:

"You are our man of mystery. We haven't seen anything of you. I wanted my husband to bring you home to dinner because I think a new town is always so lonely for a boy— young man—at first. I—forgive the slip, won't you. I—we had a boy like you once. Not much younger.

Before the war, that would have been. I held her close and tight for a moment and she pressed my hand. And we were friends.

That was when I started making enemies. Came the sound of scuffling, a blow, a girl's shrill fright and the music stopped.

A thick, blond man with walrus mustaches was getting up from the floor and his right hand held a knife. A slim-bladed knife with a deer's foot handle. He balanced himself as he stood erect and shook his head violently, holding the knife out in front of him, shoulder high, like a teacher would hold a pointer.

It would be Bat, of course, with his fists still balled as he stepped back discreetly. The girl who had screamed tried to pull him further away from the man with the knife, who was sliding closer like a stalking panther. A hubbub of alarm broke out as I said, "Excuse" to Mrs. Tregellis and got between the combatants quickly. I held out my hand for the knife and said, "Gimmie."

He wasn't the gimmie kind, as I expected. So I slammed a boot into his stomach and grabbed his knife wrist with my left hand a split second after my right fist connected

with his jaw. I twisted as he wilted to the floor and the knife fell with a little tingle.

I picked it up and somebody said angrily across the staring silence, "God, that's brutal! Einar only had a few drinks and everybody slams him."

The speaker was an ax-sized type with black handlebar mustache and a bristling goatee of the same hue. His shoulders were so wide that he would need to go sideways through an ordinary door. I said:

"Brutal is right. Knives are cutty things. If this guy is a friend of yours you better drag him outside and give him some first aid. Then put him to bed. He's—"

THIS big man crowded up close to me and it was plain from the way everybody made room for him that he was a personage of considerable status. His eyes were splinter points, his voice a rasping file.

"Take off that gun and I'll give you your needings. 'I'll—"

Baptise Pierre Louis Fitzgerald reached out a long arm and tapped him on the shoulder. Bat's smile was thin as he said softly:

"Have a care, Ton-and-a-Half. Have a care. We are like brothers, the policeman and me."

This Ton-and-a-Half bird was fast. He snatched poor Bat off the floor so abruptly it was hard to believe. His two ham sized hands bunched Bat's coat low down and high up and he swung Bat over his head like a sack of feathers. He brandished Bat high, horizontally, and the splinter points in his eyes burst into cruel flames. He was going to slam Bat against the wall or down to the floor and either would just about wreck my protégé completely.

He could also hurl Bat against me did I make a move to unbutton my revolver holster!

As I said, he was close to me. Only a step away. Just room to swing Bat's body aloft and Bat's knees grazed my nose as he went up. So I didn't need to move much to stick my hand out straight with the point of the knife against this Ton-and-a-Half person's throat. Just above the soft collar of his white shirt.

He could feel the point all right!

"Let him down gently," I suggested. "I got a shaky hand. Be just too bad if some-

body joggled me. Let him slide down your back and let him go easy."

It was a moment. You could feel the suspense hanging heavily all over that silent room. Ton-and-a-Half leaned away from the knife and I kind of leaned with him. Then slowly he let Bat down over one shoulder until Bat's feet were on the floor. And there was a rolling, gusty stir through the big room which was everybody beginning to breathe again.

I TURNED my back to him and the fellow I had hit was on his feet again. He felt his jaw gingerly and then massaged his waistline while he fastened on me what might be called a cold, malevolent look. Finally he said, in a tone that was nothing less than ominous:

"This is not finished. No. Not with me!"

Ever make a split-second decision, Chief? I glanced at the point of the knife and it was clean. I looked around at the glowering Ton-and-a-Half and saw a pin prick of red above his tie. I handed the knife back to the man who owned it. The thick man with murder in his face.

"Park this thing outside and leave it there. Tell your big friend here to put some iodine on that nick in his neck. Your jaw doesn't hurt any more than my knuckles do." I waved at the orchestra. "We haven't finished. How about some music?"

Somebody laughed. There was a general stir. Mrs. Tregellis was near me.

"Would you care to finish it?"

"Of course. What an abrupt person you are. Don't you know that those two men are celebrities of this North Country? They both have terrible reputations as headstrong men. Einar Puokki is a large shareholder in this company. Ton-and-a-Half Macdonald has the big trading post at Middle Fork. Perhaps the young man who was dancing with Mr. Macdonald's daughter didn't understand that all dances are tags."

Not so good. Bat was too hasty and Mr. Einar Puokki was drunk. Tregellis or Macdonald would have prevented Puokki from doing any real violence. Now I had made a couple of enemies because I had just stepped in too fast. I felt sort of let down.

When I took Mrs. Tregellis to her seat I received a stare from Tregellis that was pure censure. Pam came up and my chest

began to thump so hard that I just managed to say "May I have the next one?"

But the music started again—they don't waste time between numbers up here—and some gook swept her away before she could even answer. But I stood there until they came around and I tagged her partner. It was Mr. McDonogh the engineer man.

She was expecting me to speak. She was moonbeams and gossamers and my eyes were full of stars and I couldn't find a word. McDonogh was waiting with an avid look and immediately I began to dislike him immensely. I stood there waiting for my turn again and a man pulled my sleeve.

"Hey, Policemen. I think you're wanted outside. Looks like a ruckus."

Stars in my eyes! A lamb to the slaughter. I trotted briskly down the stairs and—

Bong! In my face, in my eyes. A handful of thick mud. I couldn't see the man who jumped on me from behind. I couldn't see the millions of fists and feet that converged on me all at once.

A fight is fun, if you can see what is going on. I was in the complete dark and this wasn't fun. They were set to tear me apart and they nearly succeeded. I got my hands on a piece of somebody and I twisted and heaved. A man screamed and a bone snapped. Then I let go of everything in a spasm of flame-shot emptiness.

I CAME to about twenty minutes later—so I was told—in the emergency room at the hospital, with an angel apparently dressed in veils of mist and Bat Fitzgerald, similarly attired, standing behind her. He was registering anxiety but as I focused on him he grinned wide.

"Ha! You are one tough guy, Curly. I tried to warn you but you go too fast. We are getting dirt from your eyes."

I was lying on a table so I swung my feet over the side and the hammers against my skull were a crime. The angel was Pam Whalen and the mist veils disappeared and she was still in her dance dress. Black and a touch of gold. Corn-colored hair and a peaches-and-cream look about her. Slenderly trim and cool. She tried to shoo me back with a bowl in one hand and a swab in the other.

"Don't try to stand. Just—"

I stood on my feet. My head ached clear

back to my shoulders. My eyes were gritty and blurring. I said:

"Could I have an eye cup, please? I didn't know you were a nurse. Sorry to spoil your fun. I was asleep at the switch or they wouldn't have ganged me. Hope I'm not troubling you too much."

She put the bowl on the table.

"It's no trouble. I haven't been a nurse—a graduate nurse—very long but we are used to things like this. As long as men fight like wild beasts. Dip your face in this basin, please."

I stooped over and she helped by pushing my head down. I opened and closed my eyes a few times in the liquid and when I came up for air they felt much better. She gave me a towel and when I got through I could see pretty well again.

Over on a low couch lay a man who groaned as the doctor taped a plaster cast on his leg. I went closer and it was Ton-and-a-Half Macdonald. He gave me a defiant, shamed sort of a snarl.

"I should have pushed on that knife," I told him harshly. "You're due to have an interview with the judge one of these days and he'll likely put you where the dogs won't bark at you for some time. You and some of your little playmates also. I sincerely trust they will object to being arrested on a charge of attempted murder."

He said nothing. Actually there wasn't much he could say. Dr. Marshall was annoyed.

"If you would go away, Constable," he said peevishly, "I would be grateful."

I went, but not far. I apologized to Pam Whalen:

"I'm sorry if I spoiled your fun. Better come on back. The evening is yet young."

She wasn't exactly responsive. She regarded me uncertainly, as if I were a problem and an unpleasant one. I became abject immediately. Man, did I crave that she should like me!

"You needn't worry. I won't clutter up the social scene. I'm just going to round up those mugs who tried to play horse with me. My headache is easing. I can breathe without thinking my chest is on fire and it rests my eyes just to look at you. Do you mind?"

"You don't find Puokki tonight, Curly. He left by plane, quick." Bat spoke up. "You come with me now and— Oh, oh!"

Bat stood there with a sudden look of complete surprise flooding his face. His hand went up and swept along level and he began to talk to himself, as if he were thinking out loud.

"Trouble. Mac Hay is talking on his radio. The engine is dud. They can't make the river bank. Ah—coming down. The wing hits the poplar snag. Its nose hits the brush. Puokki is killed. No. Not killed. Mac Hay is hurt. Hurt in the old burn on the Little White River."

The doctor was listening. We were all listening. The doctor caught my eye and pointed his forefinger at his head with a circular motion.

"I told you it was a progressive case. I suggest you use some restraint commencing approximately now. It is not safe to give him unlimited freedom." Having thus disposed of myself and Bat he smiled at Pam. "We can go back in a moment or so. Miss James can take over."

I was angered at the smile she gave him back. I took Bat Fitzgerald firmly by the arm.

"Come on, Dingbats. You've either got *dementia precox* or second sight, which is an old-fashioned term but it means the same thing. Save that projected vision of yours until I figure out a way to use it profitably."

I got him as far as the sidewalk outside and let loose of his arm. "Stay put for a minute. I'm forgetting my manners."

I went back inside. I could hear the doctor giving instructions about moving the patient and Pam came out briskly into the passage. I got in her way.

"I'm really sorry I had to get mixed up in that brawl and spoil your evening. And thanks a lot for fixing me up. It was worth getting banged about a bit and I'm not fooling, either."

Her eyes bedazzled me. In the lamplight they seemed moonlit pools of deepest purple but her voice held the hint of a shiver.

"You are so—so impetuous. This is a rough camp. Do be more careful, won't you?"

Doggone, her eyes made me dizzy. Was that touch of concern just for me alone! I could feel my knees wobbling. I took the step that brought us closer and I was going to whisper that if she really meant it I would try to be careful. But when I got close I

forgot what I was going to say because I had her briefly in my arms and I kissed her. Also most briefly.

THE brevity was because somebody laid a heavy hand on my shoulder and whirled me around like a top and who should it be but Mr. Tregellis. He was all bossman and was he accelerated! His eyes were like blue, blue ice. The cold kind, and his breath whistled.

He needn't have said anything and I couldn't say anything. He had splotches of red rage on his cheekbones as he shook a knotted and capable fist under my trembling nose.

"You're too big for your boots, Boy." I was inches taller but he seemed to look down on me. "On your way. I can promise you it will be faster and further when your inspector gets my radio message."

He had my cap in his hand which I had left hanging in the hall. I took it from him and put it on my head and I took his other hand from my arm.

"You should knock before you come in," I reproved him gently. "And if you get me fired please keep a job for me. Any kind of a job. I sort of like this town."

He snorted "Bah" and went past me. Bat had followed him in and he now grabbed my belt and towed me outside, where he proceeded to bawl me properly.

"You work too fast, Curly." He wagged his finger at me. "You have no finesse. All women wish tenderness and charm. I am ashamed for you."

"From you," I retorted, "that's good. Who poked this Puokki first? Who started the fray? Dry up. I've got problems and you are only one of them. Let's go home. My face feels lumpy and my eyes will be black but what's an old bruise among so many?"

We wended our way homeward, disregarding the mud, and made up the fire. Bat was depressed.

"I wish everybody didn't think I was crazy. That pilot is a nice fellow but he works for Puokki. Puokki and Macdonald ganged you and Mac Hay took him away because he is afraid somebody gets killed. Mac Hay is too good to die in the bush because nobody believes me."

I stewed this and kindred matters while

the coffee boiled and we had a couple of potent cups apiece. Then I stood up and smacked Mr. Bat Fitzgerald an open-handed swipe on the side of his face that rocked him in his chair. I straightened him up with another. Then I belted him one in the chest that sat him back hard.

I stood over him with both fists cocked and he was scared. He wailed, "Hey, Curly. Damn you! I am your friend."

"You're a nut," I hissed. "You're loco. Bats in your control tower. Your wires are crossed and your tubes are fused. You're not fooling me. You are either putting on an act or else you're lying. Or both. Make a monkey out of me, will you—just because I treat you like a white man."

"No. No, Curly. I—"

"Yes!"

"No! I don't lie, Curly. Not to you. I like you, Curly."

"You're lying. You think it will make me happy if this Puokki guy busts himself all up in a crackup. Well, it doesn't. You better think of a better one—if you can think."

"No," he whispered and his eyes were pleading. "Why won't you believe me! Maybe I'm crazy. I don't know. I see it plain. The engine was missing. They couldn't make the river. The wing hit a tree. It is true, Curly. I can tune in. I don't know how. Maybe he was calling on his radio when he hit. Ah, I don't lie, Curly. Not to you."

"How far is it?"

"Twenty miles, maybe. No trail but I can go there. I don't need a compass. I show you."

"You mean we can go through the bush?"

"If you can run with me?"

He was sincere. I was jittery. I took two short seconds to make a decision.

"All right, Bushman. Shuck those good clothes while I get out of these breeches and boots.

"We want an axe and mosquito dope and some grub and first-aid stuff. And then you can try to lose me."

IT WAS half past one in the morning when we started but nights are short up here in the summer. I left a note on the table saying where we had gone and why. I wore rubber-soled sneakers and Bat had moccasins. I stuffed what I thought we'd need,

grub, first-aid kit and a couple of sweaters into a knapsack and he took the axe.

"Which way?"

He pointed and I lined my pocket compass on the course which never varied in the next six hours. I checked it a few times but Bat never hesitated through the forest. It was up hill, down hill, through swamps and old burns choked with dead, down timber. With daylight we traveled faster. It was hard going and slow in some spots. Bat was a lean wolf but a bloodhound has plenty of endurance, too.

The sun was high and hot and I had used up my second wind when we broke out on the bank of a good-sized river. I wobbled down for a drink and suggested a rest and a bite of lunch.

"Pretty soon," Bat's eyes were scoring around. "It is right here close."

IT WAS. In the thin brush, a hundred yards from the river, the tail of a light plane pointed skyward.

Puokki was hurt and barely conscious while Hay, the pilot, had a broken arm and a sprained ankle. He had a fire going and a tea pail hung from a stick over it. He waved his good hand.

"Happy days! Our radio is smashed but I sent out a quick call as we came down. Good thing you picked it up. Where is your camp?"

"I'm the cop from Red Sands," I said. "The guy Puokki ganged last night. We'll whittle a splint for that arm of yours and wheel out of here. We came along on a hunch because Bat claimed he got your SOS on his inbuilt radio."

"Don't worry about me," Hay said. "Puokki needs doctoring in a hurry. He's got concussion and general shock. You beat it back for a plane and I'll make out all right."

"That's a long hike and we're tired," I argued. "What's wrong with this river here? Can't we use it?"

"No." Hay shook his head positively. "Just for a plane to land on in the quiet parts. The gorge a mile downstream is whitewater. The Indians portage. It's never been run. No chance. Grab something to eat and then beat it for help. There is another light plane at Red Sands."

Bat had both hands to his head and his face was strained. He shut his eyes and

then opened them as if the light hurt them. He said, in a dubious, reluctant tone:

"You are a tough guy, Curly. You might make it. There is water over the rocks in the side channel. This is the high-water time. But if you don't go right you are a goner. It will take you to Red Sands."

"No dice, Fella," the pilot shrugged. "This man needs medical aid or he's a goner, too. Likely he won't make it anyhow. Too bad. He's got lots to live for. Something we haven't. Money."

"Wait," I said. "Bat may be bugs but I've pinned my faith on him so far and I'll take another chance. Gimmie that axe." And I headed for the riverbank, where I found what I wanted.

Dry, dead spruce trees, not down long enough to be punky. I cut four good logs, maybe twenty feet long, a foot and a half diameter at the small ends. The butts were two feet across or better. Bat brought wire from the plane and some light rope and—gift of Heaven—a few long nails.

We worked like beavers, shoving the logs into place, spiking and wiring the cross pieces across the main logs. When we finished we had a sketchy raft about twenty feet long by twelve wide. There was the width of a log between each of the four main logs. Just a grid, really.

We heaped small brush and bark slabs in the middle of the raft, covered them with a blanket, and laid Puokki on top. I lashed his legs to a crosspiece. It took a lot longer to do all this than I am telling you. Then I took a long pull at the tea pail and grabbed a hunk of bread because I was famished.

"You'd be halfway to Red Sands now," the pilot looked at his watch. "A plane could fly here in twenty minutes. You're nuts, Policeman."

"No," I argued. "Might have been a third of the way there. No more. Remember we aren't fresh. It would take longer than this way. Bat says I can make Red Sands in two hours. If this man needs a doctor we save time. I want him to live because I have some unfinished business with him."

We pried the half-floating raft off the muddy shore with levers and I got on with a long pole and a spare one tied to the raft. They told me I wouldn't need to use a pole much except to keep in the current which was plenty swift all the way. Bat didn't try

to hide the tears in his eyes when I shoved off. He said:

"Keep in the middle, Curly. Keep in the middle—if you can."

I drifted around a bend out of sight and the current grew stronger. That was when I tied myself to the raft. Then I heard the roar of the gorge.

I WON'T tire you about how we went through except that we were a chip on a wild, wet, white spillway. The overfalls curled back and dropped on us in solid sections and—if the raft had been built log to log—it would have been forced under until we had drowned. As it was, the solid water poured through the gaps between the logs and the raft rode the surface. At least it stayed up long enough so we could breathe. The water roused Puokki somewhat, and he spent most of the time half strangling but I couldn't help him.

I don't expect to have another trip like that and this one will do to tell my grandchildren. I don't know how long we were in the worst of it. One minute. Five minutes. It was altogether too long. Blank rock walls on either side and hell's own broth between. If we hadn't been tied down we were lost. If the raft had capsized we were gone. But a grid-built raft doesn't capsize or become overwhelmed by sheer weight of water.

That's the theory, anyhow.

It was a hot day but I was chilled through before we came out into a line of timbered banks again. The current was still fast and I used the spare pole—the other was lost—to keep offshore. Oh, yes. We had lost our outside log and some of the crosspieces were broken, but there was enough left to float us. Can't expect too much of a raft thrown together in a hurry without proper tools. It held together until we swept out into the more placid waters of the Red Sands River, however, and there was the town itself half a mile downstream. I started to holler for help.

A flat-bottomed riverboat pushed by an outboard motor came out. "Hospital case in a hurry," I said as I grabbed the rope. The two men gave me a hand to transfer Puokki, which was ticklish as our weight put the logs under water. There was a fair crowd collecting as we boiled up to the landing and Mr. Tregellis was in the van.

"Their plane crashed near Little White River," I explained to him. "The pilot has a broken arm and a sprained leg so you better send for him. Bat is with him. About a mile upstream from the gorge."

"You ought to see that raft," said the lad in charge of the outboard engine. "It's just hanging together. If this guy run the gorge of the Little White River he's the only man alive that ever did it. I got money that says so."

No takers. They laid Puokki on a wide plank and carried him up from the river. I teetered after them and straight homeward where I shucked my clothes and crawled into bed. When Bat arrived I only awoke long enough to go to sleep again. Next thing I knew Mr. Tregellis was shaking me by the shoulder.

"Suppose you rouse up. I want to talk to you."

I sat up and yawned. My face hurt when I stretched it. He said:

"You seem to be a young man who might amount to something with a little direction. I should put the boots to you for your impertinence with my niece." He paused significantly, as the saying is. "I could do it, too."

I maintained a discreet silence.

"It is six o'clock. If you will be at my house in an hour we will have dinner and talk things over." I glanced at Bat who was apparently still asleep. "All right, bring him along, but keep him under control."

I thanked him and he went out to his jeep. Bat bounced up, grinning.

"Ah, you are into society, Curly. Be nice and polite tonight and don't sock anybody and people will like you. You should practice diplomacy and treat important people with respect."

"Skip it," I bade him. "Tomorrow we go out and find us a gold mine. No use wasting that X-ray intellect of yours. If we do make a stake you'll be able to have as much fun as if you were sensible."

MR. TREGELLIS had the biggest house in the row of bosses' residences somewhat higher up the slope than the settlement and about a quarter of a mile distant. He had the makings of a lawn, a wide sun porch, and a view that took in long miles up and down the river valley. Mrs. Tregellis

opened the door for us and was very cordial.

"The whole town is talking about you two young men. We are all fearfully intrigued. How did you know the plane was lost? No one else heard their message, as far as we know."

"At the risk of violating a professional confidence," I said, "I'll tell you a secret. Mr. Fitzgerald here is radio receptive. He doesn't know if he has his antenna shorted or his tubes are loose but his reception is excellent. Dr. Marshall calls it Dementia Praecox, which is a nice way of saying that he's addled. Dr. Marshall and Mr. Tregellis between them have committed Bat to the mental hospital where he will no doubt be scientifically unscrambled which I fear will make him very discontented with life."

"Really!" Mrs. Tregellis smiled faintly.

"It's quite true. Bat tuned in on the plane's radio and got the message. Nobody would have believed him except me, so we went and found them. Then Bat cast his vision ahead and saw the river was passable so I took a short cut."

I don't think she believed me and fortunately Mr. Tregellis arrived just then. He had Pam Whalen with him.

Was my face red!

She said good evening to both of us and we stood a golden moment on the screened veranda admiring the view before we went in to dinner. My chest was so tight that I couldn't have spoken to her to save my life and I was almost glad that she did not give me any encouragement to do so.

Dinner was served by a smart, part-Indian girl and whoever the cook was could get a diploma from me anytime. In spite of being acutely embarrassed I found my appetite was in good shape. I mean I was hungry. We made a bit of small talk with the Tregellises doing most of the conversing. With dessert I became suddenly bold and asked Pam how her patient was.

"Which one do you mean? The one you sent in or the one you brought in?"

"He means Puokki," said Tregellis. "I'm glad to say he is doing well. Dr. Marshall performed a delicate operation to relieve the pressure on his brain and Pam had quite a share in it. I'm very relieved personally because Einar Puokki is a large shareholder in the company and had quite a lot to do with my being in charge here."

So that was it. That was why Puokki could pull a knife if he felt like it. It was his town and his slaves who ran it. I looked Mr. Tregellis fair in the eye and tried to remember I was his guest.

"Knives," I reminded him, "and mud pies in the face. Somebody should tell him."

"He was drunk," insisted Tregellis. "Ton-and-a-Half, too. Those kind of men need to be humored when they are in their cups. Not strong-armed. Remember they have a lot of prestige in this isolated country. Mind you, I'm not excusing them, drunk or not. But one must make allowances."

"We all do inexcusable things sometimes." I hoped it sounded like an apology but Pam didn't look at me. "Yes, Mr. Tregellis?"

"Tell you some local history," Tregellis went on. "Operating mines is my profession. Puokki was a prospector. This operation comes from his discovery. Puokki, Ton-and-a-Half and myself started these diggings on a shoestring and were able to make a showing that interested some real capital. About that time the three of us sold another property we had for a fair sum and promptly put the money into these shares. We should do well because we have a lot of ore in sight and of a very good grade."

"Thanks for the information," I said. "If somebody charged me with assaulting a policeman I wouldn't mind having the magistrate for a friend. Maybe I was a trifle hasty, at that. But talking about mines I've been considering using Bat's unusual gifts to locate something good. Think it would work?"

Tregellis chuckled and in the midst of it he looked at Bat and suddenly became serious. Came a knock at the door and we had visitors, to wit, Dr. Marshall and Mr. McDonogh.

They nodded pleasantly to us and it was my cue to make excuses to my hostess and to thank her, explaining that we had to get up early. Bat was impatient with me when we got outside.

"You are a funny fellow, Curly. You pass up a good chance to be nice to that girl. That's foolish."

"Yeah," I snapped. "A lot you know. I'm a cop and I've got a lot of high-powered competition. Those two important citizens are both single men. That's one of the rea-

sons I want you to find me a gold mine."

"Ah, why do you want to be rich? Money don't make you happy."

I told him I'd take a chance on that possibility and we went home to bed.

WE WERE afield as soon as it was light enough to travel and headed for a fair-sized hill, eyeful of country on all sides of us. The rolling, woodsy north country, slashed by the Red Sands River.

"Do your stuff," I begged Bat. "Swivel those ether piercing orbs hither and yon until you locate the emanations from an underground deposit of high-grade ore. Then shift into the remote vision, radar control and tell me how far down the pay dirt lies, and how much there is of it. Remember, we aren't pocket hunting. We want a lot of it."

Bat sniffed the breeze a time or two then his hands went to his head as he started to concentrate. He hesitated once or twice, pivoting slowly on his heels, and finally teetered to a point like a compass needle coming to rest.

"Ah! Come on, Curly."

He went downhill at a run. He went straight, like a homing pigeon, dodging nothing that he could climb over or through. We had covered about two miles and he had slowed to a fast walk before he stopped.

"This is it, Curly," he panted in a whisper. "Underneath us. Old river bed. Maybe fifty feet down. It lies this way—" His hand swept from east to west. "Placer gold. On bedrock. A poor man's mine."

The land was sloping and broken, with little wooded ravines every which way. It didn't look like any ancient riverbed to me. I said so.

"Your system has gone haywire. This might have been the bottom of the sea, or a volcano, when the world was young. But not a river."

Bat sat down and rolled a cigarette. He pointed.

"See that ridge over there. See this one. Between is the old river bed. Those big glaciers were plenty strong. It pushed the riverbed right out of the way."

I walked around and sized things up. What he said about the glaciers—he meant the ice age—was no bunk. I have a smattering of elementary geology. There was a rim rock bluff on one end of the ground he had

indicated and at the other end was an abrupt slope off. Could be.

Could be not, also. But it wouldn't take much to sink a prospecting shaft to prove it.

I clipped an axe blaze on a small spruce and fixed the local features in my mind, remembering that we were only about four miles from Red Sands and I didn't know how much land their holdings covered. I asked Bat if he knew but he shook his head and yawned.

"I found your gold mine, Curly. I don't do any more today. The head aches. I found it. It's your mine."

Back at Red Sands I left Bat to finish his sleeping while I called on Mr. Tregellis at his office. I asked him how much their mining claims covered in the vicinity.

"You can't jump our claims." He was amused at my question. "They are all deeded. They extend from about half a mile below here to a mile and a half upstream, with a width of about two miles on either side of the river. That close enough or do you want to see the map?"

I thanked him and said that left plenty of room for any future operations I might have in mind and went on to the post office. Among the accumulated mail was a document appointing me the Deputy Mining Recorder for the Red Sands district and a lot of forms and entry books and instructions. I took this bundle of stuff back to my bailiwick where Bat had a meal well started, so I began to read up on my duties.

Right away I got a jolt that staggered me. The Mining Act specifically stated that no mining recorder is permitted to register mineral claims in his name or hold any interest therein!

While I was still staggering under the impact of this dire news a jeep ploughed up to our door and unloaded Mr. Resident Engineer McDonogh. He had a couple of middle-aged, weathered types with him who had prospector written all over them. They were all in high good humor.

"Hi," greeted McDonogh, "Just got word in the mail that you are the new Recorder so we want to record some claims. Just in case you haven't got your maps yet I brought the latest ones along. A lot more topographical detail in these."

What he told me made my blood run cold. He wanted the very chunk of country

that Bat and I had walked over early in the morning!

I eased back to get over the shock and to compose myself. Also I began to appreciate this McDonogh lad. He was alert all right. I said:

"So you tailed us, eh? You don't agree with the doctor and the magistrate. Bat isn't so batty if you allow he can do what he says he can?"

McDonogh flicked a careless hand. "Who knows! This is today. Lots of things that haven't been explained yet. How about taking our applications?"

"Sorry," I said coldly. "That ground is taken by a prior application. Come back tomorrow when I get it sorted out and I'll tell you if there is any left."

"But you are the Recorder." McDonogh grinned at his henchmen. "You can't stake a claim. And your friend here has been legally committed to an asylum. He can't make a legal contract. Now—I am making application to—"

There was a metallic sound behind me, where Bat was sitting in a corner by the stove. The sound made by a lever-action rifle when a cartridge is pumped into the breech. McDonogh stopped talking abruptly.

Doggone, I had been careless about the firearms, I guess.

THEY were all looking past me and from their expressions they did not like what they saw. I motioned to the door.

"Tomorrow, gentlemen. There is always tomorrow—you sneaking triplet of thieves. G'wan now. Bat is liable to get unstable real fast. He's like me. He doesn't care for vermin."

They made a traffic jam at the door for a second or two, then they piled into the jeep and roared away. Bat sat the gun back in its place.

"Ah," he exuded satisfaction. "There is one man who doesn't believe I am being chased by the squirrels. He is one smart fellow. He thinks—like you, Curly—that I have great gifts."

"Yeah," I said bitterly, "and he wants to cash in on it. Bet a nickel our good friend Tregellis is in on this. Those two coyotes of his must have been cached in the bush where they could watch our comings and goings."

We said we were going out early this morning. How come you didn't detect the sinister influences on our trail?"

"I do not know, Curly." Bat rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead. "It is too hard to tune in, I think. It is tiring."

"Looks like you are getting played out," I said. "Maybe this is the last time you'll be able to use these modulated frequency gifts. But you aren't going to lose out to these knavish myrmidons of this capitalistic colossus. About one hour before daylight tomorrow morning you will hightail it back to our claims and axe you a discovery post and—"

"No, Curly. You heard what he said. We cannot—"

"I can't," I admitted. "But you can. You haven't lost your citizenship and you aren't going to. I'm going to destroy those papers and you can record the claim legally."

"But, Curly, my discovery claim won't take in all the good ground. They will take—"

"Hold up," I said. "We'll fix that. You are also the agent for one Miss Pam Whalen, to whom I will issue a prospector's license which she doesn't know about. The claim you stake for her, as her agent, will cover the rest of that old river bed—and it must be one because McDonogh wants it. Be sure you put the license numbers on the posts. That'll spike their guns."

"Hey, Curly!" Bat grinned all over his face and his eyes sparkled. "You are one crafty fellow. I bet you get that girl yet. Maybe."

COME morning, Bat beat it before daylight and I stalled around, chewing my nails, until he got back about noon. He was in deep dejection.

"We are beat, Curly. McDonogh has twenty men up there. They took cat tractors through the bush with drilling equipment. They got the drill going now on a small hole. They are working fast."

So that was why neither Tregellis or McDonogh had bothered me. I said, "Did they stop you staking the claims?"

"Certainly not. I am a fox in the bush. They might find the posts pretty soon. But if they find placer gold in the drill hole, on the bedrock, we are going to have trouble. A lot of trouble."

That was no lie. I went to town and

barged right into Mr. Tregellis' private office. McDonogh was with him.

"Sit down and cool off, Shannon." Mr. Tregellis was contentedly urbane. "You are in no position to call names. In fact your actions to date could be termed malfeasance of office. Suitable penalties, I believe, are provided for such cases. I have already informed your inspector at Prince Arthur to that effect—by radiogram."

"Where's your pet lunatic?" McDonogh snapped. "You should keep him shackled. Not armed with a rifle."

"Listen, Brother," I told McDonogh, "the difference between me and Bat is that any time I take a gun in my hand I have every intention of using it. And I don't like the names you call him. Lunatic—says you!"

I brandished the committal order that Tregellis had signed and I flicked my lighter. The flame caught a corner and I held the burning paper until it was charred to my fingers.

"You better tell the inspector to send in a replacement," I said to Tregellis, "because I'm quitting. I'm going to employ some eminent legal talent and don't think you won't have litigation with all the frills."

I left them and made for the hospital where I was more than pleased to find Pam Whalen in the office. She said, "Hello. You look angry."

"I am angry," I said. "I've known you a long time and never once in all those aeons have you bestowed on me ever the tiniest little vestige of a smile."

Her eyes softened somewhat.

"Why should I smile at you? I don't like conceited ruffians in uniform. You have curly hair and a ready fist, Mr. Shannon. You are disrespectful to my uncle and rude to Dr. Marshall. Did you wish to see someone?"

She had me stumped. And she was so doggone enticing—smile or no smile.

"Listen, Lady. You see before you a harassed and frustrated man, soured by the malpractices of life and disillusioned with his fellow man. And women, too. I had some concentrated war fighting and it unsettled me. I couldn't settle down at the university again. I tried newspaper work and it palled. I capitalized on these ruffianly traits of mine and joined the police because I wanted the outdoors and action. But now I'm off to try

something else because I've a couple of deadly rivals in camp and one of them is a doctor. Where is he?"

"He's out just now. And aren't you rather young to be disillusioned about things?"

"I'm about a year older than you are, Child," I admonished her and produced the other certificate with a flourish. "This is the document that says my friend Baptise is loopy." She watched me burn it.

"Now," I said briskly, "I want to talk to Ton-and-a-Half Macdonald, also Mr. Einar Puokki. May I see them, please?"

She led me into a small ward where Macdonald was sitting up but Puokki was lying quiet. They gave me the evil eye.

"Good day, gentlemen," I greeted them brightly. "I've decided to let bygones be bygones. I should charge you both with assaulting an officer of the law with vicious intent but I won't. I only hope the next cop you tangle with won't be as soft as I am. If it's any comfort I will say that your ethics aren't any worse than some senior company officials that I could mention. And so, I bid you farewell."

Pam came out to the hall with me. She said, "I don't think I quite understand."

"I'm sure you don't." I opened the street door. "But I will tell you this much. I've loved you ever since the moment I saw you and when I make my fortune I'm going to tell you—if you are still single."

And I went away quickly.

There it is, Chief. That's the story I will tell in court if Bat needs any help to hold his claim. Surely there is still some justice left.

I'm taking the plane for the big city tomorrow afternoon where I will fix up my mining records at the head office before I turn in my uniform and buy myself out of the Force. It was sort of fun while it lasted.

Sincerely,

Con. Shannon

POSTSCRIPT

Next Day.

We had a stormy session this morning, but I hung tough. The upshot was that the company made Bat an offer of twenty-five thousand dollars cash for his discovery claim, and he accepted. It seems the physical contours of the ground are a good gamble

from a geological standpoint and I also judge that the drill turned up something good. They got a shock when I told them Miss Whalen had staked the rest of the old riverbed. Tregellis was plumb disconcerted.

Bat was almost tearful. He wanted to split with me, wanted me to stay and start a business. Open a trading post or something. I told him to keep on prospecting.

"No, Curly." He shook his head positively. "I am through. I strain myself too much this last time. I cannot do it any more. No more using the brain—not even for you, Curly. The doctor agrees I am O.K. It is sad, no?"

To my surprise Mrs. Tregellis and Pam came down to the plane when I got there, and they were dressed for traveling! Mr. Tregellis had their bags.

How bright the day! "Going some place?" I asked eagerly, with a surge of fierce hope that the motors would conk and we would have a forced landing en route so I could be a white knight and—

"Yes," said Pam. "Auntie and I are going to Oregon for a visit. That's my home, you know. Where are you off to?" As if she didn't know!

"Out into the cruel world to seek my fortune in a hurry," I said. "Like I told you yesterday."

The motors were warming up and her voice is soft, something like the echo of distant, golden chimes, so I had to lean closely to hear her say:

"I should think the quickest way would be for you to propose to a rich woman."

"Tell me one," I was kind of bitter. "That looks like you."

Her answer rocked me back on my heels. I'm still dizzy. Deliciously dizzy.

"Well—" It was for me alone. "I'm rich. I've got a check for twenty-five thousand dollars for a claim I never even knew I had!" And she was smiling when she said it!

That's why I missed the plane; that's why I want you to read this letter—and then destroy it. It will explain any message Tregellis sent you—if he did sent 'em; maybe he was only mad and said so. He's been quite friendly since. Anyhow, I am going to take your advice and grow up with the country—Pam and me both!

The Big Man Thought He Had Figured Out All the Angles



GRAVE FOR A HICK

By C. E. CLEGG

TAD couldn't get it through his head it was a gun bald-headed Mr. Smith had in his hand. From behind the wheel of the old Buick Tad saw the big man come striding fast around the corner of the brick building, then stop and look back and

pull the black thing that looked like a gun from his pocket. The little dark man called Frenchy was walking a few steps ahead of him carrying a brown leather bag. He stopped, too.

The boy saw the gray uniform of the bank policeman come into sight just as Mr.

Smith's hand snapped back twice from the recoil. Pounding Tad's ear came the loud crack of the explosion and a numbing realization came over him. Yes, it was a gun he was looking at in Mr. Smith's hand. He saw the man in the gray uniform suddenly totter aimlessly across the sidewalk and plunge face downward into the gutter of the street.

Then big, bald Mr. Smith and Frenchy were alongside the Buick scrambling into it. The big man climbed into the front seat beside Tad and the small man into the rear seat beside old Mr. Pursey. The boy felt a sharp, painful blow against his ribs and looking down saw it was the ugly black barrel of the revolver. "Drive it, Kid! Get it outa here quick!"

The boy let in the clutch and the car started to roll slowly.

"Faster!" Again he felt the vicious bite of the gun barrel.

He speeded up until they were moving as fast as the narrow street and the thick traffic would allow. Mr. Smith kept hunching his big body around and twisting his neck so his heavy gray jaw pointed backward. "O.K., Kid, slow 'er down now. If we go too fast we might pick up a cop."

"You sure there ain't nobody tailin' us, Bones?" the little one called Frenchy demanded, his voice jittery and nervous.

The big man called "Bones," whom the boy knew as Mr. Smith, stared at the smaller Frenchy with contempt. "Get a hold a' yourself, Frog-eyes," he said. "You're shakin' like a gandi-dancer."

Tad was trying to think. A frown creased through the scatter of freckles under the wild thatch of straw-colored hair. He didn't think fast, for he was what he looked to be—a ranch boy, small in stature and blunted by hard honest work with his hands. His habit of trusting good-nature didn't catch on quick to what was mean and unfriendly.

"Turn 'er here," directed the bald-headed Bones. "Swing 'er right and take the Steven's Pass highway east."

"But that ain't the way to California," Tad objected, and he knew before it was out he was talking dumb.

"We changed our plans some," the big man answered dryly. His unfeeling ice-gray eyes seemed to extract amusement from the boy's discomfort.

"But—but—" the boy choked.

"Don't worry, Kid. We'll tell you where to go."

Tad hadn't liked the two of them from the start. He had instinctively distrusted the bald man with the heavy jaw whom the travel man had introduced as Mr. Smith and the big man's dark waxy-faced, shifty-eyed companion called Frenchy. But the man at the travel agency had made all the arrangements only a few minutes before Tad had been given his first look at the three passengers who were to share his expenses in the drive to San Francisco.

"I should have been suspicious of them when the big one asked me to park around the corner from the bank while he cashed a check," the boy said to himself. But then it occurred to him that robbing a bank was something you just didn't expect anyone you were acquainted with would do.

Bones turned to the dark-faced man in the rear seat. "Look in the bag, Frenchy," he said. "See how we came out."

Frenchy dumped the contents of the brown leather bag on the seat between himself and old Mr. Pursey. Little gray-haired Mr. Pursey had paid his share for passage to San Francisco where a bookkeeping job was waiting for him. He was still too astonished at what was going on around him to utter a sound. He stared out goggle-eyed through his thick glasses and crowded himself against the side of the car.

A good-sized pile of tight bundles of paper money rested on the seat cushion. Frenchy picked them up one by one, flipped through them expertly and put them back in the bag. "There's over fifty grand," he said tensely. "Maybe sixty."

"Not bad," said the big man in the front seat. "Not bad for a day's work. Split three ways that gives us twenty thousand apiece."

"Do we have to split with Joey?" Frenchy asked sourly. "Can't we go somewheres else beside the hideout?"

Bones turned his head and fixed Frenchy with an icy glare. "You dang fool, Frenchy," he growled. "There you go tryin' to think for yourself again. After I spend more'n a year in the big house figurin' out all the angles on this here get-away, you have to start tellin' me how we oughta do it."

"But, Bones, I was only thinkin' of havin' more dough for both of us," Frenchy said defensively.

"You knot-head!" the big man called. Bones answered with disgust. "Didn't I tell you that me an' Joey used to be pals when we was in the woods loggin' together? It was him that told me about the cabin an' helped me pack the grub in. He knows them hills like a book, an' he can guide us right up over the mountains an' bring us down the Icicle River on the east side where the cops won't think of lookin' for us."

"O.K., Bones," Frenchy said. "I won't say no more. But you got to admit I told you about the bank. Wasn't the money right where I said it was gonna be?"

"You didn't say nothin' about that bank cop I plugged."

"Honest, Bones, I never seen him before. He wasn't around the bank when I was sizin' things up the other day."

"You was prob'ly just too dumb to see him. Now the cops are goin' to be twice as hot on our tail. Turn on the radio, Kid."

TAD reached down and switched on the car radio. The big man twisted the knob from station to station. Music and advertising came out through the speaker. "They ain't got it yet," he said. "Give 'em another five minutes an' they'll be spoutin' off about the stick-up."

"You think they got a line on us?" Frenchy asked nervously.

"Naw. That cop won't say nothin'. I got him right through the pump the first time. The second shot was just for luck."

Frenchy began to fumble again with the money bundles in the bag. His little black eyes fired up with the feel of it. "Gee," he muttered. "Sixty thousand bucks in one haul an' they ain't even tailin' us yet. Bones, I got to hand it to you for figurin' out that travel agency idea. What cop'd ever figure this was a get-away car when he sees a old goat an' a punk kid in it?"

"It ain't only that," Bones said. "But now the bulls don't know what kind of a crate to look for. Most dumb guys steal a car an' right off the cops broadcast a description an' everybody's on the lookout for it. This heap won't be missed for a week or more. Anybody knowin' the kid will think he's on his way drivin' to Frisco."

They passed a sign marking the Seattle city limits and at the big man's order Tad shoved down on the gas and increased the

pace of the car. Soon the thinning houses along the road gave way to dense woods of alder and second-growth fir trees and a few miles ahead of them loomed the dark barrier of the Cascade Mountain range.

The boy finally found his ability to speak. "Where you makin' me drive to, Mr. Smith? I ain't gonna take my car to no place but California."

Bones looked at him again with cold amusement for a minute. "Listen, Kid, can't you get it through that thick head a' yours that what you say don't make no difference no more. As long as my gun's pointin' at you you're goin' any place I tell you."

Tad swallowed and answered with trouble. "All right, Mr. Smith," he rasped.

Frenchy looked at the boy and twisted his face in a grin. "He sure is a dumb-lookin' bunny," he said. "I never seen a kid what looked more like a hayseed."

"How long you been off the farm, Kid?" asked Bones.

The boy answered in a lifeless tone. "I left the day before yesterday. We had a dairy place up near Tolt."

"You never shoulda left it, Kid. A dumb punk like you ain't good for much else but followin' horses around with a shovel."

"I had to leave," the boy said.

"How come you had to leave?"

"My pa died a while back an' there wasn't nobody left but me."

"How come you didn't stick around the place by yourself?" asked Bones, keeping up the questions as he could see they bothered the boy.

"The place wasn't mine no more," Tad answered. "We was buyin' the twenty acres on time an' I couldn't make the payments. The man at the bank said I had to leave. That's why I had the travel man get me passengers so I would have money enough to drive Dad's old car to my uncle's place in California."

Bones switched on the radio again. This time came a news flash of the bank hold-up. "No description of the get-away car is available," said the announcer. "But police are establishing road blocks on all the highways leading out of Seattle."

"They'll try to stop us sure comin' in to Woodinville," Bones said. "An' listen, Hayseed, you better talk right. You're drivin' back to your old man's apple ranch in Wena-

chee, see. The old goat there is your granddad, an' me'n Frenchy are hands in your old man's orchard. Get it?"

Tad digested the information slowly. "Yes, Mr. Smith," he murmured weakly.

"An' cut out that 'Mr. Smith' stuff. That's just the baloney we fed the guy at the travel agency."

THE old Buick rounded a curve and they were at the outskirts of the little town of Woodinville. Ahead of them Tad could see cars blocking all but one lane of the highway and a state policeman standing on the pavement. "It's the road-block," said Frenchy, his voice shaky.

Bones started to speak but was cut off midway. Without warning the boy had yanked the steering wheel swerving the car to the gravel at the side of the road. He jammed on the brakes. The suddenness of the stop smashed Bones hard against the dashboard and before he could recover himself Tad had the door open and was squirming out.

Then an iron vise seemed to clamp on his right arm just above the elbow and an unbearable sharp pain was in his side. He could feel warm blood under his clothes where the razor-sharp knife in Bones' hand had broken the skin. "One break an' you get it all the way," Bones hissed. "Talk right!" There was death in his voice.

The policeman had walked up to Tad's side of the car and was staring at him inquiringly. "What's the idea, Kid?"

"Huh?" the boy stammered.

The officer's face alerted sharply. "You heard me—what's the idea of skidding off the road like that?"

Tad hesitated. He felt a new pain. "I—I just got some new brakes," he explained weakly.

The state policeman glanced around at the others in the car. "Where you goin'?"

Brokenly the boy explained about the apple ranch in Wenatchee.

After hearing it all, the officer seemed satisfied and waved them forward. Tad started the Buick and they passed on through the town.

He felt the pressure of the knife ease away. "You crazy hick," Bones snarled. "I oughta slit your guts open."

"Why don't we get rid of the two of them

now?" asked Frenchy sourly. "They ain't no more use to us."

"No, not yet," said Bones. "You seen how they got us through that road-block. All a cop's gotta do is take a good look at Hayseed's dumb map, an' he knows the dope couldn't make up a story for himself."

After a minute Frenchy said. "How soon do we get to the hideout?"

"We leave the road a couple miles the other side of Skykomish. It ain't far now," answered Bones. "Let's see what we got on the radio."

This time when the announcement came about the robbery it was much the same. "Sixty thousand in cash taken," it said. "Still no trace of the bandits. State policemen combing the roads."

"You was right, Frenchy," the big man said. "Sixty thousand smackers."

Now the car was laboring on the mountain grades between steep slopes covered with heavy forest. On one side and below them the Skykomish River splashed in its rocky channel. After they had climbed steadily for about a half-hour they passed through a collection of rough frame buildings where the highway passed over the railroad line. Bones jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "That was Skykomish," he said. "Now we got only two miles to go."

Frenchy leaned forward in the back seat and scowled out at the rugged mountain-side. "It looks rougher'n hell," he said. "It don't make me itch to do no walkin'."

"The rougher it is the better for us," said the big man dryly. "You didn't expect we was going on no picnic, did you?"

They reached a place where the road came down close beside the river. Here, between walls of gray granite the churning water had gouged a hole down that showed black and bottomless. "Pull 'er off here, Kid," Bones said, speaking loud to be heard above the noise of the water. "An' both you guys get out. Frenchy, you hold your gun on 'em."

Tad and old Mr. Pursey stepped down from the car and watched Bones. They saw him twist the wheel of the Buick so it pointed toward the river and reach for the handbrake. "Wait a minute!" cried Frenchy.

"What's eatin' you?" Bones asked impatiently.

"There's a guy down there by the crick. He's got a fishin' pole."

Bones followed Frenchy's pointed finger with his eyes. A few hundred feet down the stream from where they stood a fisherman was casting his line across a pool where the water whirled and eddied around a jam of floating sticks and logs.

They watched him hook and land a fair-sized trout and then after a few more casts move on and disappear around a bend in the stream.

After a few moments, Bones said, "It's O. K. now. He's goin' the other way." He reached in quickly and threw off the hand brake and gave the car a shove.

With wet eyes but without speaking, the boy watched the car sink out of sight in the deep pool of the river. He clenched his fists white in the knowledge of his helplessness.

Bones scraped the telltale tire tracks off the road with the side of his shoe. "Now we gotta climb," he said to Frenchy. "We're gonna follow up that branch crick that runs down into the river there. Over that hump is where Joey found the hideout I been tellin' you about. It's a cabin some trapper built long before they put the road through over the pass."

"Where's the trail?" asked Frenchy, peering up into the dense tangle of cedar and salmon berry bushes and twisted deadfalls.

"There ain't no trail," said Bones. "That's what makes it a good hideout. We gotta push our way up through them broken rocks and trees. Go on, Hayseed. You and the old goat start out first."

"What we takin' them along for?" demanded Frenchy.

"We can't leave 'em here," said the bald-headed man shortly. "Besides, if we should run into a fisherman or somebody, the kid can get us by like he done with the cops."

The boy started up, slipping on the wet rocks beside the rushing current of the stream, bloodying himself on the thorns of the salmon berry and devilsclub bushes, and getting soaked by the water that splashed off the granite boulders. For Frenchy and the old man the going was even harder, but Tad saw that Bones, who had worked in the woods, moved along without trouble. The boy noticed that Bones was wearing hobnailed logger's boots which gave him an easy footing on the slick surface of the rock.

THOUGH he knew they had not come much over a mile, hours seemed to go by in the climb before Tad crashed through the brush at the head of the ravine into a wide open space. Before them, standing close beside the clear running waters of the creek, stood the cabin. It's rough-hewn logs and timbers were blackened but still solid.

"There she is," Bones said to Frenchy. "The grub and blankets is inside. If Joey's here we can pack up the stuff and start up over the range by way of the back trails he knows about."

"What we gonna do with the kid and the old man?" Frenchy asked.

The big man looked at the two eyeing him so forlorn and unhappy. He moved his open palm where the gun bulged out his coat pocket and spoke grimly. "We'll have to take care of them before we leave," he said.

Bones went into the cabin first. He twisted his head and spoke back over his shoulder to Frenchy. "Joey ain't here yet," he said. "We'll have to stick around till he gets here."

Frenchy shook his head darkly. "Twenty grand," he said. "An' he ain't even here to pick it up."

After Bones had started a fire, Frenchy took the ax and went out of sight in the trees across the clearing after more wood. Bones stood in the doorway and barked an order at Tad. "Take that bucket an' bring back some water from the crick." He ducked back inside where the food and supplies were piled on the floor.

As he had been instructed the boy picked up the bucket, but as he passed on the way to the stream bank he paused and whispered a few words in old Pursey's ear. The old man's eyes moved nervously behind his thick glasses and he nodded his head. When the boy returned with his load to the cabin, Bones appeared and took the bucket from his hand. The big man looked at the two of them calculatingly and then stepped back inside.

The instant he was lost to sight, Tad and the old man sprang to action. Old Pursey ran awkwardly on his stiff legs for the woods on the same side of the stream as the cabin. Tad sprinted in the opposite direction for a fallen log that spanned the creek. If their plan worked one of them should get away.

But hardly had they made a good start when the sound of their running brought Bones back out through the door. In a glance his cold eyes took in the situation and his brain knew what to do. He ignored the slower running Pursey, who was closest to him, and took out after the boy.

What Tad had not reckoned with was the slippery surface of the log. In crossing he had to slow to keep his balance, and when he reached the far side, Bones, whose hobnailed feet stuck to the log like glue, was only a step behind him. The big man had his gun in his hand. He raised it and chopped the barrel down sharply against the side of the boy's skull.

Tad was stunned but not unconscious. He lifted himself on his elbow and with pounding head looked up at the man who stood above him. Bones had leveled the long barreled Colt and was supporting his careful aim across his left forearm. Old Pursey, who was moving close to the cover of the forest, stumbled and did not get up. The biting smell of powder smoke entered Tad's nostrils.

Tad did not get to his feet at first. He stayed down on the dirt until Bones, seeing he wasn't knocked out, pushed him roughly with his foot. "Get up!" he ordered. "Get up an' fetch that shovel there by the cabin."

THE boy slowly obeyed. With Bones standing by he began to scoop out a trench among the tall ferns where the old man had fallen. Frenchy, who had heard the shot, came up to stand beside them. "Did the old goat try to scam?" he asked.

"It's just as good," Bones answered. "It was comin' to him anyway." His eyes rested thoughtfully on the grave after the body had been rolled in and Tad was covering it over with black leaf mold and chunks of rotted wood and moss. "They won't find him here in a hundred years," the big man said.

All at once the murder of poor harmless, greyhaired Mr. Pursey snapped something in the boy's brain. He flared up hot and wild. "Maybe they'll know it," he cried. "If I tell 'em." But his last words tapered off weakly. He knew he had been stupid again.

Bones looked at him and a slow wolfish grin spread over his heavy face.

"You, Hayseed. You don't catch on very

fast, but you ain't goin' to be around long to tell nobody nothin'."

Frenchy spoke up impatiently. "What we waitin' for, Bones? It ain't safe keepin' him around. He might get loose or something."

The big man grunted sourly. "Don't you think I got brains enough to outfigure a dumb farm hick like him? We'll keep him around till Joey gets here. Besides I like havin' him here just for laughs."

When twilight came Bones locked Tad in the little storeroom at one end of the cabin. There were no windows and only a dim light filtered through the chinks where the clay had fallen out from between the logs. The room was empty except for a bundle of hand-split cedar shakes in one corner that had been left there at some time in the past for repairs on the roof. A quick groping around and the boy knew it was hopeless. The walls and ceiling were firm.

He laid two of the cedar boards down on the damp dirt floor and sat on them. With his back against the log wall he closed his eyes to a feeling of misery. His head throbbed painfully. Suddenly a thought came to him. Like Bones said, he wouldn't be around to tell who had murdered old Mr. Pursey—but why couldn't he leave a message for someone else to find?

He picked up a short piece of board that was smooth on one side. Then he fished in his pocket until he found the stub of a pencil, and sitting down again began to painfully scratch out the letters.

When he had covered the board with writing a new idea struck him. Why not make several messages so one would be sure to be discovered? And why let Bones get the thirty dollars the travel man had given him? Why not leave it to someone who more deserved it? When he had finished writing on two more shakes he removed his shoelaces and tied each of the ten dollar bills securely around a piece of scratched wood. After that he sat long in the fading light holding the cedar boards in his hand. Now he must figure out the right place to hide them.

TAD was chilled and cramped when he was roused in the morning after a night spent without blankets in the cold mountain air. Bones had opened the door of the room and was kicking him with his heavy foot. "Fill the water bucket, Kid," he ordered

tersely. "An' then gather up some chips for the fire. An' don't try nothin' funny. Remember I got my eye on you all the time."

The boy got up and moved awkwardly down to the creek, keeping his back from the men to hide his scared eyes from them.

When the two had finished eating, Bones shoved out a plate of leftovers to Tad—but he refused. He couldn't eat. He had no hunger, only the gnawing pain in the pit of his stomach that came with know-what was going to happen to him.

Bones busy'd himself for a while getting the provisions ready for the trip over the mountains. But at midday he stopped and catching Frenchy's eye jerked his head in the direction of Tad. "Joey will be showin' up any time now," he said. "We got some work we better get outa the way."

"Yeh," said Frenchy. "The sooner the better."

"Come on, Hayseed," Bones said. "Pick up the shovel. We got another hole for you to dig."

As if he was in a dream the boy got his hand around the shovel and pulled it up to him. Bones led him to a spot close to the patch of fresh turned dirt where he had dug the day before.

"No," the boy whispered desperately, unable to get a bigger sound through his dry lips.

"There ain't no other way, Hayseed," the big man said. "You seen me knock off the other two. Start diggin'."

After three quarters of an hour the grave was almost completed. Several times Bones had to urge Tad to speed up. "Quit stallin', Kid," he said. "Let's get it over with."

Glaring at him fiercely, the boy suddenly clenched the shovel handle tight and tried to swing it around—but his position in the hole made him clumsy. Bones saw the blow coming and stepped easily to one side.

"It's no use, Hayseed," he said. "I'm way ahead of you. Quit stallin' an' dig."

The boy resumed his labor. But this time his narrow shoulders sagged slack and beaten. All hope had left him.

"What was that?" asked Frenchy sharply, turned his head around to stare in the direction of the brush behind the cabin.

Tad stopped digging and they all listened. They heard the sound of movement in the

undergrowth and wood snapping under heavy feet.

"It's Joey," said Bones, his face brightening. "He's late, but he finally got here." He raised his voice. "Hey, Joey! Over here!"

Frenchy, who was standing closest to the woods, moved forward a few paces and waited for Joey to come into sight. But as the branches of a thick clump of hemlock parted, he jerked back violently. Instinctively his hand moved to the pocket where he kept his gun.

The gun never came into sight. Tad saw him suddenly clamp both hands to his chest and fall over backward. At the same time he heard the sharp echoing report of a rifle shot. He saw Bones drop his long barreled revolver and raise his hands above his head. The big man was smart enough to recognize the superiority of the 30-30 rifles in the hands of the two strangers who had stepped out into the clearing.

The two sheriff's deputies stared for a minute at the hole the boy had been digging next to the mound of fresh earth. When they turned their eyes on Bones their faces showed the hate they felt. "Plannin' a little buryin' party, eh?" one asked.

The big, bald-headed man didn't answer.

One of the sheriff's men spoke to Tad. "We got your message, Kid," he said. "An' you ain't gonna be sorry for your good work. The bank's offered a reward."

The boy tried but couldn't answer. Warm tears of relief were in his eyes.

"We picked up the other guy, Joey, down by the road," the man added.

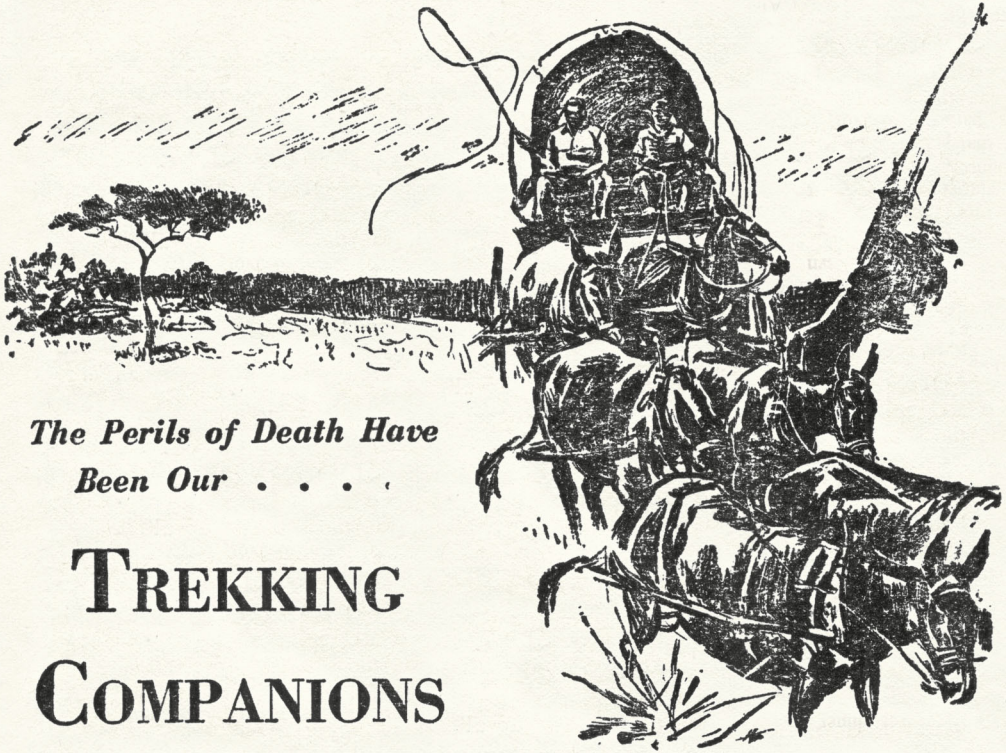
With handcuffs around his wrists, Bones had been listening. His wide hard face had become a twisted mask of puzzlement. "It ain't possible there was a message," he growled. "There wasn't no one here to take it."

Both of the strangers looked at him and laughed.

"There's just one thing you forgot," said one of the deputies.

"Huh?"

"The crick. It was a smart trick for the kid to scratch all the dope on a piece of wood an' heave it in the crick. A fisherman pulled it out this mornin' about a mile down below here. He seen it floatin' by him with a ten dollar bill tied on to it."



*The Perils of Death Have
Been Our . . .*

TREKKING COMPANIONS

THE African moon was at the full. Its white light, cold, yet seeming incandescent, exposed with a ruthless clarity the nakedness of the veldt's contours, gave the stunted, thorn-armored bush trees the appearance of spectral images and made of the rock outcrops and giant boulders verisimilitudes of prehistoric beasts of prey. It was a light which seemed to cast a gossamer veil of illusion over all things; filling deep hollows and ravines, making dark shadows appear like yawning craters. Things distant appeared close at hand and near-by things it removed a day's trek away. It was a part of Africa's magic; making a fantasy of things material and giving an illusion of solidity to things as intangible as a spider's web and the condensation of an animal's outbreathing. It created a fantastic, two-dimensional world as unreal as the cardboard "flats" of a cheap stage set: picking out the jagged peaks of a line of distant kopjes, it caused them to appear no more substantial than a much used, wrinkled and sagging back drop.

A thin white mist rising little more than two feet sheeted the veldt, shrouding it,

muffling sound, hiding what moved and lived beneath its surface.

A white, tented topped wagon moved at an easy pace across the undulating veldt. It was drawn by sleek, well-conditioned mules. Tethered to the tail-board of the wagon, following as docilely as a phlegmatic farm horse, was a coal black stallion—it was a native Basutu breed with a leavening of Arab.

The passage of the wagon—appearing above the mist as if it were floating on a tideless sea—was almost noiseless; there was only a dull rumble of the well-greased wheels, a not unmusical creaking as the wagon lurched over the veldt's unevenness: that and the even patter of the animals' hoofs.

The two men on the wagon's driving seat sat in that understanding silence which can better demonstrate good companionship than a spate of words; two men, as markedly distinct in outward appearance as the moon's white light from the darkest of the night's shadows.

Two men. One, the driver, holding in his two hands the long stocked, long lashed driving whip, was a Hottentot—a yellow-

skinned woolly-haired Hottentot. There was an almost Oriental slant to the set of his sloe-black eyes; his chin was pointed and receding; the skin of his face and body was wrinkled by time and scarred by a hundred wounds witnessing to a life of perilous adventure: he had more than once been raked by a lion's claws, soft-nosed bullets had left signs of their passage; assegais had sliced through his flesh. He was no taller than the average of his people, no handsomer, but for the expression of his eyes—especially when he looked up at the man who sat beside him—he would have been ugly beyond imagining. There was something almost simian in his appearance as he sat now utterly relaxed, his body giving easily to the wagon's lurch and sway, flourishing the big whip as if it were no heavier than a reed plucked from the river bed. His short, naked legs were slightly bowed, his powerful arms abnormally long and the girth of his chest suggested a gorillalike strength.

He was dwarfed in all physical particulars by the man who sat beside him, holding the reins in his hands, wearing well-fitting riding breeches and a white, semi-military tunic coat. In the heels of this man's knee-high brown riding boots golden box spurs occasionally caught and reflected the rays of the moon. He was bare-headed and his jet black hair was brushed straight back over a well-shaped skull.

"But *why* are we going back to Marka's kraal, Baas?" the Hottentot asked, suddenly breaking the silence.

"To return to Marka the diamonds which are his, Jim."

The question and answer, which seemed

to be an audible continuation of what had hitherto been a silent conversation, had been spoken in the Hottentot's *clicking* dialect, and from voice alone it would have been difficult to have said which man was speaking; if anything, the white man's intonation was purer than that of the Hottentot.

"But it is folly, Baas," he protested with a characteristic pouting out-thrust of his thick lips. "The stones came to us by chance—"

"They were stolen by evil white men, Jim. And it was my folly which gave them the opportunity to steal—and to work other evil."

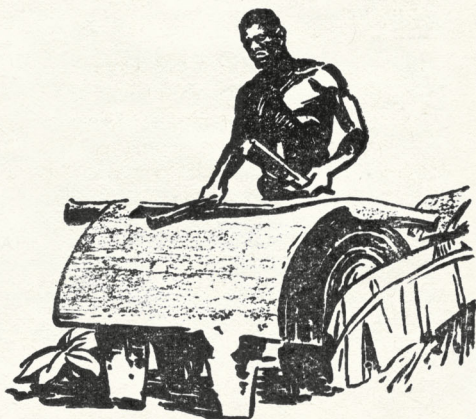
The Hottentot chuckled.

"And it was your wisdom, Baas, which defeated the evil they planned and put into your hands the diamonds they had stolen. *Wu!* And now you plan to give back the rewards of your wisdom. What folly!" Again that swift out-thrust of his lips. Then the Hottentot continued in a voice of mock despair, appealing, it seemed, to the unseen spirits of the veldt: "Pay heed to the wonder, to the uprightness of my Baas! *Wo-we!* But he is the Major! He is a man amongst men—and I am his servant! All the years of our manhood—and they are not few—we have wandered together up and down this mighty land, seeking the white stones which grow in the earth and which white men prize—I know not why! We have played the many games which the evil magic of the stones always sets before those who follow the search. We have defeated death, in manifold forms. Times beyond my counting. *Wo-we!* The perils of death have been our trekking companions; the blankets which covered us; the fires at which we

A "Major" Story

by

L. PATRICK GREENE



cooked our food; the plates from which we ate. And all this that we might become possessed of bits of dirt dug from the dirt! Yet—heed now to the wonder of it!—when now diamonds, more than would fill my Baas' helmet, come easily into our keeping, when there is none to say, 'yea' or 'nay', we trek through the night to give them up. To what end? Why, Baas?"

THE white man, Aubrey St. John Major, "the Major" to all white Africa, smiled.

"Would you have us break the law, Jim?" he asked banteringly. "Or to be like hyenas, getting fat on the killing of others? No. The stones are Marka's and to Marka they must be returned."

"It must be as the Baas pleases," Jim said resignedly. "He is all wise! Nevertheless—" and he nodded his head sagely—"this is great folly. The stones are not Marka's."

"They were stolen by his young men who worked in the mines. Furthermore, Baas, they are of less value in Marka's eyes than a string of colored beads such as can be bought at any *ivinkel** for no more than a *tikkey*.** So let us now go to an *ivinkel*. Buy there, if you will, all the colored beads in the place and give them to Marka in exchange for the stones and he will laugh to himself all the rest of his years thinking how he bested you in a bargain."

"But of course," Jim continued after a quick side glance at the Major, "the Baas will not do that. *Au-a!* It is not the stones or the wealth which they can bring him which delight his heart. If that were all, we could trek again to a little valley we know where there are stones in plenty to be had for no more than the work of stooping to pick them up. But no! The Baas' pleasure does not lie that way. So we return the stones to Marka. Just the same." Jim added as an afterthought, "you are doing Marka no kindness, Baas. It is as though you were putting a pack of hunger-maddened hyenas in to his kraal; as if you had released a black momba in his sleeping hut."

The Major roused himself and looked sharply at the Hottentot.

"How so, Jim?"

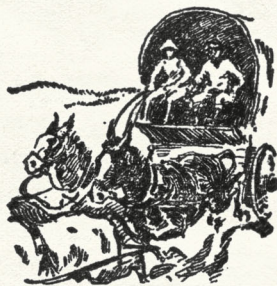
"There will be other evil white men who

will try to steal the stones from Marka once it is known—as it will be known—that you have returned them to him. So, you are returning something to him on which he sets no value, but to obtain which evil white men will kill—or worse."

The Major nodded.

"That is something to think of, Jim," he admitted. "Perhaps you are right and I am wrong. Perhaps it would be wise to find another way."

There was a momentary gleam of triumph in the Hottentot's eyes; he masked it by turning his head away from the Major and with a flourish of the whip sent the long lash curling over the backs of the mules with a loud crack.



The animals broke into a canter, but his shout of "Ah, now!" soothed them, canceling the urge of the whip and they dropped once again into an easy, steady trot.

A few moments later the two leaders shied violently, then stopped. Their example was followed by the other four and instantly the six were in a jumble of confusion—snorting, rearing, squealing, their hard hooves lashing out viciously.

The Hottentot jumped down from the wagon and moved easily amongst the mules, talking to them—seeming to speak a language which they understood—calming them, straightening out the tangle into which they had got the harness gear.

"What frightened them, Jim?" the Major called, reaching for his rifle which hung on pegs close to his hand. But he knew the answer before Jim gave it to him. There was no mistaking the origin of the strong, musk-like odor which came to his nostrils. He heard a strong, sharp hissing noise—like that made by steam escaping from an engine's safety valve. It was followed by a hoarse, half-muffled bellowing roar. He looked in the direction of the sound and

**Ivinkel*, small trading store.

***Tikkey*, small coin worth about five cents.

saw, half concealed by the white veil of mist, the monstrously obscene form of a gigantic crocodile. It was making a long, overland migration to some far distant pool in search of food—or a mate.

"It is the father of all crocodiles, Baas," Jim called excitedly. "Shoot it!"

The Major laughed and hung up his rifle again.

"What need, Jim? It has done us no harm—and will not."

"As to that, you cannot say, Baas. It may well be, on one of the days which are now hidden from us by the darkness of all the tomorrows, we will have occasion to cross a river and this crocodile—this one you now let go safely from you—will be the one to take you to his larder. *Wo-we*, Baas! Crocodiles are *schelm* and it is always wise to kill *schelm*—whether they be lions or spitting snakes; rogue elephants or the fly-fleas of death; crocodiles, hyenas or—or evil men. That the Baas will not kill *schelm* is—*Ou!* How many times have I said this?—the Baas' weakness. He permits them to live. Often, even after they have done him an evil. It comes to me that, some day, that weakness will cause his death—and mine. I—"

He stopped short as a weird cry sounded; it was a long drawn-out, eerie note; it sounded as if its maker was expressing all the sorrows the world has known since time began.

"It is a Gonya Baas," the Hottentot muttered through chattering teeth. "To hear it at such a time is an evil omen. It is, maybe a sign of the evil which will come to us because you did not kill the *schelm*."

"That's is child's talk, Jim," the Major said with a laugh. "And you are a man, a hunter and a warrior. You know it is a gonya insect. It is powerless to hurt even a new-born child. Its cry—*wo-we!* That is the voice the Great Spirits have given it, but truly they have given it no power to see into the future. Come, let us trek!"

Jim grunted, muttering to himself:

"My Baas is all wise. Yet there are things even he does not know. And to hear a gonya at night—*Wu!* The smallest child at a kraal knows it is an omen of evil, perhaps of death."

He turned to climb up into the wagon, then halted and stood listening intently.

"What is it, Jim?" the Major called softly.

Jim held up his hand for silence then stooped and put an ear to the ground. The iron-hard surface of the veldt acted as a sounding board, carrying to his supernaturally keen ears noises which came from a great distance. The Major never ceased to wonder at the miraculous demonstrations Jim so often gave of his acute hearing which was matched, incidentally, by an almost telescopic eyesight—Jim was often able to describe things so far distant that the Major could only just discern them through his field glasses. The explanation, the Major knew, was not so much that Jim—in common with most native hunters—had developed his senses to the *n*th power, but that white men, lacking the need in the fight for survival, had lost the powers which had been their heritage.

At last Jim rose to his feet and came round to the wagon.

"I heard men's voices, Baas," he said. "The voices of white men. There are three, no four, of them. They are making an out-span and they are, I think, angry."

The Major did not question the Hottentot's statement though he was dubious about the accuracy of Jim's final deduction; the Hottentot, with a child-like desire to impress, was not above drawing a bow at a venture.

"Where are they, Jim?"

The Hottentot pointed over the veldt to the north.

"They can be of no concern of ours, Baas," he said quickly. "They are only *voetgangers*."*

"That is no blame to them, Jim," the Major said absently. Then he continued in English, speaking his thoughts aloud, "By jove! The bally veldt is becomin' positively overcrowded." He drawled the words almost affectedly and it was strange, now that he spoke English, how his speech seemed to dress him in dudish clothes. More than that. His muscular strength seemed to have slipped from him, the strong lines of his jaw softened. He fumbled in the breast pocket of his tunic, took from it a monocle which he fixed in his right eye. There was no doubt about it now—he looked the com-

*Voetgangers, a name contemptuously given to white men who, through poverty, are obliged to trek on foot.

plete, effete, nincompoop of a dude! He continued:

"These four—if they *are* four—can't possibly be the same three I—er—discharged from my wagon two or three hours ago. No. That's quite impossible. They must be miles away in the other direction. Then who are these? What are they doing so far away from the *dorps* without some sort of—er—transportation. One, or even two, might have been a prospector down on his luck. But four! Pon my soul, my insatiable curiosity is aroused. Think I ought to pay them a call—leave my card an' all that."

He stood up on the seat and looked over the veldt in the direction Jim had pointed. At first he could see nothing save a crazy pattern of light and shade showing above the sheet of mist, and it was only because his eyes were very keen and trained to observe that he finally detected a yellow glow and knew it came from a campfire.

THEN a shot sounded. It came to his ears no louder than the snapping of a dry twig.

"Now I *know* I must pay them a visit!" he exclaimed as he jumped down from the seat into the back of the wagon.

"What is it that the Baas will do?" Jim asked anxiously.

"I am going to ride over to the outspan of the four—you said four?—men, Jim," the Major replied handing down the horse's saddle and bridle to the Hottentot. "Perhaps they need help. You will go on to Marka's kraal. I will join you there before sun-up."

Jim groaned in dismay.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed. "Did not the *gonya* scream? It is not wise to ignore its warning, Baas. Do not go, Baas. Or if you must go—at least let me come with you."

"There is no need, Jim."

"They may be *schelm*, Baas!"

"I know how to deal with *schelm*, Jim," the Major replied with a laugh, patting his revolver holster which hung at his hip.

"You *know* how to deal with them, Baas," Jim said lugubriously, "but you do not act according to your knowledge. That is why I fear. You let *schelms* live."

Then, having made his protest, Jim busied himself saddling and bridling the stallion. A few moments later the Major

swung himself lightly into the saddle, waved a gaily mocking salute to Jim, and rode off slowly in the direction of the distant outspan.

Jim climbed up into the wagon and for a little while watched his Baas' progress.

"How like my Baas," he exclaimed. "*Wo-we!* He would ride to meet death—*knowing* that death waited at the rendezvous—just as gaily as he would ride to meet a great reward. There is no fear in him.

"*Juk*, there!"

His call to the mules set them moving forward on a line at right angles to that taken by the Major, heading for the kraal of the headman, Marka, which nestled at the base of a distant kopje. But Jim was still uneasy. His thoughts rode with his Baas.

"I do not like it," he muttered. "The Baas rides alone—he thinks, may be, to give aid to men in need. But supposing it is a camp of evil men to which he rides! Suppose they have set a trap in which they hope to snare him—"

Jim shook his head as if, by that action, he could rid himself of his fears.

"*Wo-we!*" he continued presently. "Truly I am a fool!" The Baas is *slim*! His eyes can see through the fog of lies behind which evil always seeks to hide itself. He is not a child. I am a fool to thus concern myself."

Jim commenced one of the songs of his people. His voice was harshly unmusical, the tune a primitive wailing dirge, the words—they would have shocked the broad-mindedest of missionaries!

But the song quickly died away. He shivered—and it was not cold. His fears had returned with renewed force.

THE mules were now descending the gentle slope of a deep depression—probably a long dried up water course—which ran due north and south across the veldt. The mist grew thicker, rose higher. By the time they had reached the bed of the depression it completely engulfed the wagon and Jim could scarcely discern the hind quarters of the two wheel mules.

Jim halted the mules and once again debated with himself the wisest course to follow; whether to obey his Baas' instructions or follow the promptings of his own intuition.

"The Baas will be angry if I disobey him," Jim muttered ruefully. "He will talk of beatings—*au!* But there's always laughter in his eyes to soften such talk. And that is his weakness. If he had a little evil in his being—just a little evil; enough to harden him in some ways; enough to make him deal harshly with all *schelm* who cross his path! Enough to make him kill! But then he would not be my Baas. He would not be the man I have served—and counted the service my reward—these many years. But now—what to do?"

The weirdly mournful cry of a *gonya* sounded again.

Jim started and clutched desperately at the bag of charms which hung by a cord about his neck. He gabbled a meaningless jargon which had been taught him—for a steep tuition fee—by a witch doctor who guaranteed its power to ward off all evil, whether of this world or the next.

He called sharply to the mules, setting them in motion again. But instead of heading them up the opposite slope of the depression he headed them north and drove them slowly along the bed of the depression. The mist which hid the wagon, seemed also to deaden the rumble of the wagon wheels and the patter of the animals' feet.

"The Baas will understand," he encouraged himself, "when I tell him about the *gonya's* second warning."

THREE white men sat on their blanket rolls beside their campfire. One of the men, he was grossly fat, was grilling strips of buck meat on a cleverly improvised spit. A second man was clumsily mixing flour and water, making some sour dough bread: the movements of his hands were restricted by the shining steel handcuffs on his wrists. There were handcuffs, too, on the wrists of the fat man. The remaining member of the trio was idly whittling a piece of wood with a razor-sharp hunting knife. He wore the uniform of the mounted police and was the most disreputable-looking of the three. He was a tall, thin man with a hatchet face. His tight lips were set in a perpetual mocking sneer. He was clean-shaven—at least he had no mustache or beard, but his face had not known a razor for several days past and the red, fuzzy growth of hair blurred the outlines of his cheeks and

heightened his unkempt appearance. His uniform fitted him not at all, the tunic hanging loosely from his narrow shoulders, the riding breeches sagging in concertina-like folds. The brass buttons were tarnished. He was ragged and dirty.

He chewed tobacco noisily, spitting occasionally into the heart of the fire, causing it to hiss viciously and send up a little column of malodorous smoke. And he kept up a constant flow of obscenely sarcastic comments on the labors of his two companions. They returned his insults with others equally vile, unperturbed, as if it were their natural tone of conversation.

"Suppose he doesn't come, Jake," the fat man said presently. His voice matched his appearance. The words seemed to ooze greasily from between his lips that scarcely parted wide enough to give them utterance; yet his enunciation was clear enough and the tone was pipingly clear—almost fruity.

The uniformed man, Jake Rennie, spat again into the fire.

"*Ach sis!*" he exclaimed. "Already five times yet you have asked that foolish question, Parker. And five times I have answered you. If it is the Major—and it *is* the Major—he will come."

The third man looked up from his bread-mixing.

"And if it isn't the Major? Or if he doesn't come? I'll make you pay for this damned silly game you've got us to play, Rennie."

The softness of his voice seemed to add to the evil menace of the threat of his words.

"Almighty! Use a bit of sense, Carson," Rennie expostulated uneasily. "I tell you, man, this Major's a *verdoemte slim* one. We don't want him to shy away before we've done our business with him. And this plan of mine—"

"Listen to him!" Carson interposed with a vicious curse. "As if a back-veldt Boer ever had the brains to make a plan that would work! Why—" he turned on the fat man—"why couldn't you play it my way? A bullet through a man's gizzard will stop him shying away—"

"I am not against killing—if there's no risk," Rennie put in quickly. "You know that. But—*ach sis!* There's no sense making things harder for ourselves. If we can

get what we want without killing—that's the best way."

"Rennie's right, Carson," Fat Parker said smoothly. "We kill only if we have to. And heaven forbid that we should have more blood on our hands. Already our hands are red. How we have sinned!"

Rennie laughed uproariously until he detected the angry scowl on Carson's face; his laugh ended then, suddenly, in an almost frightened squeak.

"Stop playing the sky pilot, Fat," Carson said. "This is no time for acting the fool. All right! You've voted to play it Rennie's way. It's two against one. I'm the odd man out. So there's to be no more killing—unless! Still, I don't like being handcuffed. It makes me remember things I like to forget."

"You're too damned sensitive, Carson," Fat Parker laughed. "It isn't as if they were locked on you. Now I rather admire my bracelets. Of course they're not as polished as yours. But you don't hear me complaining."

"Complain!" Rennie said hotly. "Why should you? Almighty! We're only playing a game. You're the bait that's going to trap Big Game! And don't either of you make any mistake about that. The Major is Big Game. The biggest of all!"

"A small bullet'll bring down the biggest," Carson countered. "But if this Major is all that you say he is—why haven't the police caught him long before this?"

"Yes, how about that, Rennie?" Fat Parker chimed in. "You don't hear of any other big I. D. B. operators getting away with the things you say he does. If half of what you say is true, he ought to be doing hard labor for the rest of his natural life."

"Must I yet go over all that again?" Rennie asked impatiently. "Almighty! Close up one of your ears so that what I say into the other won't run out. This Major! He is *slim—slim*, I tell you. Cunning, like a snake. As strong as an elephant. The things I have known him to do. You wouldn't believe. He knows the niggers and the veldt better than I do, and I was born on the veldt under the tail board of a trek wagon. He speaks the vernaculars of the black people as well as they speak it themselves. He can ride. He can shoot. And

he has friends wherever he goes—white and black and all colors in between. Almighty! I would give much to be a man like him—then I wouldn't have to be a partner of low, worthless swine like you!"

For a moment or two Rennie, carried away by his own sincerity, was exalted above the dirt and degradation of his appearance. The other two looked at each other meaningfully. Carson reached down for his revolver which was hidden in a fold of his blanket roll but desisted when Parker shook his head. The fat man's lips framed the words, "Not yet!"

Rennie, sensing the understanding between his two partners, laughed uneasily.

"Almighty!" he muttered. "Like a fool, I talk."

"May be," Parker assented lightly. "May be there's some sense to it. Carson's no saint—"

"Nor you, either, Fat. I've known you do things that have made me sweat above a bit. You've got a dirty, cruel streak in you. For all your pious talk at times, I've heard you say things—an' it was more the *way* you said 'em—that 'ud make a woman like Fanny Hall blush. Come to think of it, Rennie and I are a cut above you. We only walk in the sewers—but you lie down and wallow in them!"

THERE was a half-mad, killing light in Fat Parker's eyes as he bent over the dough he had been kneading.

"True," he said in a low, rumble voice. "I have sinned! How I have sinned! But this is not the time for repentance. We were talking of the Major. You were saying, Rennie?"

"It is only," Rennie said hurriedly, relieved that his late outburst seemed to have been forgotten—"that I want to make sure you will not spring the trap too soon or permit him to escape once he is in it. Do not, I tell you, men, treat him as the man he may seem to be. It may be, when you see him—*ach sis!* He wears a monode in his right eye. He looks and talks like a fool dude—you will tell yourselves that he is, truly, a helpless fool. And you will be careless. You will have no fears. And then! *Ach sis!* I tell you it is safer to go bare-handed into a cave where is a lionness who has just whelped, then to let down your

guard when you're dealing with the Major. He—"

"All right! All right!" Fat Parker broke in with a show of good-natured impatience. "We won't take no chances, will we, Carson?"

"No," Carson agreed. "We'll take no chances. We want his wagon and mules—that's all! Maybe we'll offer him a partnership."

Rennie laughed at that.

"As well expect a bull elephant to run with a pack of wild dogs," he scoffed. "No. We'll have to take what we want."

"We're three to one," Fat Parker said softly. "That's odds enough. Besides he won't be suspecting anything."

"*Ach sis!* Generally speaking I do not look for odds. But in this case—" Rennie shrugged his shoulders—"the one happens to be the Major. That levels the odds. Besides, his nigger Jim, the Hottentot, will be with him. And that nigger—give you my word—is one to be reckoned with. That's why I made this plan. Now you know what to do. You've got parts to play. Play 'em!"

"Plenty of time when we hear the wagon coming," Carson expostulated.

"He may not come in the wagon. He may come on foot—or send his Hottentot to scout ahead. He may come on horseback—"

"Or he may not come at all," Fat interrupted softly.

"He will come," Rennie said positively. "He will have seen our campfire and heard the shot. That will fetch the Major. I know him, I tell you. He will come."

AND so it was when—this was about ten minutes later—the Major reined to a halt behind a thick clump of bush within earshot of the men who sat about the campfire, he heard nothing to awaken suspicion that anything was wrong.

He dismounted and after gently patting his horse's neck and whispering soft instruction, he went forward a little way on foot, moving noiselessly and taking clever advantage of every scrap of cover. He stopped, hidden by the gnarled bole of a stunted thorn tree. Peering cautiously 'round the tree's trunk he got a clear view of the men sitting about the campfire.

"Only three," he mused. "Jim said four.

But then the old boy was probably chancing his arm a bit. Don't know the policeman chappie. He looks a bit of a—er—swipe, but probably I'm doin' him an injustice. The moonlight plays funny tricks an' I suppose he's been trekking hard after desperate desperadoes, lawbreakers an' all that. An', by jove—" this was as the moonlight was reflected by the steel handcuffs on the wrists of the other two men—"he's caught them! Oh, good show! Now they do look bad eggs. Funny! I don't recognize either of them! Or is that funny?"

"The trooper chap looks as if he'd like to sleep—an' dare not! Wonder why they're all on foot—an' no pack animals! Funny, very."

"Well—it rather looks as if I won't be able to keep my appointment with Jim at Marka's kraal at sunrise. I think I must give the trooper a hand—the poor beggar looks worn out. I only hope that some day it will be credited to my account—aiding the jolly old police in the execution of their duty, an' all that!"

He made his way back to his horse, mounted and with no attempt now at concealment rode slowly up to the outspan.

His appearance was greeted with curses and angry mutterings of the two handcuffed men, but Rennie stumbled to his feet and lurched forward—the tired, stumbling gait was cleverly feigned—to meet him.

"Major, ma-an!" Rennie exclaimed. "But I am glad to see you. So you heard my signal shots! I knew you would. And I knew you would come, if it was your wagon I saw. And it had to be you—who else would trek at night as you do? Almighty—" he swayed wearily on his feet—"I am so tired. For days and nights I have not closed my eyes but kept them wide open—watching my two prisoners. They are *schelm*. Dismount, man, and we will eat—and I will tell you about them whom I, myself, have arrested. For it, I will doubtless get promotion. But that is a small matter. Oh! But this is good. Talking helps to keep me awake. I talk to them—but, *ach sis!* If they talk back it is only to curse me or try to bribe me to let them go free. Dismount, ma-an—"

The words tumbled from him in an almost unbroken, incoherent flood—further evidence, the Major decided, that the man

had almost reached the limit of human endurance.

"Gently, gently," the Major said in the Taal. "Now you may eat in peace and then sleep. I will keep watch. Then—after you have slept—you shall tell me all about it."

As he spoke he dismounted, off-saddled and tethered his horse to a nearby tree.

"Now then," he continued, coming up to the fire and looking down at the other two who seemed sullenly intent upon their tasks—Fat Parker turning the bread which he had set to bake in the red ashes of the fire; Carson putting more buck meat to roast on the spit.

"Almighty!" Rennie exclaimed, sprawling down on his blankets, his hands clasped behind his head. "This is good! Already, yet, I feel like a new man. Now I tell you, I am not so sleepy. But I am hungry, yes. Soon skoff will be ready. You will eat, Major?"

"Thanks, no," the Major replied. "But you seem to know me and I—"

"You do not know me, you would say. O-ah! I am only Trooper Rennie. It is not strange that you should not know me. It would be more than strange if I did not know you. Almighty! I have seen you in the *dorps* and on the veldt. And I know—I think—all the tales they tell of you. Truly! And when as we were making our outspan here I looked up and chanced to see a wagon moving over the veldt something told me, even before I fired the signal shots, that it was you."

"The bread is cooked," Fat Parker called sullenly, silencing Rennie's excited chatter.

"Good. Then we will eat. You will excuse, Major?"

He took the hot, flat loaf and tore it into three portions, sharing it between himself and his prisoners. Then he divided the buck meat. They all ate greedily, washing down the soggy bread and tough, stringy meat with gulps of black, scalding coffee which they drank from the smoke-blackened billy it had been boiled in.

Noticing the awkward movements of the two handcuffed men, the Major suggested removing the irons and half rose to carry out his suggestion. He was stopped by Rennie.

"No! *Ach sis*, Major, man, it would not be safe. They are killers. I do not take the

handcuffs off them until the door of the *trunk* is locked and bolted upon them."

The Major shrugged his shoulders and resumed his seat. There was silence for a little while, broken only by the noisy mastications of the three men.

At last Rennie gave a sigh of repletion.

"A man feels better with food in his belly, Major. We have been on short rations for over a week. Ever since I caught up with those two up on the Portuguese border. *Ach sis*! I was only just in time. A day later and they'd have been over the border, able to thumb their noses at me. Almighty, yes."

"What have they done?"

"What haven't they done? Murder is the least of their crimes. They have sold dope, and bad booze *and* guns to the blacks. The fat one—his name is Parker—pretended to be a missionary, having first killed the missionary he pretended to be. Yes. And he lived at the mission, with Carson—that's the other man—to assist him. They used the mission as their headquarters for the evil trading they carried on. I called at the mission on a regular patrol. I thought Parker was a funny missionary. He did things a good missionary does not do. And there were native women! Still I did not suspect how evil these two were until I talked to the natives in the kraals around the mission. Then I went back—but these two had got word of my coming and took to their heels. They had two days start of me, riding in a wagon. But I caught up with them—as I have said."

"And you arrested them—as easily as that!"

"No. It was not easy. There was shooting. They killed my horse and pack mules. Then their nigger driver bolted with their wagon and mules. After that it was easier—" Rennie yawned. "Almighty! Some day you shall hear the whole story. I was very *slim*, I tell you. Now I am tired. For a week or more—I have forgotten the days—I have trekked on foot, driving these evil men before me—"

"Better sleep now," the Major said. "I'll keep watch."

Rennie shook his head stubbornly.

"Presently." He stared at the two who were making shift to spread out their blanket rolls. "Look at them! Meek as fat tailed

sheep they are now! But they will get up to all manner of devilish tricks when you are keeping watch alone. I know. I am glad it is all over. Tomorrow we will trek in your wagon to the dorp, yes? In the morning you will ride to your outspan for it—"

"Jim's driving it to Marka's kraal," the Major said absently. "At least," he amended, "that is what I ordered him to do, but unless my ears deceive me—an' they very rarely do—the old boy's disobeyed orders an' he's on his way here now."

He rose to his feet, listening expectantly, and so did not observe the looks of triumph which flashed between the three men; it cancelled, as it were, the other looks of chagrin they had exchanged on hearing that the wagon was on its way to Marka's kraal.

Then, startlingly clear, yet seeming to come from the bowels of the earth, the raucous cry of the gray lourie sounded—"Go-a-way!"

"That's Jim," the Major said with a chuckle. "He's just sounding to make sure everything is all right before he shows himself. He's a downy bird, is Jim." He raised his voice and shouted, "Come, Jim. We outspan here tonight!" He turned to Rennie. "You'll be able to sleep soundly tonight. Jim and I will keep watch. And in the morning we'll trek for the dorp. Your—er—odyssey is over."

As he spoke there sounded a rumble of wheels, the staccato patter of animals' hooves digging into sharply rising ground to get safe purchase, the slamming of a whip and Jim's voice shouting a queer mixture of endearments and abuse as he drove up out of the depression on to the level veldt.

"O-he, Baas!" he exclaimed in a relieved voice as he halted the mules not far from the camp fire. "Then all is well!"

"Truly, Jim," the Major replied as he went to help the Hottentot outspan, first checking Rennie's offer of assistance. "But why are you here?"

"It came to me that the Baas had changed his mind and had need of me," Jim replied evasively, not quite sure of his ground. He concluded triumphantly, "And the Baas *has* need of me. So we outspan here. What is the play, Baas?"

He looked over his shoulder at the three men beside the fire. Then he nodded.

"Au-a! I see. It is plain. The policeman has two evil white men his prisoners. And the police is tired but is afraid to sleep. So-a! Tonight we keep watch for him. Is that it, Baas?"

The Major nodded.

"And tomorrow, Baas?"

"Tomorrow we take them in the wagon to the dorp."

"So we do not go to Marka's kraal to return the diamonds, Baas?" Jim asked in a low voice. "And will not?"

"And will!" The Major laughed. "But now tell me—speaking a true word—why did you come here and not trek on to Marka's kraal?"

"I thought," Jim began, then stopped. With a shame-faced grin he admitted, "It was because of the gunya, Baas. It screamed another warning after you had left. And I could not turn a deaf ear to the second warning, Baas."

"And so," the Major exclaimed sarcastically, "Jim, the Hottentot, the mighty hunter, finds his bones turned to water at the cry of an insect he can squash between his thumb and forefinger. It is a tale to be told! And now you see what the peril is—two white men securely handcuffed and a policeman who is too tired to keep watch over them any longer! The gunya concerns itself with small—very small—perils!"

Jim shook his head lugubriously.

"It is true, Baas. I have fancied evil where none exists. Yet the gunya's warning is not a thing to treat lightly. Perhaps there is an evil abroad which has not yet manifested itself. At the least, the Baas *did* want me—and I am here."

THE work of outspanning concluded they went up to the camp fire. By this time Parker and Carson were sprawled on their blankets, snoring noisily. Rennie, too, had settled down for the night.

The Major sat down in a deck chair which Jim brought from the wagon; the Hottentot squatted on his haunches beside him.

Jim said softly. "Sleep, Baas! I will keep watch."

"No, Jim. This is a white man's *indaba*. I do not sleep tonight."

"Then we will both keep watch. And, Baas, about the gunya! It is not wise, truly,

to laugh at its warnings. The tales I could tell you!"

The Major chuckled softly.

"Doubtless, Jim. And do not forget to add this one to the many!"

"You laugh, Baas. But—there is something about this I do not like. It may be that those two men are sleeping. It may be that white men snore that way. Yet I—who am only a stupid Hottentot who believes a gunya's warning—would say that they snore as do children who are feigning sleep."

"True, O Wise One," the Major replied. "I had noticed that. They *are* feigning sleep in the hope of getting us off guard. By keeping a close watch we defeat their purpose. Besides—they are handcuffed!"

"Say you so, Baas?" Jim exclaimed. "But have you examined the handcuffs? *Wo-we!* I remember times when the Ma-johnnies put handcuffs on you, Baas—but you shook them from you."

"Something in what the old boy says," the Major murmured in English. "There nearly always is. And, pon my word, I've been unusually credulous tonight, accepting things at their face value, and all that." Then, in the vernacular, "I will examine the handcuffs now, Jim. It may be that I will tie their feet together also. No. Stay here. I do this alone. I have said this is a white-man's *indaba*."

HE ROSE and went quietly to where the two men, Parker and Carson lay on the opposite side of the fire. Both men had pulled the blankets up to their chins, half muffling their faces—a natural reaction to the chill in the night air.

Jim, ready to spring to his Baas' aid should that be needed, watched intently—too intently—with no thought for the policeman behind him.

Through the thin blue haze of wood smoke which rose lazily from the fire he saw his Baas stoop over the two recumbent forms and pull down the blanket covering one of them. Things happened very quickly then. He saw two hands—they should have been held together at the wrists by bands of steel—reach up and close 'round the Major's neck, pulling him off balance; he saw the other man leap to his feet, revolver in hand. He saw that revolver swing-

ing in an arc that would bring it down on the Major's head—

With a hoarse shout of rage Jim sprang to his feet—at least, that was his intention. But the muscles of his legs had no more stiffened to carry out that order of his brain when a great weight seemed to fall on him from behind and he pitched forward onto his face, knocked senseless by a blow from the barrel of Rennie's revolver.

THE Major's return to consciousness was a slow and pain-filled business and when he finally opened his eyes and looked wearily about him, he could see nothing; it was as if the night's white mist had turned into a thick, opaque, swirling yellow fog in which he sensed men moving rather than saw them. His head throbbed, his limbs ached and when he tried to move he seemed numb and incapable of movement. His lips felt cracked and burning. He tried to lick them, but his tongue seemed swollen, filling his mouth, and refused to function. He tried to call "Jim!" but only succeeded in making a gruntingly inarticulate animal-like sound.

Then the mists of unconsciousness closed about him.

When he again opened his eyes the yellow fog was less thick; his brain slowly returned to its normal working. His vision improved and with it came an awareness of his predicament and an understanding of the paralysis which had deprived his limbs of life and had taken from him the power of speech. He was lying supine on the veldt, his hands stretched out behind his head, his arms stretched out to the full length. His wrists were handcuffed together round a stout sapling. His legs, spread wide apart, were tethered to two more trees. A filthy gag filled his mouth.

He raised his head a little, even so little. The effort caused him a great deal of pain. He saw—not clearly; the mists had not entirely vanished—two men inspanning the mules. The men were the prisoners over whom he had volunteered to keep watch. He groaned inwardly at a remembrance of the ease they had deluded him and won their freedom. But how had they dealt with the problem of Jim—and the policeman? Then he groaned again as, shifting his focus somewhat, he saw Rennie saddling the

black horse! So Rennie was not a policeman after all! It had all been a cleverly laid plan to trap him—and it had succeeded. But where was Jim? Had he escaped? The Major found some hope in that thought.

"My word, though," he thought, "the old boy will have the laugh on me over this. And he'll blame it all on the gunya!"

He chuckled inwardly and lowered his head, wincing with pain as he did so.

He stared up at the star-strewn sky, listening intently, hoping to hear the "go-a-way" signal call which would tell him that Jim was safe. Instead he heard the voices of the three men raised in angry argument. He turned his head slowly and looked toward them.

"I tell you, Rennie," the fat man was saying, "that you shall not ride the horse! You will ride in the wagon with us. Carson agrees with me."

"Almighty! What do I care what you and Carson agree to?" Rennie shouted. "This, I tell you, is a man's horse and if it pleases me to ride him, who are you to say 'No'?"

"We are your partners," the man Carson said softly.

"That is my misfortune. I—"

"So you think you are too good to sit in the wagon with us," Fat Parker interrupted sneeringly. "We must disillusion you—and in this—" a rasp came into his voice—"you will do as your partners decide. We have given in to you too much already. We have let the Major and his nigger live because you begged it—also," he added with a laugh—"because I think they will die anyway, and not easily. In any case, they cannot harm us, living or dead. But we don't trust you, Rennie. You're soft! And I do not think you would hesitate to turn King's evidence against us if you thought you could save your own skin. Also, you see you can travel faster on horseback than we in the wagon. You *might* be tempted to ride ahead and bolt with the fruits of our labor. So—" he shrugged his shoulders—"we say you shall ride with us. But we will play fair. We'll 'count out' and abide by the decision. Fair enough, eh?"

Rennie hesitated a moment before growling, "*Ach sis*, yes. If that's how it must be."

"Here goes then," the fat man wheezed

and pointing in turn at Rennie, Carson, himself and the horse—and in that order—he recited this childish "counting out" doggerel:

"Icktum, ticktum, tantum, tarum

"Rosen, posen, pie.

"Eggs, butter, cheese, bread,

"Stick, stock, stone, down dead."

But childish jargon though it was the fat man's voice made of it a devilish incantation and the expression on Rennie's face was one of half-incredulous awe.

As the fat man uttered the last word of the doggerel—"dead"—his finger pointed at the horse and Carson, with a callous laugh drew his revolver and sent a heavy bullet crashing into the stallion's head. With a wild neigh of pain the animal reared, striking out frantically with its front feet. A second and third shot followed the first and the stallion with a final sobbing squeal dropped lifelessly to the ground. For a moment Rennie stood looking dully at the horse then, with a wild yell of, "*You verdoemte murdering swine!*" he leaped on to the wagon, intent on getting his powerful hands around Carson's neck.

There was another shot and Rennie toppled backward and fell heavily to the ground.

Fat Parker laughed.

"In the midst of life we are in death. It is a humbling thought, Carson."

"There was no need of that," Carson said slowly as he gathered up the reins. "I could have handled him."

"Perhaps you're right," Parker agreed easily. "Perhaps you could have handled him. Perhaps we should have trusted him. But a half is better than a third, eh, Carson?"

Carson made no reply, but slammed the driving whip, urging the mules forward. And so he did not hear Fat Parker add under his breath; "And a whole is better than a half." Or, if he heard, he thought it more diplomatic to ignore. And so, handling the mules with skill, he drove over the veldt at a sharp trot, heading east by north-east.

FOR a little while the clatter of hooves and the rumble of wheels came to the Major's ears—then there was silence. But if the thoughts and vows which seethed in

the Major's mind could have found utterance they would have echoed like trumpet notes over the veldt, promising justice and vengeance.

His eyes closed again—but this time he did not sink so deeply into the mists of unconsciousness. He was, in effect, experiencing in reverse, the sensations of drowning, and recent events had affected him like the phantasy of a nightmare. But when next he came to the surface it was to full consciousness; though his head throbbed painfully, and his limbs felt even more numb than they had done before, his brain was working normally and, therefore, efficiently.

He lay quietly for a moment, relaxed as much as his posture permitted, mentally reviewing his predicament and summoning up his reserve of strength for the task that confronted him. Typically, he did not waste emotions in thinking of what had happened or of the causes of it all. Nor for one moment did he consider waiting in the hope that Jim would come to his rescue. Jim

thought—the possibility of being discovered by another migrating crocodile.

He strained first at one leg, then at the other. There was no ray of hope there. The ropes by which he was bound gave his feet no play at all. They were held as tightly as if they were clamped in a vise. He raised his head as much as he could in an attempt to examine the manner in which his feet were bound. But the long grasses hid them.

He let his head fall back and looked over his head to the tree behind to which he was handcuffed. What he saw gave him hope. His arms had been stretched out on either side of a sapling and then the handcuffs fastened to his wrists. He tugged at them, experimentally. But they fitted too snugly and, by reason of his spread-eagle posture, he could not bring his abnormal strength into play and so force them apart. On the other hand, he noticed that the sapling shook to his tuggings. He stretched out as much as he could, straining away from the trees to which his feet were bound, endeavoring to give his arms more play; gaining



was doubtless in a similar position to his own. He was alive—that was a great deal on the credit side. He could not visualize life without the service and friendship of the loyal Hottentot. They had adventured together so many years.

As to the likelihood of being rescued by some chance wayfarer. He could not wait in idleness, doing nothing to free himself, on so forlorn a hope. No. He could not wait.

There were hyenas! And vultures! And—he could not repress a shudder at this

that, he painstakingly worked his wrists up the trunk of the tree. The gain was only a matter of inches, won at the expense of great pain. And now his body seemed to be shaken by a series of spasmodic muscular contractions and relaxations, as if he were subjected to the impetus of strong electric shock, as he worked frantically in an endeavor to uproot the sapling or, failing that, to make it bend over toward him so that he could move his hands yet higher.

His body was alternatively bumped on the ground or stretched out as if on a rack

as the sapling sprung back after each forward jerking. At such times it felt as if his limbs would be torn from their sockets. He sweated profusely; his eyes were bloodshot; blood streamed from his lacerated wrists.

Forced to rest at last, he relaxed completely and there was a glint of triumph in his eyes at the realization that his arms were no longer fully extended; his efforts had met with some measure of success.

He looked up at the star-strewn sky, noting the constellations marching to their setting; in another hour the sun would rise and its blistering heat would be added to his present torment.

He resumed his attack on the sapling, gaining a little with each forward jerk, and the backlash no longer racked him. On the forward tugs the sapling's feathery branches now swayed between his eyes and the stars.

He was obsessed by an almost insane desire to pull and pull until he had gained his end. But his wiser self prevailed. Once again he rested, eyes closed.

When he resumed his task dark clouds were hurrying across the sky, driven by the wind that brings in the dawn. The stars and moon were blotted out; a gray darkness covered the veldt.

The Major heard a low moaning noise; it was accompanied by the sound as of a heavy body crawling over the ground toward him. He froze into complete immobility; he scarcely breathed. He thought of crocodiles, of snakes and hyenas, and knew that he formed an easy prey for the least of the bush scavengers. But for the gag in his mouth he would have yelled aloud as he felt something brush against his leg.

Then the moon shone fitfully through a break in the clouds and he saw the man Rennie sprawled full length on the ground very close to him; his outstretched hand almost rested on the Major's leg—and in that outstretched hand the naked blade of a hunting knife glistened. Unable to comprehend the other's intention, imagining only the worst and unable to do anything to avert this final blow he was sure was about



to fall, the Major watched as wide-eyed as a rabbit will watch the weasel that stalks it.

There were gasping grunts and a pain-filled groan as Rennie moved nearer; his left hand groping exploringly before him closed on the Major's right knee—and then the cloud closed in about the moon.

There was no movement for a little while; no sound save the harsh gasping breathing of Rennie. Then the hand moved, joining the other which held the knife. The hands moved—downward—and presently the Major knew that Rennie was sawing at the rawhide ropes which bound his right foot to a tree. At last it was freed, and with the freeing the Major experienced excruciating pain as the blood flowed back to his foot. He flexed his leg cautiously, rejoicing in the power of movement. He grew impatient for the freedom of his other leg. He flexed his free one with the intention of prodding Rennie into swifter action; he refrained, remembering the revolver shots, telling himself that Rennie was undoubtedly badly wounded. He must have patience.

Rennie was moving again! Slowly as a chameleon stalking a fly! Each forward foot gained was accompanied by a gurgling moan of pain. But at last his objective was attained. Once again blindly groping hands felt for the ropes which bound the Major's foot; once again the knife sawed through the rawhide.

At last it was accomplished—and Rennie could do no more. The knife fell from a hand no longer strong enough to hold it. He did not move. It seemed that he had ceased to breathe.

The breeze strengthened, dispersing the clouds. The stars were paling before the ghostly glimmer of the false dawn.

FOR a little while the Major was content to exercise his legs, then he drew them up and hitched himself backward. He continued thus until, sitting erect now, he had passed to one side of the sapling and his hands were in front of him—a little to one side and the position was an awkward one, it is true; but they were in front of him.

And now that the sapling was in front of him it looked not so stout, its height was barely twice his own, its stoutest branches no thicker than a pencil.

He looked at the handcuffs which were

stained by blood from his lacerated wrists. They were of an ancient design. But for the fact that his wrists were badly swollen he could have sprung them. Even now a shrewd blow delivered on the shank there and they would spring apart. But that would have to wait.

He rose to his feet, sliding his hands up the trunk of the sapling, reaching high above his head. There he found good purchase and pulled downward and outward. The sapling bent—bent easily as he shifted his hands higher and let it take his full weight. He straddled it, his looped arms bunching the feathery branches against his chest.

Just as the sun shot above the horizon, the tree, released of his weight sprang quivering erect. The Major was free!

He sat down on a rock outcrop, else he would have fallen, so great was the strain to which he had been subjected. But he did not rest, he worked awkwardly at the filthy gag in his mouth until at last he was able to spit it from him.

"My word!" he gasped. "That's better."

At least that is what his mind said; actually the sounds which came to his lips were inarticulate gurgles. Gulping painfully he rose and went to where Rennie sprawled. He bent over him and rolled him gently on his back. The man was breathing, but very faintly. His tunic was stained with the blood which had drained out where the bullet from Fat Parker's revolver had entered. The Major unbuttoned the tunic, whistling softly as he bared the wound. There was, he knew, nothing that he could do. To Rennie, death would soon come to release him.

The man's eyes flickered open and met the Major's. His lips moved. The Major bent low to catch the faint words.

"Almighty! You are free! You will go after the swine! He murdered your horse. For that there was no need—"

The voice died away. The eyelids closed.

"Where's Jim?" the Major asked, repeating the question again and again, his speech becoming clearer with each repetition.

"In—the—mapani—" Rennie gasped at length.

The Major took up Rennie's hunting knife and rose to his feet, making his way to a near-by patch of mapani bush, follow-

ing now the *spoor*, left by men dragging a body behind them. He came suddenly upon Jim, half hidden by bush and tall grass. The Hottentot was lying on his back, so completely swathed by the rawhide rope which pinioned his arms to his sides that he looked like a monstrous cocoon. But he was alive! And not greatly hurt, the Major thought, judging by the light which came into his eyes as he saw the Major bending over him.

The Major took the gag from Jim's mouth and laughing lightly at the Hottentot's excited attempts to speak, got to work with the knife, cutting through the ropes.

At last it was finished. Jim too was free. But he could not move for a little while and lay as if the ropes still bound him.

"*Au-a!*" he exclaimed at length. "I thought you would never come, Baas. Yet I knew you would! It is enough, Baas," he added in protest when he realized that the Major was massaging his cramped limbs. "It is not seemly that you should care thus for a useless Hottentot. And, *wo-we!* You are still handcuffed! Are they too strong for you, Baas?"

"They have been, Jim. But not now."

He rested the handcuffs across a ledge of rock and indicating a large pebble said:

"Take that, Jim, and strike hard with it on the shoulders of the manacles.

Jim needed no further instructions and after three or four jarring blows—the pebble was an awkward tool—the cuffs opened and fell from the Major's wrists.

They sat together then in companionable silence, neither caring to give voice to the relief he felt that the other had suffered no great ill.

"What happened, Baas?" the Hottentot asked presently.

THE Major told the little he knew, glossing over his own effort to escape, magnifying the aid given to him by Rennie.

"At least," he concluded, "he did his best to make amends for the evil he had done. And his dying is not easy!"

"Nor should it be," Jim grumbled. "*Wo-we!* My head feels split in two from the blow he gave me as I was coming to the Baas' aid. And what now?"

"There is much to be done, Jim. First we must do what we can for the man

Rennie. Then—" his eyes flashed a steely glitter—"we have a debt to pay to the two *schelm* who have done this evil and who, doubtless, plan much more."

"And the Baas will not be soft in his dealing with them?"

"The Baas will not be soft," the Major promised grimly. "And now, if you are strong enough, we will see to the false policeman."

"Truly," Jim said, his eyes glittering as he picked up the hunting knife the Major had discarded.

"But not that way, Jim. He is already as one dead."

They rose to their feet and made their way slowly to where Rennie was. He opened his eyes as they knelt beside him. He smiled wanly at them.

"*Ach sis!* I am glad no great harm has come to you—" his voice was no more than a whisper—"and now let me talk. Almighty! Little time is left to me. Those two—they are *verdoemte* evil, and I was their partner. We have done many evil things. We killed the missionary, because he had found us out and was going to report us. Then Fat played the part of a missionary. We helped. We traded. We sold dope, and rotgut booze to the niggers. We got gold and diamonds from them. But a policeman arrested us—for no more than selling rotgut to the niggers. He didn't even suspect the worse evil we had done. He was a brave man—but a fool. He brought us away alone, with no one to help him. Carson fed his horse and pack mules with poison weed and he had to leave them behind at a kraal. We thought he would stay there, and we could escape with the aid of niggers. But no. He was a brave man—but a fool. He made us trek on foot. And last night—before I fired the shots which brought you—we caught him off guard and killed him. With our naked hands we killed him. Though we were handcuffed together, we were too much for him. We hid his body under some boulders, back there in the bush—"

Rennie's voice faltered to an end. His eyes closed.

The Major lifted him gently to a sitting position.

"Where have they gone?" he asked. "What were you planning to do?"

"To the mission at Two Tree Kop," Rennie gasped at length. "We were going to collect the wealth we'd hid before the policeman took us away and then escape over the border. Almighty! You will never catch them. They have gone beyond the reach of your vengeance—but vengeance will overtake them, as—it—has—overtaken—me!"

His voice died away in an immensity of silence. The light died from his eyes, but they remained wide open, staring. A blood-stained frothy bubble emerged from his lips and hung there—there was no exhalation of breathing to disturb it.

The Major gently closed the dead man's eyes, extracted the man's revolver from its holster and with Jim's help heaped boulders over him. That was all they could do by way of burial.

That done they made a hasty search of the outspan and the immediate vicinity in the hope that something had been left behind which would be of service to them. They found nothing save the body of the Major's horse and a little heap of stones which hid the body of the murdered policeman, and the clothes Rennie had discarded in exchange for the uniform.

"Come, Jim," the Major said abruptly, and there was a harsh metallic ring to his voice which was normally blandly musical. "We have business with the living, and the time is short."

He headed at a slouching easy gait across the veldt and Jim, scratching his head in puzzled wonder, walked closely beside him.

"Where do we go, Baas?" he asked.

"To the mission at Two Tree Kop—where else? But first we go to Marka's kraal."

"*Au-a!*" Jim exclaimed. "This is folly! Marka's kraal is not in the way we should go. Furthermore, how can we, on foot, catch up with fast traveling mules?"

"We will find messengers at Marka's kraal who can travel faster than the mules, Jim."

"The Baas speaks in riddles," Jim said irritably. Then he slapped his naked thighs. "I am a fool, Baas. You are right! Let us hurry and speed those messengers on their way!"

"Gently, Jim," the Major said as Jim broke into a run. "We have a long trek

before us. We are hungry, thirsty—and my head feels as if blows from an axe were splitting it open."

"And mine, Baas," Jim said with a rueful grimace. "And truly, there is no need for haste. The way opens before us. It is three days fast trekking by wagon to the mission at Two Tree Kop. And our messengers will hinder them so that they will take four or, maybe five. Also, Marka has horses—of a sort—and there will be none to hinder the Baas, many to speed him on his way. We will trek across the veldt as straight as a hive-ward winging bee. We will eat up this start they have gained. *Wo-we!* It may be that when *they* reach the mission, they will find us there to greet them."

The Major nodded.

"Something like that is my intention, Jim."

Jim licked his lips and looked slyly at his Baas.

"And next time a gunya screams, Baas, you will pay heed to its warning?"

The Major smiled.

"I wondered how long it would be before the old boy said, 'I told you so,'" he drawled in English, adding in the vernacular, "At least I will not laugh at it, Jim."

After that they trekked in silence, walking with bent heads, moving like automations, self-hypnotizing themselves to forget their aching head and stiffening limbs, sinking below the surface of consciousness any awareness of their physical ills.

LONG before they came within the shadow of the kopjes about the base of which nestled Marka's kraal, they were seen and recognized by native herd boys who ran to take the news to Marka, the headman. And he, recognizing that the two men were walking as if they had reached the end of their physical exhaustion, sent his young men to give them assistance.

The Major and Jim were both reeling in their gait, suffering a sort of delayed concussion rather than physical weariness.

"Look, Baas," Jim exclaimed suddenly. "Marka has seen us and sends help." As he spoke Jim dropped to the ground. "Go on if you must, Baas," he continued. "But I can go no farther—and my pride does not drive me."

The Major surrendered at that and sat down beside the Hottentot in the shade of a marula tree. Before Marka's warriors reached them his snores echoed Jim's—and his snores were not feigned.

He did not awaken when the natives put him in an improvised litter and carried him to the kraal; Jim was content to lean heavily on the shoulders of the two who walked on either side of him.

They took the Major to a large, clean hut and left him in charge of Jim and two wise old women of the kraal who were skilled in the art of healing. They stripped the Major, bathed and annointed his head and wrists with a soothing ointment; then they massaged him expertly until his too heavy, sodden sleep passed into the strength restoring one of complete relaxation.

"That is good!" Jim said tonelessly. "Go now. I will remain here to keep watch."

The old women shook their heads and whispered together. Then they advanced resolutely on Jim and, despite his protests, dealt with him as they had dealt with his Baas. And presently Jim, too, slept."

When the Major awoke, it was late afternoon. He dressed himself quickly and quietly and left the hut in search of the headman, Marka. The kraal people he encountered greeted him with happy, respectful smiles, praising the spirits that he had recovered from the weakness which had possessed him. It did not matter to them that his clothing was torn and dirty, that he was unshaven and came to them now empty handed. They knew his worth, and though they wondered at the sequence of events which had brought him to his present state, none questioned him.

He found Marka sitting with the old men of the kraal outside his hut. Salutations were exchanged; Marka's head wife brought out a three-legged stool for the Major to sit on; the beer calabash was gravely passed around. The Major praised the beer and the beauty of the headman's wives. They discussed the crops and the prospect of the coming rainy season. And then, when all the formalities had been observed, the Major spoke of the happenings of the past night. He spoke without heat, but with such graphic imagery that they saw in their mind's eye exactly as it had happened.

"And so I come to you," the Major con-

cluded, "as a man may come to his friends, seeking your help that I may bring those evil men to a white man's justice."

"We are your men, *inkosi*," Marka said simply.

The Major nodded, accepting the implied service.

"Then listen closely," he said.

HE SPOKE swiftly, and in the voice of command, detailing his plan, explaining what he wanted from them. When he had finished he listened to the shrewd comments of Marka and the old men, amending and improving his plan, accepting their offer of assistance that far exceeded that for which he had asked. Then, with every least point decided on, he made his way back to the hut where he had left Jim. Before he reached it ten picked warriors left the kraal and headed across the veldt at a pace destroying lope. Coincident with their departure, the signal drums of the kraal commenced to boom out a message which would be picked up by kraals to the north and relayed onward. Its instructions would be obeyed. There was no doubt about that. Was not the message being sent by a white man they all counted as their friend?

Jim came yawning to the door of the hut as the Major approached. He grinned a welcome.

"It is well, Baas. Already the messengers are speeding through the air—they will travel faster than the mules. And you are all right, Baas. The weakness has passed?"

"Yes, Jim. Only hunger remains. Very soon they will bring food to us. And you?"

"There is no more pain, Baas. But to hunger, add thirst. They make good beer at this kraal."

As he spoke food and drink was brought to them. While they ate the Major explained his plan to Jim and what part they had to play.

It was nearing sunset when they left the kraal, mounted on two butter-fat cobs. Folded blankets served as saddles; their bridles had been improvised by Jim from the soft skin of antelopes. They rode at a slow trot across the veldt, the shouted good wishes of Marka's people echoing in their ears. And when they died away in the distance, the air throbbed with the booming of the signal drums.

THINGS were not going too well with Fat Harper and Carson. And certainly things were far from well between them. It would be putting it mildly to say that conditions were strained. They rode in moody silence, each concerned with his own thoughts and plans; each estimating his chance of double-crossing the other.

Four days had elapsed since they had driven away from the men they had murdered and the two men they had left—as they thought—to a slow, lingering death. It now looked as if they would have to spend yet another night on the veldt before they reached their destination though the kopje, rising sheer from the level of the plain, which marked their destination looked very near, so clear was the air. But the distance was much greater than it appeared, and already the sun was dropping to its setting.

"Of course," Carson said slowly, breaking the long silence, "we could trek all night and get there easily before sun-up."

Harper vetoed the suggestion with a curse.

"No more night trekking for me, Carson—or for you! I had enough last night. And what did it get us? We got bogged down in a ravine, didn't we, and it was morning before we pulled out."

"And whose fault was that?" Carson snarled. "You thought you were being clever getting that nigger to show us a short cut that 'ud save us a few miles."

"The nigger ought to have known it wasn't safe for a wagon to cross," Harper said defensively. "The—fool thought because he could cross there, we could. I'd have taught him a bit of wisdom if I could have laid hands on him."

"Yes. And roused all the natives of the district against us, like as not. It's not safe to knock niggers about the way you do. They'll pay you back one of these days—not that I'd care about what happens to you, but I don't want to suffer for your stupidity."

Harper laughed.

"The niggers'll have to get a move on if they want to pay me back. I'll be out of this damned country in a few days, an' I'm never coming back. The sooner we get to the mission, the sooner we can get away. So hurry the mules along. We want to get to the waterhole and outspan before dark."

In response to Carson's urgings the mules broke into a canter. But it did not last long, presently they dropped back to their former pace—a slow, sedate trot.

"Blast you!" Harper exclaimed. "I said, hurry 'em along!"

"I'm doing the driving," Carson retorted. "They're about tuckered out and I'm going to nurse 'em along. Don't want them to be in a muck sweat when we get to the water hole. It's no fun rubbing 'em down—and you're no—help."

"Why bother to rub 'em down," Fat said smoothly. "We won't need them much longer."

"They'll fetch a good price if we sell 'em in good condition—"

"Chicken feed, my boy," Harper chuckled. "And you can have my share—that'll show you how generous I am." He continued in a complaining whine, "You must admit, Carson, that this trip hasn't been the bed of roses we expected it to be. According to Rennie we ought to have done the trip in three days easy—but we ain't there yet."

"You shouldn't have killed Rennie. He knew more about the veldt than the two of us put together."

"It was you who shot the horse," Harper said pointedly. "And Rennie would have killed you if I hadn't got a shot in first. So, come to think of it, it is your fault he isn't with us now. It is your fault—" the mock sanctimonious whine came into his voice—"that the blood of an innocent man is on my hands. Oh! The pity of it! You're right, though. He was a good veldt man. He wouldn't have got us bogged down last night. All right, I've admitted that was my fault. Just the same, I'm beginning to wonder if he could have avoided all the other things which have delayed us."

"What do you mean?" Carson asked uneasily.

"Mean? What should I mean? It started at our first night's outspan. Remember? We had lions roaring round us all night. At least *you* said they were lions; but not a trace of a *spoor* of one could we see in the morning! We didn't get any sleep that night, did we? And when we started to in-span the mules they stampeded—or you said they did!—and it was past noon before we caught 'em all and started to trek. And

the—beasts were too tired—you said—as a result of all the chasing they'd had to go at more than a walk.

"And then—" Fat Harper's voice got more bitterly vindictive and accusing as he proceeded with a recital of their misfortunes—"as if that wasn't enough, the bank at a river's ford had caved in in such a way—so *you* said!—that it wasn't safe to cross there and we had to go a good fifteen miles out of our way before we found a place where it was safe to cross. An' there we made camp and everything seemed all Sir Garnet until about midnight—while you were on watch—you woke me up and said the bush was on fire. And we had to inspan in a hell of a hurry and drive down to the river's ford. And I had to stand up to my waist in water holding the mules for fear—you said—they'd stampede again. The upper half of me was scorched dry, and the lower half was shivering with cold: not to mention being scared that crocodiles 'ud be along at any minute. Then—"

"**H**ELL!" Carson interrupted angrily, "I don't like the way you're insinuating things, saying I did this and said that. Are you suggesting—"

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm only stating what happened. Right! Now where was I? Oh yes—standing up to my waist in water most of the night to escape a bush fire—"

"What are you whining about? I did, too. I'll be damned lucky if I don't get an attack of fever as a result. At any rate, it didn't give me any pleasure, I can tell you."

"No? I don't suppose it did. But I'm betting you found something to laugh at when we discovered in the morning we'd have been as safe as houses if we'd stopped at the outspan. The fire hadn't come within a couple of hundred yards of it."

"The back fires I started worked better than I dared hope," Carson explained. "But it would have been too risky to have counted on them working so well."

"So you say," Harper agreed easily. "But it's funny, isn't it? Well, shall I go on, or is your memory in good working order? For instance it was the morning after the fire that the off hind wheel of the wagon came off. It was over a couple of hours before you found the hub cap; it took us another

couple or more hours before we got the wheel on again—"

"And nearly broke my back doing it," Carson growled. Then he shivered. "Hell, I think I've got an attack of fever coming on!"

"So you say!" Harper laughed and waved his chubby hands as if to signify that it was really of no consequence. "And there were other things—no sense repeating them; plaguety, annoying things that delayed us. Instead of traveling fast and soft, we've traveled slow and hard. Course, all these things might be just a sequence of unfortunate incidents—on the other hand you may be playing some double-crossing trick. Are you?"

The question was as sharp as the crack of a whip.

"Don't be a fool, Fat," Carson said dully. "And take your hand away from your revolver."

Harper laughed softly.

"You must have fever—it's affecting your eyesight. What should I want with a revolver? We're pals, ain't we? How long will it take us to get to the water hole?"

Carson gazed ahead.

"Nine or ten minutes," he replied. "See that baobab? It's there."

"Hurry then, man. I'm damned hungry."

Carson whipped the mules to a canter and kept them at it until they reached the baobab tree. He pulled them up with a fierce yank on the reins.

As soon as the mules came to a halt, Harper jumped down and hurried to the water hole. Carson followed at a slower gait until an angry shout from Harper caused him to hurry.

Speechless with rage, the fat man pointed to the water hole. Instead of the almost crystal clear spring they had had every reason to expect, there was nothing but a stinking pool in which floated the bloated bodies of two hyenas. Nor was that all! There was plenty of evidence that the water had been deliberately polluted.

Reeling, his speech thickening as the fever germs got a stronger hold on him, Carson said sneeringly:

"And I suppose you'll say I'm responsible for this too, Fat."

"No." Harper looked at him thoughtfully. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that,

But it's funny, ain't it? Well, now you'll have to have it your way. We'll have to trek on. It's a fact we can't camp here."

"True enough," Carson admitted, sitting down on a boulder. "But look here, Fat, I'm—worried. Up to now I've put down all the things that have happened to running into a patch of bad luck. A—big patch, as you say. Africa is like that. But this business, this fouling of the water hole—there's nothing happenstance about that. It was done for some purpose aimed against us. And I'm beginning to think all the other things were planned too."

"You're delirious," Harper scoffed. "Or are you trying to cover up something? What are you driving at?"

"It's only an idea," Carson muttered. "Wish Rennie was here; he'd know. He'd have understood all the drum talk that's been going on these last three days. And, come to think of it, this is funny—we've only seen *one* nigger all the time—and he led us into that bog!"

"What are you nattering about!" Parker exclaimed impatiently. "Come on! Let's get moving."

Carson shook his head.

"Wait a bit, Fat," he begged. "I want to figure this out. Look here. Suppose—only suppose, mind—the Major and his nigger got free easier than we thought possible—"

"That's supposing a hell of a lot," Harper interrupted with a laugh. "The way we tied them up, they'll be there at Doomsday. But go on."

"A nigger might have come along and freed them," Carson said thoughtfully. "Anyway, suppose they did get free and made their way to a nearby kraal. Well—Rennie told us enough about the Major for us to figure out what sort of a man he is. A nigger lover and all that—"

"Hell, yes," Harper assented easily. "Little friend of all the niggers, the Major was, according to Rennie."

"Yes," Carson continued, "and Rennie said the niggers 'ud do anything the Major asked them. Well, suppose he's been talking to them on the signal drums, telling them to do the things to us that have been done; telling them to delay us so he could catch up to us or—or—" his voice rose to a scream—"or get to the mission ahead of us.

Yes. That's it, Fat." His eyes were dilated; he clutched spasmodically at the fat man's sleeve. The fever was getting a stronger hold, its course quickening. His face was flushed, his eyes unnaturally bright. "Yes, yes. That's it, Fat. Don't you see? If we go to the mission we're done. We can't go there yet. We must get over the border and lie low for a bit. Over the border and far away. Over—" He shook his head, trying to shake off the fever, forcing himself to speak calmly and logically so that he could convince the fat man who laughed at him sneeringly. He said slowly, "You've got to believe me, Fat. I know I'm right. Fever sometimes makes a man see things very clearly for a bit. We mustn't go to the mission yet. Wait until I've got over this fever. We'll hide up in a place I know over the border until the Major'll get tired of waiting for us. We—Fat! Do you hear me? Don't look at me like that. And stop muttering that damned fool 'Icktum, ticktum' thing. I'm not Rennie—and you can't count me out!"

FAT HARPER laughed.

"You're a fool, Carson," he said, "if you think you can take me in with a cock-and-bull story like that. For some dirty reason of your own you want to get me over the border before we go to the mission. Well, it don't work. I'm going on to the mission tonight—with you, or without you. I don't care which. Only, if you ain't there to share with me in the morning—that'll be your loss. A whole's better than a half. Well, coming?"

With a despairing gesture Carson lurched to his feet.

"All right," he said dully. "But you'll have to drive. I'm all in."

Fat Harper laughed and turned toward the wagon, evading Carson's attempt to hang on to him for support. As he did so the mules pricked up their ears and moved forward.

"Who-a, you silly swine!" Fat shouted, hurrying toward them and waving his arms excitedly. They swerved and broke into a trot. Harper made a desperate attempt to clamber over the tail board of the wagon as it passed him. He failed and fell to the ground with a thud which shook the breath from his body. By the time he had recov-

ered and sat up, the mules and the wagon were out of sight. He rose, his face white with rage, and turned to curse Carson, blaming him for this final misadventure. But Carson was beyond hearing or caring. He was lying full length on the ground, babbling incoherently.

Revolver in hand, Fat Harper cautiously approached him, ready to deal with any further treachery on the part of his partner in crime. But one glance into Carson's face, into his vacantly staring eyes, convinced him that this was not play acting. The fever had taken complete control.

Fat Harper sat down and moodily considered what course to take. He quickly came to the only solution possible to such a man.

"I'll trek on foot to the mission," he told himself. "I'll get to the mission before the sun gets too high tomorrow morning. No point waiting here. I'll be twice as thirsty and hungry by morning. Besides, it'll be cool traveling through the night. It's a cinch I'm not going to stay here acting as nurse to Carson."

The sun had set. Already the afterglow was beginning to fade from the sky. But there would be the stars, and a moon. He'd be all right."

He rose to his feet and climbing on to a big boulder looked in the direction of Two Tree Kop in order to get his bearings. There it was. A landmark the biggest greenhorn could not miss. Then he chuckled as he saw, not three hundred yards away, the wagon. The mules had come to a halt and were, he thought, grazing peacefully.

"I'll cut their hides off when I catch up with them!" he swore viciously.

He jumped down from the boulder and stood for a moment looking speculatively at Carson. "Just to make sure," he said aloud, almost gloatingly.

He took aim with his revolver and fired. The bullet smashed into Carson's knee cap. The sudden surge of intense pain shocked the man from his delirium. He screamed and tried to rise to his feet—then he pitched forward on his face and was very still.

Fat Harper laughed and hurried away. He did not look back. Had he done so, he might have seen dark forms creep from their place of concealment and silently gather around the prostrate Carson.

AS HE trekked, Harper laughed at the way in which the entire proceeds from the illegal trading of himself and his erstwhile partners had now come into his hands. Still, that was what he had always intended; and things would be easy now. He'd get some food and drink as soon as he got to the mission, have a bit of a sleep then recover the loot from where it had been cleverly cached. With any luck at all he'd be over the border before sun under tomorrow. From there his lines of escape from the long arm of justice were already well and cleverly laid. There'd be no slip there. And no fear of being extradited—he'd covered his tracks too well for that!

The wagon was now only fifty yards ahead—it was between him and the mules who were headed in the way he had to go. It was going to be easier than he had dared hope.

The tail board of the wagon was almost within reach of his outstretched hand when the wagon moved forward. He broke into a run—the pace of the mules increased; to a trot; to a canter and the wagon drew swiftly away from him in a cloud of dust.

He mouthed incoherent curses and shook his clenched fists in the air. Then, stolidly, he plodded on, hope reborn when he realized that the wagon had again come to a halt.

Fat Harper was no veldt man. Walking under the most favorable conditions was an exercise he had always avoided. He stumbled frequently, tripped by the long grass and the veldt's unevenness. He kept his eyes fixed on the wagon's tented top.

Time passed. He sweated profusely. A cloud of mosquitoes and other flying pests hovered about his head, feasting on his blood. His feet ached. He discarded his coat and helmet. Presently he undid the heavy cartridge belt about his waist—first taking the revolver from its holster—and let it fall unheeded to the ground. He felt that he had been trekking for hours, and the wagon seemed no nearer! Yet he had made good progress; the kopje showed up more clearly now, that was proof to him that he had traveled a considerable distance from the water hole—and Carson.

He sat down and rested for a little while. When he resumed his trek it was at a much slower gait and yet now, creating for him

the illusion that he was traveling fast, the space between himself and the wagon was rapidly lessening. When it was about a hundred feet ahead he dropped to the ground and crawled slowly forward on his belly. He was going to take no chances this time! He'd take every precaution not to startle the stupid brutes!

His progress was painful and, despite his exaggerated caution, extremely noisy. His stertorous breathing alone would have startled even less sensitive animals than mules. Dry twigs snapped under his weight.

He cut his hands and knees on sharp-edged stones; thorns tore his clothing and left bleeding wails across his face. But he blundered on and presently was conscious that he had passed into the shadow cast by the wagon. A few yards more—

He rose slowly to his knees. His hands reached upward and held on to the tailboard. And then the wagon moved forward with a suddenness which jerked him to his feet and sharply forward. Holding on grimly he half ran, half clung to the tailboard. The speed increased—his fat legs could no longer keep pace with it and he hadn't the skill or strength to pull himself up. His legs sprawled out behind him, dragging on the veldt. He shouted curses at the mules, calling them to stop.

And still the speed increased until at last he could hold on no longer and he dropped heavily to the veldt. He lay prostrate for a while, completely winded, bruised and shaken. He sat up at last and in a demonstration of senseless rage emptied his revolver at the fast moving wagon. Then flinging the now useless weapon away he rose to his feet and resumed his journey. He kept doggedly to his objective. He was very tired; his bones ached; a horrible thirst tormented him—but not once did he think of surrendering; he encouraged himself with visions of the life of luxury he was going to lead, a luxury that was almost within reach of his outstretched hand.

He found himself now counting his paces—so many to that boulder—to that thorn bush. . . . It helped to distract his attention from other things; things of the imagination, surely. Like the shadowy forms which seemed to keep him company, to his right and left, behind him—so close behind him

that at times they seemed to be on his heels, forcing him to quicken his pace for a little: things like the "voices" which echoed about him—or within him! Voices of men killed in cold blood—the kindly voice of the white-bearded old missionary; the strangled cry of the policeman; Rennie's wild scream; the strident curses of delirious Carson. Voices which spoke of a just vengeance awaiting him. . . .

He fell frequently, and though it seemed to him that he immediately rose to his feet and continued his trek, he more often lay prostrate for long minutes before he obeyed the command of his brain—and of the "voices!"

THE East lightened. Seen through the white morning mist, the kopje seemed farther off than ever. But even as Fat Harper stared miserably at it the sun hurdled the horizon, the mist cleared and—it was as if he had been looking through the wrong end of a telescope and had suddenly reversed it—the kopje suddenly looked very near; he could actually make out the white-washed mission buildings at its base.

He went forward with renewed confidence, his spirits soaring above his physical afflictions. His lips were cracked and bleeding; his face swollen from a myriad of bites. The upper half of him was practically naked, his shirt hanging about him in tattered shreds.

The sun rose higher, beating upon his unprotected head, searing his unhealthily white flesh.

And then, quite suddenly, he was conscious that the wagon was directly before him, so close that he almost ran into it. He accepted its presence as he had accepted so many strange events of the night. He tried to clamber up over the tailboard. After several futile attempts he tiptoed with ludicrous caution to the front of the wagon. Still the mules did not move. He grinned triumphantly and climbed up on to the driver's seat. Safely there, he gave expression to his relief by a hysterical outburst of laughter and cursing. Gaining control of himself he gathered up the reins and with a shout of "Juk!" drove the mules forward.

For a little while Harper was content to drive the mules at a walk and he luxuriated

in the ease of this unexpected good fortune; that was all he was conscious of at the moment. The night's alarms, the fatigue of his long, tiring trek, the shadows and the "voices" were all forgotten. He spared no thought for the two men he had caused to be left bound with no hope, as he thought, of escape, doomed to a slow and painful death. He did not give a thought to the other victims of his criminal greed—the missionary and the trooper; Rennie, Carson and the hundreds of natives he had debauched with his rot-gut booze. He lived only in the present. He was no longer foot sore and tired, hungry or thirsty.

Then he began to think ahead, making and rejecting plans, each new plan calling for more speed and increasing his determination to get over the border with the least possible delay.

He would, he finally decided, stop no longer at the mission than was necessary to retrieve the treasure—five, ten minutes at the outside. Foolish to take chances now success was in sight. He would not, he vowed, even stop to eat and drink until he was over the border.

Having reached that decision he took the big whip from the socket and lashed the mules until they broke into a frenzied gallop.

HALF an hour later Fat Harper pulled the mules to a halt at the mission. It was a small one—consisting of a few large native made huts—and of recent years had been comparatively neglected by the Home Mission Board.

Several natives who had been squatting in the sun in the shade of one of the huts, rose to their feet as Fat Harper clambered down from the wagon and shouted to them. He did not recognize any of them. All niggers, he was fond of saying, looked alike to him.

He supposed—if he thought of it at all—that these were some of the "converts" who had not run away when he and his partners had taken over after the murder of the missionary; men who had been more than ready to adopt the evil he had preached and practiced.

One of them, slouching lazily forward, said insolently, "What do you want, Fat One?"

"Hold the mules," Fat ordered with an oath.

"There will be payment?" the native questioned.

Fat Harper took a step forward, his hand raised threateningly. He laughed confidently as the native cringed. He knew how to deal with niggers!

"You shall have a bottle of white man's *puza*," he promised.

"All right, Fat One," the native replied, and he squatted on his haunches in front of the two lead mules.

Harper went into the largest hut and kicked on one side the tanned buck skin which had been used as a rug, disclosing a heavy trap door. He pulled this up and peered down a deep shaft which led to the mission's water supply. Wooden steps led down to the spring-filled tank at the bottom.

Gruntingly Harper lowered himself to the ground, swung his legs over the shaft's opening, feeling with his feet for the top rung of the ladder. Then he slowly and cautiously descended, counting the steps as he went. He halted when his feet had almost reached the surface of the water which faintly reflected back the light which filtered down the shaft from above, and groped with his hands round the clammy wall of the shaft. At last his fingers located a flat slab of loose rock. He worked his fingers around the edge of this, loosening it still more, until presently it swung inward and back as though on a hinge.

From this cunningly contrived hiding place Harper pulled out a large canvas bag then slowly made his way back up the ladder. Reaching the top he sat down for a moment to recover from his exertions, his legs dangling down the shaft, his back to the door of the hut, the canvas bag by his side. He fought down the desire to open the bag and gloat over its contents. Besides—he *knew* what it contained. The wealth it represented would enable him to spend the rest of his life in luxurious ease.

He laughed softly. Everything was going well. Couldn't be better.

With elephantine slowness, because of his bulk and the stiffness of his joints, he commenced to rise to his feet. And that was the moment when his Fate descended upon him; descended with a material, stunning

force. He sagged to his knees like a pole-axed bullock and would have pitched head first down the shaft; but strong hands saved him from that.

And then for a while he wandered in the mists of total unconsciousness.

WHEN he next opened his eyes he was stretched out on the floor of a hut. There was a gag in his mouth. His arms and legs were spread eagled to their utmost extent and securely tethered to four stout posts driven into the ground. There was a heavy weight on his chest. It was the canvas bag, for the contents of which he had committed so much evil and, latterly, endured so much! Its weight was oppressive, seeming to increase with every passing moment. He tried to shake it off, but his efforts were in vain. It had been securely tied to him.

His head ached. But fear of what the future held for him was even greater than fear created by his present predicament. It was a fear which turned his bowels to water. Yet even now he was far from a full understanding of what had happened—or why. Clear, logical thought was completely beyond him. Events were too much for him and, gradually, he surrendered wholly to his present misery and physical exhaustion. He slept, uneasily, trekking—in his restless dreams—over a vast, waterless, barren waste, pursued by the stern justice he had flouted for so many years, carrying on his shoulders an Old Man of the Sea—a personification of all the crimes he had committed.

The hut was in semi-darkness when he awoke, brought to the no less terrifying realities by something cold and clammy which crawled over his face. He would have screamed—had screaming been possible.

A tiny candle cast a yellow flickering light which scarcely reached the opposite wall of the hut.

Harper was conscious now that he was no longer alone. There was someone who babbled a meaningless sequence of words in the characterless monotone of one in the delirium of fever.

He raised his head and looked in the direction of the voice and vaguely discerned a sheeted form which moved restlessly on a low bed.

He let his head fall back; his short, fat neck seemed too weak to support its weight, and he listened—because he could not do otherwise—to the ravings. Gradually the spate of words formed some semblance of continuity and presently Harper *knew* that the man on the bed was Carson! Carson—the man who had been his accomplice and partner! Carson, the man he had left behind last night—was it last night?—at the fouled water hole; Carson, whose knee cap he had shattered with a bullet from his revolver.

The voice babbled on almost unceasingly as the sick man lived over his black deeds of the past, cursing Fat Harper, laughing, crying, “counting out” unseen adversaries with whom he seemed to be constantly waging a losing battle.

The very monotony of it almost wore through the thin shell of sanity Fat Harper still retained.

There were intervals when Carson’s voice was mercifully stilled—but never for long. It seemed that the periods of silence only served to give force and impetus to a fresh outburst of raving; to garbled recollections of the trek in the Major’s wagon and the run of ill luck which had accompanied it. The Major! The name was repeated over and over again. The Major and Jim the Hottentot! They—according to the sick man’s ravings—had been the cause of all their troubles. The Major! He had been the man who had dressed and bandaged Carson’s shattered knee—the Major had brought him to the mission.

The Major!

FAT HARPER closed his eyes. So he had fallen into the dude’s hands, had he? Then things were not so bad. Better that than be a prisoner of revengeful natives. Given half a chance, he had no doubt of his ability to get out of the mess he was in. And yet—

He had been a fool, he thought, to have listened to Rennie and Carson. A fool to have balked at another murder or two.

Fear then closed down again on Fat Harper, so completely unmanning him that large tears rolled down his fat cheeks, washing furrows in his dust-grimed face; possessed him so completely that he was nothing but a receptacle containing that basest of

human emotions. Time ceased to have any meaning to him. A minute was an eternity; eternity all too short to plumb the depths of his fears.

When next he was conscious of the delirious man's mutterings they had taken the form of an insane chant; Carson was intoning over and over again the first two lines of the childish doggerel Harper had so often used to impress the Dutchman, Rennie:

"Icktum, ticktum, tantum, tarum,

"Rosen, posen, pie. . . ."

And the end of each repetition was spaced by a hysterical giggle.

After a time Fat Harper found himself repeating the nonsensical jingle to himself; he continued to repeat it long after Carson's voice had ceased; repeated it until an exhausted sleep overtook him.

The sun was shining through the open doorway of the hut when he next awoke. He raised his head and looked across the room; there was no bed, no Carson. He was alone. He thought then that he had always been alone; that the babblings of a sick man had existed only in his own fevered imagination. His head throbbed. He felt sick with hunger, thirst—and a terrible fear. His ribs felt as if they were bending under the weight of the canvas bag.

Two natives entered the hut. Terror dilated his eyes as the men bent over him. They took the gag from his mouth. He tried to speak, but could only gag incoherently. They raised his head and held a small gourd to his lips. It contained some of the poisonous concoction he had used to debauch the natives, but he drank it greedily—then almost choked and was terribly nauseated.

Still, the warmth of the stuff, burning into his vitals, gave him new hope and courage of a sort.

Recovering the power of speech, he questioned the natives; cursing and threatening them when they made no reply. He offered them rich bribes to help him to escape. He cursed and threatened again when they still refused to answer.

They held the gourd again to his lips and again he drank. Then they fed him with spoonfulls of mealie meal, putting a spoonful of the coarse porridge into his mouth every time he parted his lips to curse.

At last they left the hut as silently as they had entered.

He felt stronger now. His eyes glittered. He began to mumble words, phrases, sentences. The potent liquor he had drunk was beginning to take effect. But though he thought his brain was working normally, he laughed idiotically at times and the words which now came from him, slurred drunkenly, were no more than the meaningless jargon—"Icktum, Ticktum, Tantum, Tarum:—"

Fear sobered and silenced him when—this was several hours later—the Major and Jim the Hottentot entered the hut and stood looking down at him.

The Major was as immaculately attired as if he had just been outfitted by a Saville Row tailor who specialized in "the correct wear for the tropics." In his right eye a gold-rimmed monocle gleamed; the gold box spurs in the heels of his brown polo boots glistened in the sunshine. But his dudishness was confined to the outer trappings. His face was set as stern as outraged justice; his blue eyes held the cold light of tempered steel.

Fat Harper's soul cringed within him. He closed his eyes as if in that way he could find escape. At last the continued silence broke him, forced him to open his eyes, and he begged for mercy offering all he had in return for freedom and a chance to escape.

"You have nothing to offer by way of bribes. And if you had all the wealth of the world, it would not save you."

The contempt in the Major's cold, crisp voice cut Harper like the lash of a sjambok. He shivered.

"What are you going to do with me?" he whimpered.

"Treat you as you did Rennie, perhaps. Kill you, as you killed the missionary and the policeman—but sudden death is too good for you. Cripple you, as you crippled Carson. Fever delirium saved *him* a lot of pain, and his greater punishment is to come. He will hang, you know."

"But me!" Harper raved. "What are you going to do with me?"

"You? I could have you bound, as you now are bound, and carried out onto the veldt and left there to die—as you left Jim and me. But that would be a personal re-

venge, and I must rise above that. Or I could leave you to the natives you have ill-treated. You would then die slowly and very painfully. But no. I cannot do that. It would be bad for the natives. After all, you are, I suppose, some sort of a white man. Besides, I can't bring myself to allow torture."

"Hell, man!" Harper screamed. "This is torture."

The Major looked at him contemptuously.

"Is it? I fear you exaggerate." He continued in the same calm, impersonal voice, ignoring the other's outburst, "I have here a full and comprehensive statement made by Carson during his lucid moments. He was anxious to make it, specially where it implicates you. He seems exceedingly bitter about the way you treated him. It is a long and damning document and covers a great many of your filthy operations, Harper. Undoubtedly not all of them, but sufficient to insure your just reward. I propose to read it to you. Don't interrupt or you will be gagged—and Jim is not inclined to be tender toward you."

He took several sheets of paper from his pocket and read, in the measured, unbiased tones of a judge summing up, the statement Carson had made. It was a black record of murder, treachery and saddistic cruelty.

When he had come to the end, he said:

"I have confirmed much of the statement by examining the natives of this district. You're a foul beast, Harper. Now to make an end. Are you prepared to sign this statement, affirming its truth as applicable to you?"

"It's all lies," Harper whined. "The lies of a delirious man."

The Major nodded thoughtfully.

"Naturally, you would say that. But you forget. I saw you shoot Rennie—and before he died Rennie told me how you had killed the policeman. Jim saw you fire the shot which smashed Carson's knee cap. Oh yes!" And now the affected drawl crept into the Major's voice. "Pon my soul! didn't you know? Oh, that's rich! Surely you're not surprised? Why, we were at the back of everything that happened to you, delaying you so that we could get to the mission first. The lions, the stampeding mules! The wheel which came off! The bush fire! The native who led you into a

bog! All that was the result of my instructions. You see, I have a lot of friends and they obeyed the messages of the drums. Didn't you know that? And your trek from the fouled water hole—it is clear and pure again now! Do you mean to tell me that you didn't suspect for one moment that I was at the bottom of it all, that one of my native friends drove the wagon away and cleverly kept it just beyond your reach? Oh! This is really priceless. Quite!" He was silent for a moment, when he continued his voice was stern and cold once again:

"Will you sign the statement?"

"No, damn you! You—"

"Gag him, Jim."

The Hottentot obeyed—and he was not gentle.

"I am going to *press* you to sign, Harper," the Major said. "Not that it matters very much whether you sign or not—your fate is as sure as death. But for my own personal satisfaction, I insist on having your signature. So—to the pressing. It is a form of questioning I am borrowing from our somewhat unenlightened forefathers. The individual to be questioned was stretched out very much as you are now and heavy weights were put on his body until—Well, he generally was ready to talk before the pressure completely flattened him. You are already carrying the weight of your ill gotten gains. Now we will add to it the weight of the crimes you have committed."

In response to his shouted order two natives came in carrying a heavy block of wood which they placed across Harper's shins.

"That," said the Major, "represents the weight of the missionary you murdered. Are you ready to sign? Nod your head if you are."

Harper made no move of surrender. He glared at the Major. Hate and fear filled his eyes.

Other natives entered after the first two had departed. Each pair carried a heavy weight which was put on Harper's body until only his face was uncovered.

"You are now," the Major said coldly, "also carrying the weights of the policeman, of Rennie and Carson, of the two natives you flogged to death. And the full tale is far from complete. Are you ready to sign? No? Well, perhaps we will leave you for

a little while, letting your sins weigh you down. Or shall I count you out? Pleasant little rhyme of yours. How does it go?

"Icktum, ticktum, tantum, tarum,

"Rosen, posen, pie.

"Eggs, butter, cheese, bread,

"Stick, stock, stone, down *dead*."

At the word "dead" he pointed at Harper.

"You see? *You're* odd man out, this time. Well?"

Harper's face was mottled purple. His temple veins stood out prominently, his eyes were filming over and he breathed with difficulty. He raised his head and nodded.

THE Major sighed softly with relief but there was no pity, no sign of softening in his voice when he said:

"You are wise."

The weights, including the canvas bag, were removed. Harper's hands were released and he was raised to a sitting position by two natives. Other natives rubbed his wrists and fingers, restoring the circulation.

A few minutes later he painfully scrawled his signature at the bottom of Carson's confession. That completed, he fell back in a dead weight.

"And now what, Baas?" Jim asked.

"Now we take the two *schelms* to the *dorp* and hand them over to the white man's justice, Jim."

"It is too easy for them, Baas," the Hot-

tentot protested. "Better leave them to us black ones."

The Major shook his head.

"No, Jim. And, believe me, for them the end will not be easy. It will be very hard—all the harder because it will be delayed. But for them there is no escape. And they know it. That will be part of their punishment.

"Now get this fat one into the wagon with the sick one—they will find each other pleasing company. Then we will trek."

"And afterwards, Baas?" Jim asked. "After we have delivered the *schelm* into the hands of the police? What then?"

"Why then, Jim," the Major replied airily, "we will trek wherever the fancy blows us. The veldt is wide and there is much that even we have not seen or done. Men talk of a race of giants, of strange animals, of sorcery beyond human understanding."

"Golly, yes, Baas," Jim said, his face beaming with happiness.

"But first, Jim," the Major added with a chuckle, "we will go to Marka's kraal to return the diamonds to him."

"Au-a, Baas!" Jim protested. "What folly! But you are my Baas. And so—"

With a shrug of his shoulders he hurried out of the hut to make preparations for the return journey to the *dorp*.

For a little while the Major stood looking down at the unconscious Harper. Then he, too, shrugged his shoulders and hurried out into the sunshine.



*A Man Oughta Line Up Equal to Himself. Nobody
Can Ask More.*



FATE FIRES NO BLANKS

By GEORGE BRUCE MARQUIS

EMERGED from the snug cocoon that was his bedroll, Bat Jennison inaugurated a leisurely muscle loosening stretch, a comfortable gymnastic never to be completed. A bullet that sidestepped his sinewy neck

by a thin finger's breadth had quarrelled by, pacing the sound of the shot. Then the upjutting cliffs had seized the crash, and tossed it from side to side of the narrow canyon till it muttered into a grudging silence, like a stubborn notion determined on

future resurrection. Yet Jennison heard the clashing echoes from the pari-security of a low-sprung buck brush, so swiftly had he thrown himself sidewise when the bullet raced by. Perhaps it is superfluous to add that Jennison's Winchester was now in his hands, its muzzle peering avidly for the targeteer.

Also that Sunflower had lost only two croppings of the lush grass, for he too was a seasoned campaigner.

The buck brush was on the up canyon verge of a little grove of bull pine, where Jennison had made camp the night before. The canyon was narrow, its walls rising in terraced steps of stately cliffs, three in viewable number. Along near the base of the bottom cliffs tinkled a swift clear stream, neither river nor rivulet, perhaps best dubbed a creek. The creek was lined on both sides with trees and bushes, a tunnel of green through which the stream scampered like a truant child.

An odd condition existed in the valley. At Jennison's camp it was perfectly clear, but upstream, the length of two football fields away, from wall to wall the narrow valley jostled with great blobs of fog like giant puff balls, cast willy nilly from the playful hand of some whimsical Manitou. From their friendly shelter the bullet had sped, the blossom of powder smoke concealed and merged in the mimic counterfeit.

The bullet that had so nearly slit Jennison's gullet had obligingly blazed the side of a tree in its flight. Now Jennison wriggled backward, reached the tree and in its shelter stood erect. Squinting cautiously along the gash he gauged the point of origin of the bullet. A clump of willows near the base of the lowest cliff, that was it. An easy guess registered the distance at two hundred yards. Two hundred yards, slightly down hill. Most emphatically, it was good shooting in any man's league.

Of this parexcellent targeteer Jennison had caught not a single glimpse. It was true he could have withdrawn, yet Jennison doubted it. The shooting was too deadly serious for that, unless the marksman was one of those supreme egoists, who never dallied with the possibility that he could register a miss. No. All experience argued that the gunman would assure himself that

his bullet had done its appointed work. Stealthy, hidden approach was easy. From the sharpshooter's lair to the grove, the way was blanketed by an all but continuous fringe of trees and bushes. Jennison moved to intersect this hypothetical line of march just beyond where the curtain of brush and trees drew opposite the grove of bull pine.

Crossing the hosannahing stream in two long strides per handily placed rocks, Jennison settled behind an eye high thicket of wild rose bushes, and drew his Colt's .45. A dozen feet away the predicted path of the gunman bent down to the water's edge, and in that dozen feet the prowler would be nicely exposed. Jennison could be justly censured if he failed to get his man.

CASTING his eye up along the leafy banister that handrailed the trail a dozen yards or so away, Jennison noted the slight nodding movement of a slender new growth willow. Brushed lightly by an incautious elbow, he predicted, though a skittering bird could have given it the fillip, or even an animal. Jennison holding to his first thesis, quietly cocked a pistol, while he watched for a repetition of that stirred willow. He watched vainly. A somehow blunder it was not to be repeated.

And then Jennison glimpsed the hat, decked with three feathers from the wing of a crow, thrust rakishly behind the band, and drew his breath in deeply. A black Stetson, with a like jaunty trio of feathers had once been a familiar sight to him, on the Tillayuma Indian Reservation. But that had been in Oregon and this was Idaho, four hundred miles removed. Yet miracles do happen, happened indeed even as Jennison stared. Moving soundlessly on moccasined feet, the man beneath the hat, had crouched into view. And Jennison's split second hunch had become reality. The man was Joe Three Crows.

An Indian was Joe Three Crows, young, educated, wily as a fox, and as agile as a panther. Jennison observed the crouch and that the Winchester in his hand was cocked, a tawny finger caressing the trigger. How to hail him without hurling the Indian into irremediable folly, that was Jennison's problem. Yet he solved it, his summons a spate of words.

"Bat Jennison talkin' Joe. Drop that gun!"

A week ago, Jennison had been at Pan-nikan City with Doc Levitt and Whispering Thompson. They were in funds, and life a rose-tinted dream. And then a serpent squirmed into their Eden. Through grapevine channels came the news that an old trail companion, Pegleg Wimberley was sick at Hophni, a mining camp in the Burdock Mountains. It was like stating a time mellowed syllogism to remark that his fellow miners at Hophni would care for Pegleg. It was like adding an insipid corollary to observe that Bat Jennison would journey Hophniway to make sure of that care. And at once. That next morning found him and Sunflower on their way.

For two days now, Jennison had travelled in, to him virgin territory, pressing into the foothills of the downreaching Burdock Mountains. Night before last he had camped at a scrawny town called Folio. It lay on Beech Creek whose gold bearing gravels had promised prodigal returns, a promise not fully redeemed nor for long. Folio had declined with its failing gravels, living for a time on memories, as did many another camp. Then herds of cattle began to appear, scattered thinly over the bunch grass hills and a crimped renaissance bloomed diffidently at Folio.

Jennison had been in many towns scattered all over the West, but never one like Folio. Never before had he met so much blatant curiosity, as he encountered in this slatternly village. A half dozen times, that sin of all western sins had been committed. He had been asked his name, his destination, even his business. For their comfort he had joined, for this night, the populous family *yclept* Levi, was going to Jerico and was the good Samaritan. Perhaps the pair of Colts swinging low on his thighs clogged the dice on his final statement. At any rate they questioned him no further. But their sly furtiveness annoyed him, and he withdrew out of his time to the sanctuary of his blankets. And next morning he departed from Folio with Aurora. No animadversions intended.

He travelled west up Beech Creek valley. At Folio it was wide, with flat shouldered sides, but as it drove steadily into the foothills it narrowed and deepened into a robust mountain canyon. And though he was on

the trail to Hophni, for hours he neither passed nor met a fellow path voyager. The generally untraveled condition of the trail indicated that the traffic was perennially scanty.

IT WAS four o'clock when he encountered the prospector, a shifty eyed wreck, lolling at his makeshift camp beside the trail. His two burros drowsing in the nearby shade, evidenced energy at par with their master's shockless voltage. Jennison, the friendliest of men, turned aside to chat briefly, as well as to assure himself that he was on the trail to Hophni. He met one of life's surprises. As an all but solid rule, these lonely wanderers become increasingly introspective, and taciturn to sullenness. Not so this chance met man. Without even answering Jennison's question about the trail, he flung himself headlong into a jumbled account of his vicissitudes. Floods, Indians, famine, near strikes, robbers, all pellmelled jerkily from his bearded lips. Now he crescendoed:

"Yep, old Jude Pickle's sure had slim pickin's, but that's ended. I'm soon goin' to be rollin' on plush as the feller says. I'm waitin' right now till my good luck rides up this here trail and he won't be long now. Yep—" Here he halted abruptly, mouth open, his snagged teeth peering out furtively from behind blue pendulous lips. For a long moment that unlovely tableau held, then with a look of mingled craft and panic he clapped a warty and dirt crusted hand over his offending organ of speech. Slowly he dropped his hand to his lean hip as he giggled.

"People are jest about two thirds right when they say us old pelicans ramblin' round alone go crazy. Yep, jest about two thirds right. Now you asked about the trail to Hophni. You can't miss if you *heed* what I'm tellin' you. Foller this road 'bout a mile more. *Then* right where the trail forks there's a whackin' big pillar of red rock, taller an a house. You can't miss seein' it. Take the trail to your *right*. *That's your road to Hophni*. The other ain't a trail anyway. Jest a smoothed out place through the bushes. It don't take you nowhere. Remember, take the trail to your *right*. So long."

Jennison took the anxious dismissal in stride. As he rode along, without conscious

effort he recalled other wanderers and shook his head. Junkins, Wimbley, Price. No, these prospectors had little kin with this garrulous trail side acquaintance. Maybe, Jennison mused, this man at least was right. Two thirds crazy? Hell. *He* had gone the entire route. Or had he? Had his final act been in the nature of a pose to cover up indiscretion? Was his luck indeed riding up the trail? And why his stressing of the trail to Hophni? Vaguely, tantalizingly, a half thought stirred in Jennison's brain, that there was a meaning here, if only he could coax it to within mental grasping.

The reddish pillar of rock, frantic signboard to the gesticulating miner loomed in the mouth of the bisecting trail and was disregarded. It could be that Jennison dozed over the saddlehorn. Or it could be that the goddess Fortuna, learned in subtle ways of entrapping predestined allies, had tugged ever so gently on Sunflower's left bridle rein. For imperative reasons, not yet known to Jennison, he was not to journey now to Hophni, though he travelled indeed still in that general direction. Hophni, and the maimed Wimbley were still on his agenda but for a later date.

What Sunflower plodded now, was a trail in courtesy only. Never planned, its lazy wanderings had likely been platted by the nimble feet of elk, carelessly following the retreating winter snows, back to their summer pastures. Horses, not many, had passed this way, yet not recently. Well yes, one, Jennison presently reckoned, a week, maybe two ago, but not a sign of cattle sullied its smoothness.

It was in very fact virgin territory into which he penetrated, and Jennison loved it for its unmarred wildness. What peace pervaded it. He chuckled softly as a bluejay scolded him roundly for invading his private domain. Dammit! The bird was right. But then Jennison would not turn back for all the bluejays' just ire. Not even when a pine squirrel from a limb added his dissonance. Not much. He would see this trail through to its rainbow end.

So while the canyon deepened and shrank sidewise he pushed on. Near sundown he came on the grove of jack pine girdling a neat little oval of grass. Here he made camp, cared for his pony, cooked and ate supper. Then a pipe and to bed. Soothed by the chat-

tering creek, lulled by the hooting of a great barred owl, he fell asleep. At daybreak he awoke, two minutes later had been all but pinked by a bullet. Half an hour later he had summoned Joe Three Crows to ground arms.

A CURRENT sophistry has it that an Indian is always stolid, glacial, adamant, unbending. It is exactly comparable to that other innanity, that women are fickle. That an Indian would endure lacerating pain without a whimper was but the magic of sheer will. But given the moment an Indian would match ecstasy with any white. And now, to Joe Three Crows that moment had arrived. At Jennison's words, he straightened up swiftly.

"Bat Jennison!" he yelled it. "By God! *That is good news!*"

"Drop that *gun!*" Jennison's single tracked mind, was glued to essentials, not pyrotechnics.

Face wreathed now in smiles, Joe Three Crows obliged with a graceful gesture. Then while Jennison pondered, he put on a mimic of a war dance. Prancing, bent kneed, he furthered forth his own accompaniment.

"Hoo—hoo—whoah—hoo," he chanted. "Hoo, hoo, whoah, hoo."

Jennison's answering grin widened at the other's shuffling. Here was genuine joy, not counterfeit mirth. Whatever else, Joe Three Crows had not knowingly shot at Bat Jennison. Jennison holstered his pistol, and hand outstretched stepped through the scant barrier. As their palms smacked he said with quiet cordiality:

"How are you, Joe?"

"At the top of the heap, Mr. Jennison," Joe Three Crows chuckled throatily. "But a minute ago I was buried a mile deep in gloom. God, Mr. Jennison am I ever glad to see you! Right now I wouldn't trade places with President Grant."

"And a half hour ago, you damned nigh aced me." Jennison chided him lightly.

"Not *you*, Mr. Jennison." This very gravely. "I was gunning for Snake Hem-pells. Ever hear of him?"

Jennison nodded, adding, "Pick up your gun, Joe and let's mosey over to my camp. Whilst we rustle up something to eat, we'll gab. I've gotta hunch, we've got somethin' to talk about. And call me Bat. Hell. A feller

who can shoot like you can shouldn't oughta Mister nobody."

A querying whinny floated to them from across the creek, Sunflower asking plaintively, "Where are you Bat?"

Joe Three Crows bowed deferentially toward the grove of bull pine. "Sunflower, I presume."

"Yep," Jennison smiled, "he's missed me. Sometimes," he went on whimsically, "I sure wonder what he's achully callin' me when he emits soundy nickers like that."

While Joe Three Crows built up a brisk campfire, Jennison, with prodigal hand sliced bacon into a skillet. Then with the bacon sizzling under the Indian's watchful eye, Jennison stirred up flapjacks and set his black gallon sized coffee pot to simmer discreetly in the hot ash base at the rim of the fire. The crisp bacon was cascaded in equal division to twin tin plates, the smoking brown grease found temporary sanctuary in a tin cup, and the skillet became a cake griddle. No scrimping here. Each flapjack all but spanned the ten inch skillet. With two each, they made simultaneous attack.

"Reckon," Jennison suggested out of a mouth well crammed with bacon and flapjack, "that at first bacon grease 'ill hafta do the work fur our minus butter. But the least two or three flapjacks I kinda like to mess up with brown sugar."

"Brown sugar!" Joe Three Crows mumbled in ecstasy. "Fan me with a cattail. You mean you've got brown sugar?"

"Yep," Jennison nodded. "But it's achully Sunflower's. Notwithstandin' we'll sure borry a few lumps. He'll never miss 'em. Smart as he undoubted is, he can't yit count."

The meal ended Joe Three Crows rolled a cigarette while Jennison prepared to do devoirs to his well matured briar.

"Joe," he remarked presently from around the stem, "it's a damned funny meetin' you up here like this. Last time was at The Flat Dog Agency, four hundred miles away I reckon. And the fact is I was on my way to Hophni and jest kinda happened to get off the trail down here a piece. If I hadn't happened on that miss, hell knows when me and you would a met up."

"Mr. Jennison—I mean Bat," the Indian said solemnly, "you didn't *happen* to miss your trail. You were sent. I don't pretend to

answer that. Call it chance, or fate, or Providence or even a *Manitou* (God) of my fathers. But you know and I know that fate fires no blank cartridges. Yes, Bat, you were sent."

There it was square in his teeth. He was sent. And now as Jennison sat there his mind back trailed to find sure echo to Joe Three Crows' thought. So many quirks of chance, so many things that had seemed inconsequential had somehow shaped his destiny. Nor could he know that other, lesser men would have flaunted them. That in his simple knight errant way he must accept what others would cast aside.

BEWILDERED, almost sadly, he spoke. "Sometimes I've been kinda puzzled why other people's troubles come my way. I've jest been a handy roost, I reckon."

"It's *you*, Bat," Joe Three Crows assessed the little man with fine understanding. "Being *you*, is the reason. You untangle knots. You make wrong things right. And when you do a fine act you don't flap your wings and crow about it. Don't fidget. I'll push the cork in the praise bottle as I once heard you phrase it. And now I'll tell you my story."

"Correct," Jennison encouraged him. "Should we have a job to do, we probable oughta should be on our hosses."

"Hell," Joe Three Crows laughed, "the same old Bat. Job to do, let's be at it. All right, I'll tell you."

"Hop to it," Jennison chuckled. "As the feller says 'shoot or give up the gun.'"

"Well," the Indian began. "Let's start at Acme, Oregon, the village just off the Tillayuma Indian Reservation that you know all about. I wonder if you remember a man who ran a little store there named Lavender?"

"Sure," Jennison answered. "A kinda harmless little wart on a pickle with a missing hand, right seems to me. Squawman, wasn't he?"

At the infelicitous word, Joe Three Crows stiffened slightly.

"His wife *was* part Indian," he said a bit primly.

"Hell, Joe," Jennison said quickly, "I wasn't slingin' no mud. It's jest a word to me like say buccaroo, or miner, or 'hoss thief—"

Here he halted while Joe Three Crows threw back his head and simply roared. Then he reached over and prodded Jennison's knee with a forefinger.

"A man like you don't need to apologize *ever*," he asserted. "But I'm apologizing. Let it lay. Lavender's wife was part Indian, but she was also a—"

The excoriating word would have blistered an unseasoned tongue, yet Joe Three Crows was not even lightly singed. Jennison winced at the appellation. To Jennison's friends, his stubborn unreasoning worshipful attitude toward woman, as sex, was often a matter of high annoyance and acrimonious debate. So now to Joe Three Crows' scorching accusation, he entered this frosty caveat.

"Joe, you oughta be damned sure of your grounds when you go to lippin' things like that about a good woman. That's a hard sayin'."

"It is a hard saying," the other admitted grimly, "but I spoke by the book. And I'll bet you a drink that we can't buy that when I'm done you'll agree yourself that I didn't miscall her."

"Mebbe," Jennison grunted with a world of doubt held in reserve. "Anyway go on. It musta been five years ago Lavender left Acme. Say, I remember he had a cute little gal. About ten years old, pretty as a chromo, named—"

"Naomi," Joe Three Crows filled in the memory gap. "Yes, five years ago Lavender left Acme. He wandered around here and there but about three years ago landed in that camp you were headed for Bat. Hophni. Here he set up a store like he had at Acme. And he did well, for in a year or so he had saved and cached away about three thousand dollars, in nuggets and gold dust. Then the devil slammed him with both fists."

"One fist Snake Hempells?" Jennison hazarded.

"Snake Hempells," the other grimaced. "The other was Lavender's—wife."

"Don't seem possible," Jennison protested. "Less it was an accident."

"*She* don't deal in accidents," Joe Three Crows snarled. "But wait and I'll tell you about it. This Snake Hempells was a tough bird hanging around Hophni, gambling, killing and robbing as it suited him. There wasn't a Bat Jennison to cramp his style.

Everybody took to the street when he walked down the sidewalk. Yes, I see you're wishing you'd been there, but you weren't. Well, one evening Lavender came down to his cabin from the store to find that his wife had stolen his cache of gold dust and run away with Snake Hempells. Wait, that's not all. She had schemed to take Naomi along for one of Hempells' thugs! Would have, too, only Naomi slipped out of their clutches, got away pretty well scratched up and hid till her father got home."

For a long moment a silence lay between, then ruffled only by their heavy breathing, as each according to his tenets registered various emotions. At length Jennison broke the silence.

"Joe," he said with a bit of hesitation in his throat, "a while back you remarked some words about Lavender's woman. I'd be kinda histed if you'd say 'em over agin now and kinda wide spread."

"A pleasure," Joe Three Crows obliged. "How's this?"

"You've done noble," Jennison praised him when the lava hot words had scorched out their sulphurous length. "You've sure done noble. Personal, I'm feelin' better. S'pose you go on frum thar."

"Well," Joe Three Crows took up the odyssey of the despoiled Lavender, "with everything that had happened to him, Lavender wouldn't stay at Hophni any longer. He sold what little stock of goods he had and pulled out. Folio, down the valley aways looked like it was a possible place and so he went there. He'd been a kind of storekeeper most of his life so he tried it there again. Off and on he and I had carried on a desultory correspondence, mostly about nothing in particular. But six weeks ago, I got a letter that was different. In two weeks I was in Folio, myself."

"More of Snake Hempells?" Jennison suggested.

"You guess close," Joe Three Crows told him. "It was Snake Hempells."

"Not all guessin'," Jennison said. "I've heered a lot about him and his putrid ways. I'd figger he'd show up if only to brag. Besides I stayed in Folio last night, and it 'ud be the kind of a burg to kennel a wolf like him. Go on, Joe."

"Hempells had come roaring into town," the Indian continued, "and after while he

and a half dozen of his men, all drunk ganged Lavender's store. Lavender had to take what they said. He couldn't do anything else. It seemed Lavender's wife had left Hempells for some other worthless skunk. But the worst of it was that Naomi was there in the store." He paused a moment. "A man's got to remember," he provisoed, "that Lavender's only got one hand and that he's no gunman. And too, Hempells and his toughs were flourishing their pistols. Yes, a man's got to remember all that, and still. Well, maybe you've read or heard how Turks acted when they were buying female slaves."

"Don't spread it out," Jennison interrupted savagely. "Still and but I'll be rememberin' when I meet up with Snake Hempells."

"You will," Joe Three Crows nodded. "Well the gist of it was that Hempells was coming back for Naomi later, a month he said. Before he left he warned Lavender not to try to make a sneak with the girl. Said he had friends right there in Folio who would keep an eye on them, which was the truth. So Lavender wrote to me."

"And he done right that," Jennison okeyed Lavender's sound judgment. "And did he have anything in mind special?"

"Yes," Joe answered, "he wanted me to take the girl away and get her into a government school where she'd be safe."

"A plan I'm bettin' Naomi vetoed," Jennison remarked.

"Just that," the other assured him. "So we slipped away at midnight and came here. Lavender had learned about this valley from an Indian he'd befriended at Folio."

"A damned pore move," Jennison assessed it in uncomplimentary fashion. "It ain't fifty miles from Folio, and that means right in Snake Hempells back yard, so to name it."

"You're wrong, Bat," Joe Three Crows disagreed. "I'll show you why pretty soon. It was perfect if it hadn't been for a nosey old prospector who happened onto the combination."

"I reckon," Jennison picked up the tale, "that prospector's named Pickle."

"Jude Pickle," Joe Three Crows amplified. Then he turned to ask swiftly, "How the hell do you know that?"

"Because," Jennison answered, "he

damned nigh let it out to me yesterday that he was waitin' fur Hempells to come along. Wait, I'll tell you. . . . So," he ended, "my guess is, he's promised to help Hempells out. And Hempells' like to trundle along most any minute. We'd best be movin', Joe."

Jennison observed that the valley was swinging to the west of south as they advanced and that the robust creek did not follow its turnings. Not at all. It poured full bodied from the base of the southeast cliff, a cliff towering up in perpendicular fashion five hundred feet at a swift guess. The flood raced from a smooth-mouthed tunnel, that even now, deep in the summer, scarcely showed a yard of clearance between the roof of this rock flume and the foam flecked surface of the stream. Jennison had seen streams like this before in his wanderings, but not many. Now as they halted here before this awesome phenomenon of nature in labor, a horse whinneyed shrilly. The dissonance seemed to come from a clump of willows just clear of the tunnel's mouth. Joe Three Crows grinned.

"My *kinatan* (pony)," he explained "I'll get him, and then we'll take a dive."

Jennison was still puzzling this remark when the Indian returned with his horse.

"This is the secret, Bat," he pointed. "We ride up this channel a hundred yards, and then *presto*—we're in as neat a box canyon as you've ever seen. No you can't see through it from either end. It's got two bends in it. I carry a pitch pine torch. My pony's used to it. The bed's smooth, and the water at the deepest will just about reach your stirrups. This is the only way into the box canyon. If that damned Pickle hadn't stumbled onto it, or if that Indian hasn't sold Lavender out—but what's the use. You see I was out on a hunt in the upper end of the canyon when Pickle splashed through. Lavender was right there at the upper end of this spillway and he had his pistol with him. He made Pickle turn right round and go back. Should have shot him, for just as Pickle ducked out of sight he yelled that he would pay Lavender off. Ready?"

"Yep," Jennison said, "And as to Pickle, Lavender should oughta shot him, but then he couldn't, bein' a decent man."

"Maybe I'm not decent," Joe Three Crows remarked. "But if I ever get a bead

on the old buzzard he's sure going to lose his tail feathers. Here we go."

SUNFLOWER disapproved of this torchlight parade, but with Chawenan, Joe Three Crows pony, familiarity had doubtless bred its customary contempt. Half way through, a thin segment of light appeared and soon they were splashing out into the sunlight where a trail turned up from the water's edge into a sward as green and velvety as a well-kept lawn.

Jennison had seen some strange country in his wanderings, but this had wonder all its own. It could have been the interior view of an extinct volcano, though there was nothing in particular to support that thesis other than the general setting. The walls were all but vertical and rimmed it uniformly. A flattened oval, minor diameter perhaps one mile, the major double, the floor was a perfect park, grass, trees and bushes. Deer were plentiful, even antelope. How they had come into the valley would have presented a nice question for campfire discussion. The stream itself entered the valley by a series of leap frogging cascades, down over the rim of the south wall. Here was the Isle of the Lotus eaters complete even to its wispy waterfall, Eden with its serpent, Snake Hempells.

Halting on the low bench just above the ford, Jennison turned to Joe Three Crows to query:

"Where's the people?"

"Not far," was the answer, "but hid. I'll give them the signal."

The quavering call of a lonesome coyote burred from the Indian's lips. Jennison paid tribute to the mimicry but caviled at its timing.

"That 'ud sure make a coyote somersault with envy," he grinned, "but they don't never yelp in daylight."

"That's why I do," the other explained. "They know it's Joe performing."

Jennison heard voices, the one fresh, vibrant and alit with life, the other dredged of hope, somber with fear. The screen of bushes parted and Lavender and Naomi appeared then halted at sight of the stranger. Then Lavender recognized him and knew his great worth.

"Mr. Jennison," his voice was trebled from emotion, "God did hear me."

"As to that," Jennison floundered, "I cain't say. Anyway, me and Joe have sure arrived right side up and agrinnin'."

They dismounted, and Joe introduced the girl. Jennison's nomenclature *anent* beauty in women was circumscribed, yet fervently he applied it now to this girl, though indeed silently. "Purty as a chromo." Pulchritude had no higher symbol of speech to him. Yet this fifteen-year-old satin-skinned lass was worthy of more, far more. Now Jennison had a practical thought as the small talk flowed.

"Joe," said he, "that back trail sure oughta be watched off and on. Any way so to do outen flounderin' down crick?"

"You betcha," Joe Three Crows laughed. He pointed aloft. "See that hole fifty feet or so above the tunnel? Old channel I guess. Gives a full view of the valley to the grove where you camped and two miles further anyway. I spotted your camp fire from there last night. I'll scramble up and look. Take about ten minutes."

Jennison watched that superb climb with smiling lips. Indian or no here was a man.

"You're sure lucky, Mr. Lavender," he observed, "in that Joe. He's sure a regular he-man."

"Don't know what Naomi and I would have done without him," Lavender declared. he looked wistfully at his maimed hand. "'Specially with me crippled like I am."

"You oughta blame yourself on account of something you cain't help," Jennison insisted, "long as you play the man up to what you've still got. Mebbe I'm a mite handier with a gun than you, but that's because I never knowed anything else. You can run a store, and I couldn't. A man oughta line up equal to himself. Nobody can ask more." To Joe Three Crows, "All clear you say, let's set down then and kinda talk things over, all of us."

"Let's start with the Injun who told you about this valley," Jennison began. "Joe says you let him have a shirt, outen payin' fur it. Was it *before* Hempells, excuse me Miss Naomi, misbehaved in your store at Folio or after that?"

"I don't see—" Lavender parleyed.

"Leave the puzzlin'," Jennison told him. "I ain't askin' fur fun."

"Well," Lavender was feeling out a

backtrail, "it was afterward. Next day in fact."

"How long had you knowed him," Jennison continued.

"Guess I hadn't seen him around town more than a day or so before then," so Lavender testified.

"And after he'd told you about this place?"

"I'm not sure I saw him again."

"So he didn't guide you up here."

"No. He told me how to get in. That's about all."

"Now remember close, Mr. Lavender. Did he tell you about this handy keyhole Joe's jest been spyin' through?"

"He didn't, Mr. Jennison." It was Naomi subbing for her befuddled parent. "I heard the conversation, all of it."

"Jest one thing more then," Jennison smiled at the girl. "Did he by any chanct tell you that thar wasn't no other possible way to git *into* this valley, or *out* either fur that matter?"

Communal glances between the two then Naomi answered.

"He said," she reported verbatim, "jus' one doah an' no laddah'."

"Just one door and no ladder," Jennison transcribed the vernacular thoughtfully. "Well, we'd best plan on him bein' a liar. If he knowed what Joe found out he's a half liar anyway. And he may a lied further. That's something I'm lookin' into."

"But what would be the point to all this, Bat?" It was Joe Three Crows asking.

"Well," Jennison amplified the thought, "S'pose that Injun was in Hempells' pay. Hempells wanted Miss Naomi here where he could lay hands on her when he got readied so to do. And which he ain't goin' to not by a damned sight, excuse me, Miss. What better place than this fur his said plans? *Then* with old Jude Pickle watchin' the front gate so to speak, nobody could sneak out, could they? Then jest s'pose thar's a *back* door. They know you're here, Joe, and it's dollars to a pinch of dust they also know *I'm* here too. I mean Pickle and mebbe that Injun. Should thar then be a *back* door, they'll probable use it. I don't like that Injun bearin' down on that 'laddah'. He kinda lugged it in by the years looks to me. So I'm goin' to take a look-see. You stay here, Joe. If you see any signs down valley

cut loose with your Winchester. Three shots. I'll come froggin' back. And if you see trouble, let Miss Naomi skedaddle up that trail you've made and duck into that said hole, and stay thar."

Jennison turned up stream, passing within a few rods their lean-to camp cook fire, with a scattering of utensils festooning stubbed-off limbs of a handy tree. Such simple living was incident to the season. A little farther and he knew that they had at least two saddle horses, the stigmata of their calling printed on their glossy sides. Nearby, three more horses, pack animals by the viewable signs. Almost shoulder neighbors to the horses, deer.

NOW to his task. From his *cantinas* he drew his field glasses and focused them on the upper reaches of the cliffs. For if another way opened down into this valley, its beginnings would be evidenced up there, above the green line held by trees and bushes. Two hours of scanning, and he was convinced. Other than for a bird entrance here did not exist. And then, just as he slipped the binoculars back into the *cantinas*, he heard the shots. One, then three. The one a pistol, the three a rifle, a rifle that stuttered with haste.

The distance back was perhaps a half mile, and Sunflower was a good horse. He ran unvexed with spur or quirt. Yet he had encouragement. Jennison, feathering the saddle in masterly way was talking to Sunflower as man to man. There was need for him to hurry. Naomi was in peril. Well, yes her father too, even Joe Three Crows, but it was for the girl that Sunflower must climax his ultimate best. Yet that clipped two minutes flight seemed interminably long. It seemed to Jennison that he could have cut a cord of wood, killed and skinned a deer, or braided a lariat in the measureless time that snailed between that first shot and the tragic scene that met him when he pelted into sight.

It was a pitiful tableau that would trouble his sleep for many a night to come. Not the prone body of Lavender, his head cradled in Naomi's lap. Not that alone. It was what he read in the girl's eyes as he swept nearer. Horror, panic, hopelessness, despair. And then Jennison saw Joe Three Crows as he emerged rifle in hand from the

auxiliary tunnel and scrambled swiftly downward, his face a thunder cloud.

"That damned Siwash," Joe Three Crows in his wrath used the utter mudsill appellation to his race, "shot him. But he won't shoot anybody else."

There was need for calmness, clear thinking, sanity here, so Jennison slid quietly out of his saddle, without haste approached the girl and looked down at the man. There was blood on the grass beneath his body but no visible wound. Jennison turned and looked questioningly at Joe Three Crows who now was panting at his side.

"In the back, low down," he gasped. "Spine I think."

"We'd best find out," Jennison nodded, as he knelt down. Lavender's eyes fluttered open as they shifted him gently.

"We've gotta look," Jennison told him. "We'll be careful."

"No pain," Lavender said weakly. "Paralyzed, I guess."

"Tain't likely," Jennison soothed him. "See, you can wiggle your left boot toe. Nope, you're hurt undoubted, but you ain't paralyzed. You're weak, fur you've lost a dipper full of blood probable. But a man can lose that much with a bad nose bleed. Let's look, now at the wound. Nope. It ain't so worse but what it could be a lot worset. We'll let you rest a bit then we'll carry you up to your camp. Jest stretch out now and take it easy as you can. I've gotta look round with Joe a minute. That's right, Miss Naomi, jest cradle your pappy's head in your lap agin. We'll be back in a couple of minutes. And don't fret moren you hafta. See," he pointed, "your pappy didn't git hit so hard on account the bullet plowed through this six-inch saplin'. That kinda took the punch offen it. He's prodded, but not so hard as he would a-been only fur that handy bull pine."

"How'd it happen?" Jennison asked when out of earshot of the two.

"Not exactly sure myself." Joe Three Crows answered. "All I know is that something made me look up toward that tunnel. The damned Siwash was down a few feet below the end and as I whirled he cut loose. I got in three shots before he made it back in and out of sight."

"You get him?" Jennison asked.

"You bet," the other grunted. "Blood

all along the tunnel. He's splattered out on the rocks below, plenty dead. Must have skinned up the cliff. There's cracks enough I guess, anyway for moccasins."

"Let's look," Jennison said thoughtfully. "He mighta had a ladder or something similar."

What they found shamed Joe Three Crows, yet added to Jennison's mental stature in the Indian's eyes. Wedged down in a crack at the verge of the opening down-creek, was the knotted end of a long lariat. Its fifty-foot length now swayed loose but there was evidence that before this it had been snuggled artfully into a crevice that ran down the face of the cliff. The lariat was brown matching well the color of the cliff. As to the Indian, as Joe Three Crows had stated, he was "splattered" on the rocks below. Jennison drew the lariat up and yanked it free from its anchorage.

"Proves one thing to me," he said with satisfaction. "Him leavin' it thar to climb back with, means thar ain't no other way into this valley 'ceptin' the two we know about. And *now*, thar's only one. We'll sure watch it."

He studied the valley with care, the sprawled body briefly.

"He was after you, Joe," he said with certainty. "That means, I figger, that Hempells is likely due right soon. Bein' a careful man he wanted you outen the way. Sure goin' to be a joke onto him, when he finds us both personally present so to speak."

Lavender was still without much pain so Jennison left Joe Three Crows there while he and the girl set out to make necessary preparations at the camp for moving the wounded man. And Jennison wanted to talk to her out of Lavender's hearing.

"You see," he announced sunnily, "all we've gotta do jest as soon as we finish off this said Hempells is to tote your pappy out to Pannikan City, so as Doc Levitt can cure him up. If you ain't never heard of Doc let me tell you. When they made Doc they broke the mould. Thar ain't now, never was, nor won't be another doc like him. When he sets into a case the angel of death takes a immediate vacation. How, you ask, will we git your pappy to Pannikan? Why we'll swing him in a blanket between two hosses in case he cain't ride by then. We'll hafta take it slow mebbe, and agin mebbe not too

slow. So jest you remember that and don't fret, anyway no more than you would jest natural. And till we can start fur Pannikin, you betcha the three of us 'ill be takin' good care of him."

"You're awfully good," she said shyly, "and you make me feel better."

"Not good," Jennison corrected, "but I hope I'm human."

A BLANKET in hand, Jennison and the girl were soon back. With care, they lifted Lavender onto this improvised stretcher and carried him back to the lean-to and the bed which represented the ultimate of comfort within their pioneer limitations. Next they cut away the blood-soaked clothing and cleansed and dressed the wound. Rough surgery sprung from sheer necessity was sometimes even practiced but only when the need was very great. That was not now. So when Jennison had given Lavender a stiff drink of liquor, he and Joe Three Crows returned to care for their sadly neglected horses.

"Joe," Jennison suggested as he lifted his binoculars from his *cantinas*. "S'pose you take our hosses up beyond the camp and unsaddle 'em and stake 'em out. I'm goin' to clamber up yonder and spy out the valley. Then we'd best rustle up some grub. Should Naomi have a good hunk of fresh deer meat, she might boil it fur broth. Her pappy may not feel hungry, but he's gotta gain himself some strength and eatin' is sure one of the all firedest ways of doin' that said which. I'll be back in the shake of a bull's tail. What's that? Well, Joe, he's gotta chanst to make it, I figger. But he's gotta tell himself that he's gonta. And keep almighty sayin' it."

The noon meal ended, Jennison and Joe Three Crows returned to the ford to prepare for the assault that Jennison felt would not be long delayed. For the frustrated attempt on Joe Three Crows pointed conclusively to this. But its failure, probably unknown to Hempells, would cause no change in his plans. He could brush this Indian aside like a dancing thistledown. Even if he knew of the presence here of Jennison, that would have no weight unless he knew who this stranger really was. Even then he would probably chance it, for he was a bold man indeed.

First a look down valley, then thoughtful concrete planning. The arch of the tunnel here was wide enough for two horses abreast, with a natural shoulder of creek bank flush against the breached walls of the dam. Here at Jennison's suggestion they ricked up some tinder dry brush, threaded well with pitch pine shavings. Should Hempells try a night foray the touch of a match would swiftly focus the marauders as a perfect target.

"Dammit, Bat, that's smart," Joe Three Crows declared admiringly.

"Well," Jennison said dryly. "One way to live long is to plan kinda careful. I'm doubtin' if we'll need it, but if we do there she is. All you'll hafta do, Joe, is to rake a match along your britches and touch it off. As to the other things we'll go into some of 'em now. Howsomever my guess is they'll move in by daylight. A man as able with a gun as Hempells undoubted is ain't like to worry none. And he's got some fancy cannonaders with him frum what I've heered, specially Harelip Scully. Whilst we're talkin' about that, remember, Joe, that *Hempells and Scully are my meat*. You can play tunes on the belly buttons of any of the rest, but leave them two fur me. *Cumtux?*" (understand).

"Me *cumtux*," Joe Three Crows grinned. "Yo' bet yo' my life."

THE afternoon wore away without incident. But because the grove where Jennison had camped was only a scant mile from the unbarred gate to their citadel, they spied out the lower reaches of the valley at not infrequent intervals. With Joe Three Crows on watch, Jennison would stroll with well assumed nonchalance up to the camp to exemplify the prophylactic of apparent freedom from care. It was a sovereign tonic for the girl, a lesser for the man. Yet even with him it had a modicum of efficacy. The bedrock faith Jennison held in Levitt needed no pretending. Given the opportunity, Levitt could save Lavender. And that opportunity would be given, though the heavens crumbled about their ears. But first they must dispose of Hempells. The rest in Jennison's sunshiny words would be as simple "as dealin' the jack frum the bottom of the deck."

Jennison and Joe Three Crows ate their

evening meal in relays, the Indian first. Jennison finished in record time and had just about reached their incipient lighthouse beacon when Joe Three Crows called to him from the mouth of the handy observation tunnel.

"Company, Bat," he reported.

One swift glance from the tunnel confirmed the diagnosis. Company had indeed arrived. Seven horsemen were riding out of the canyon to pause at Jennison's last night camping ground. Here they sat their horses while they seemed to hold council. It was near sunset and the narrow gorge was already heavy with shadows. Their goal was a scant mile away, and doubtless there was temptation in that nearness, and something else. Yet the parley which in all likelihood was between the eager leader and Pickle, who knew the difficulties of that treacherous mill chute, eventuated in seeming victory for the guide. All appearances indicated that they were camping there in Jennison's grove for the night. Unless, suspecting onlookers, it was a clever pretend devised to deceive. If that was indeed the game being played out there before Jennison and Joe Three Crows, Hempells was wasting effort. Come night, come day, a competent reception committee would be before the castle gates.

They watched the manifold activities of the camp. The unsaddling of horses, the picketing out, the budding campfire, the silhouetting of figures against its blaze as the men stacked their plates with food. Then the campfire, transmuted into a robust bonfire, the skyward flight of scurrying sparks at industrious prodding. Then the fire's slow death as the men sleepily cuddled their blankets. If genuine. And so it seemed, even under the moonlight that was soon flooding palely this sequestered valley. Waterloo had been postponed.

"No fireworks tonight, Joe," Jennison said presently. "Let's go back."

Leaving Joe Three Crows at the ford, Jennison walked on to the camp. A tiny fire burned demurely before the lean-to, its quiet light marking out the motionless body of Lavender stretched on his bed just within the make-shift building. On a blanket before the fire the lonely figure of the girl, keeping vigil over the wounded man. At the sound of steps she glanced around, then

was on her feet with that unconscious grace and agility that only youth can strut. Age can ape feebly, but that pitiful mimic impresses not at all. She met Jennison a few steps from the fire.

"Daddy's asleep," she volunteered. "He's not suffering much now." Then abruptly, "They've come?"

"Yep," Jennison nodded. "They've camped down here a mile or so. Settled fur the night so it looks. Still and but, me and Joe ain't takin' no chances on a slip-up. And that's jest fine about your pappy. Nope, I ain't supprised a mite. He's goin' to be all right and that's whatever."

Her eyes were searching his face in the moonlight. Now she said softly, "There're not many men like you, Mr. Jennison. You make me think of something in my Bible, 'the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.'"

"Shucks," Jennison said in genuine confusion, "I sure don't cast much of a shadder, me weighin' only a scant hundred and thirty. Jest the same I've gotta hunch your pappy's due fur a sure mend in health. And as fur Hempells, don't you fret none. Me and Joe'll handle him."

SHE scuffed at the grass with a toe as if embarrassed. Then a hand went into a pocket and was withdrawn, a neat little pistol in her brown fist.

"Mr. Jennison," she said with simple earnestness. "Daddy and I had a long talk this afternoon. If anything happens to you and—Joe, we are not going to fall into Snake Hempells' power."

Jennison felt a strange constriction of his throat, a dimming of his eyes at her words.

Chivvied as the two had been, penned here in this remote valley, they had made a decision.

"Miss Naomi," he said very gently, "you and your pappy figgered right. Death ain't nothin' set up agin' a lotta ways of livin'. But," he stressed it positively, "you ain't goin' to hafta use that said gun. That's my solid hunch and she's seldom wrong."

Jennison and Joe Three Crows lazed by their little campfire smoking and talking in comfortably comradely way. Nor was it a pose. Not much. Every foreseeable peril had been duly appraised and checkmated.

Calmly they waited for the turn of fortune's wheel.

And they talked of many things. The probable fate of Indians, the different faces and figures you could see in the full moon. They contrasted the intelligence of dogs and horses. They discussed earnestly whether in building fences against ranging stock a man had the right or no to use the often brutally maiming barbed wire. They argued the effectiveness of a Winchester versus a Remington. They wondered why coyotes were always down on their luck, why frogs croaked, roosters crowed, if there were really hoop snakes. They debated the ancient chestnut, which was first the hen or the egg, the best way to put out a fire, what to do if you were struck by lightning.

Occasionally they ate some jerked venison, but drank coffee without inhibitions the whole night through. Twice Jennison slipped up toward the lean-to, for observation and reassuring report. Both Lavender and the girl seemed asleep.

Dawn pushed its gray shield up covertly above the eastern rim of the valley, in the willows birds twittered sleepily, day tiptoed into view. Jennison arose from his seat before the fire and in leisurely way stretched his muscles.

"Joe," he suggested, "mebbe it 'ud be a good idee fur you to take a glimpse down valley. Hempells moren like 'ill be rarin' to go. I'll fry some bacon and turn us over some flapjacks whilst you're peekin'."

"They're beginning to stir up the fire," Joe Three Crows reported presently. "Dammit but that bacon smells good, Bat. Flapjacks too. Give me two for a starter."

They ate swiftly, but that was just routine, not nerve acceleration. Then with Joe Three Crows again heading for his post above, Jennison walked up to the lean-to. Lavender was awake, the girl busy about the cook fire. Jennison greeted her cheerily then stepped over to the lean-to and smiled down at her father.

"You're lookin' chipper," Jennison declared. "Bet you can wiggle all your toes now to beat all sixty." Then to them both, for the girl was now standing by his side. "Things are goin' to be poppin' soon if not sooner, down at the ford. But don't you worry a-tall. The crick banks 'ill keep lead frum strayin' this way and me and Joe 'ill

hang *that* wash out to dry in quick order. Jest remember, that when the shindig starts. Don't come no closer, Miss Naomi, and kinda keep flattened down. So long."

As Jennison reached their smouldering campfire, Joe Three Crows called from the mouth of the tunnel, "They're saddling up, Bat."

"Best come on down then," Jennison suggested. "We'll probable be seein' 'em squirtin' outen this water spout down here purty quick. We've gotta be ready to thumb in the cork."

A FEW yards short of the giant tunnel, the stream seemed to pause as if to catch its breath for the daring plunge. Here it was all but currentless, a crystal pool a yard or so in depth. Low banks formed the sides of this basin, banks as high as the shoulders of a tall man. On the camp side, the bank was fringed well with bushes. Here Jennison and his companion would be crouched presently, Joe Three Crows nearest to the creek's outlet. He had his rifle. Jennison at this close range would stake all on his two .45 Colt's.

The men at the grove had been saddling up, Joe Three Crows had announced. That meant that they would soon be moving. The time for waiting would not be long, yet there would be time to brew a cup of coffee, and drink it too. Nor did Jennison even glance at his watch, a thing at which Joe Three Crows presently marvelled. For the Indian had three times consulted his own excellent timepiece within a space of ten minutes as he noted with some annoyance. What a superb ally, Joe Three Crows reflected, was this gray-eyed little man.

Presently, above the velvet-like roll of the chuted water they heard it, the muted sound of advancing horsemen pushing up the smooth-bottomed channel against the tug of the swift current. Then the low dissonance of guarded voices as the open end of the tunnel blinked into view.

Two, four, six, so they emerged into the quiet little pool to halt, each clutching a cocked rifle ready for instant use. Jennison's attention centered on the lead pair, Snake Hempells and Harelip Scully. That sloped back head, set on thin articulate neck gave ocular proof that the patronym, Snake, had been justly bestowed. Whoever the donor it

was pure genius. Now as he halted there he seemed suspicious of the silence, the lack of resistance, the suddenly noticed absence of his guide. He turned in the saddle to bark angrily:

"Where's that damned Pickle?"

Like a swiftly discordant answer to his snarl came Jennison's cold words.

"Hands up! We've got you covered."

What happened then no single eye could have read in all its interlocking multiple evolutions. It may be that destiny drove Snake Hempells along a predestined path to overthrow and death. Ten ticks of a watch and the two survivors with hands trembling aloft stared in dazed wonder at Jennison, then at their dead companions, then up to where Joe Three Crows scrambled madly for that upper tunnel.

"Ride out slow," Jennison ordered, "and up here. Now put down your hands."

For a long appraising moment he looked at his white-faced prisoners. Young they were, scarcely more than lads. Maybe—

"Boys," he said not unkindly, "you've both been travellin' down the wrong side of the lane. I'm askin' myself now if you've learned enough to cross the street."

"You mean," one of them blurted through flabby lips, "you're willing to give us a chance to go straight from now on? God, yes, after this."

"Me too," his companion fervently echoed the thought. "I've sure got a belly-full."

"You'll mebbe backslide," Jennison conceded out of a wide experience. "Still my advice is, don't. And you might as well take them four saddle hosses along. They belong to you as much as to anybody I reckon. Also take that trail fur Hophni and keep goin'. We're toddlin' back through Folio and I ain't *expectin'* to see you agin. So long."

H HE TURNED to Joe Three Crows who had now returned to say briskly. "Run up to the camp, Joe, and tell 'em every-

thing's all right. And if you've got a shovel up thar bring it along. Yep, I can see in your eye that you got a bead on Jude Pickle. I ain't chidin' you fur it, Joe. Trot along now."

The matter of interment was simple, the communal grave found ready, excavated by the recent uprooting of a giant pine. To Joe Three Crows a mild phenomenon was presented, for the body of Hempells unlike his fellows had not been eddied into the shallows, but lay submerged on the bottom of the pool. It had a simple explanation after all as Jennison demonstrated when they had carried him up onto the bank.

"In minin' camps," Jennison told him, "if a miner's body *floats* we figger he's been killed and robbed. You see most miners carry their gold dust in a money-belt round their middle. If he's got much gold dust on him, the weight 'ill drag a dead man down and hold him thar. You see gold dust runs about four pounds to a thousand dollars. Here, heft this said money belt. Twenty pounds, I reckon it, anyway, say \$5,000, mebbe a little more." While Joe Three Crows balanced Hempells' wealth on his palm in wonder, Jennison went on a bit sadly.

"Joe, you're eddicated in school, college mebbe, whilst all my learnin' has been in the school of hard knocks. Notwithstanding I've been told that if a man takes another man's wife away frum him, that the husband can sue this laterly thief and collect big damages."

"That's right," Joe Three Crows was plainly puzzled. "It's for what they call loss of consortium."

"I'll bet that's the right word," Jennison brightened, "though I ain't never heard it before. Anyway, that said which happened to Lavender, didn't it? And Hempells done it to him, didn't he? Well, 'less you can show me wrong, Lavender's sure gettin' paid fur his loss of—I disremember what. Anyway, him and Miss Naomi are sure agoin' to git the dust."

“ . . . Euchred God Almighty’s Storm, Bluffed the Eternal Sea ! ”



A SHIP ON HIS SHOULDERS

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

LUKE TELFORD got his command the hard way, in the midst of a gale that might finish her. And the hardest part of it was that Luke Telford wanted no command,

then or at any other time. "It's a headache," he thought. He underestimated.

The Old Man came down from the bridge to inspect the job that Mr. Telford's gang had done on Number Two hatch. Occasional

hammering seas had ripped tarpaulins and pounded leaks in that wooden hatch. And the winter northwester was rising. The cloudless sky was a pitiless iceberg blue, all one color under a white-streaked sea.

Mr. Telford, Boatswain Jack Gower and the rest had worked with lifelines strung along the well deck. They manhandled dislodged hatch covers, spread tarps and drove wedges. Every man of them was alert to leap for the ladders, the foremast or whatever else was high, solid and handy if a big comber roared down over the forecastle head. Telford was quick to hustle his gang to the lower bridge. All hands knew the gale was getting tougher and piling up mountains of water.

BUT when Captain Thomas descended from the lower bridge with Jorgensen, the big second mate, at his heels, he came as casually as if she were in drydock. The Old Man had kept some way on her, too.

Captain Thomas stepped out onto the steel plates of the well deck with never a glance at the head, beyond which endless seas were crouching. Looking at the little Old Man's trim figure you knew he was confident that no vulgar seas would disturb his dignity by making him jump. And Mr. Telford knew well that Captain Thomas really felt that way. It wasn't the matter of giving the men a lead and a lift; he felt that way.

"I'd give heaven and hell for a crust like his," the mate told himself.

True, she'd taken three big ones in a row and by rights was due for a smooth. Trust the Old Man to know it. But she didn't get a smooth. That sort of trick was what Luke Telford suspected from the treacherous sea. Instead of a smooth, a cross sea leaped aboard. It came not over the high forecastle but from the starboard side of the well deck. It hit solid and fast and broke above the bulwark.

"Watch your——!" The thunder of the water drowned out Telford's voice as if he had been throttled.

The Old Man never had a chance, nor had Mr. Jorgensen, though Jorgensen grabbed at his captain as if he thought he could save him. Both men were swept like yellow leaves before a broom over the side into the bitter winter water of the North Atlantic.

The sea in its attack on the *Marian Stearns* had gained a point—two points.

Shocked men gripped tightly what was nearest to them as the wave drained away. Gone! The Old Man was gone!

Mr. Telford had his command—the command he didn't want. He had seen too much of the malice of the leaping water to want to hold a ship and thirty-five men in the palm of his hand. The northwester jeered at him.

Squat Jack Gower looked at him for an order, bleak, suspicious, watchful. Luke Telford shook his head. No order he could give would save them. He'd been jolted back thirty-one years.

That big one that had taken the Old Man and the second mate looked almost as large to Mr. Telford as the wave in his earliest encounter with the sea. He still dreamed about the great wave. He'd been a kid, warned to play on the dry sand. He had waited until his older brother had strayed on along the beach. With a delicious feeling of guilt he started for the water. He wet his feet and then he saw a shell tumbling down the slanting wet sand in the last of the receding water. He pursued that shell down the slope. And then it came, a towering and hissing thing, the sea itself, rearing up over him like a striking serpent. The sea! The great sea had lured him and now had come to take him!

Like a serpent the lifting green wall had paralyzed him, staying his feet in the rushing sand. In guilty helplessness he screamed. And then the sea hit him. It was an assault that brought with it infinite terror, like the attack of a great slaving animal. Rolled, choked, beaten, Telford had been dragged at last out of the grip of the monster by his big brother.

Telford shook that wave out of his salt-sore eyes. What now? He must move. He had a ship on his shoulders. Hadn't Luke Telford, first officer, proved for years that he didn't fear the sea?

He looked into the black eyes of Jack Gower, the boatswain, and saw that Gower's appraisal had become doubt. The injustice stung worse than the salt in his eyes.

"What's the word, sir?" Gower bawled. It wasn't a question; it was the squat boatswain's way of saying that he wasn't daunted and that Telford was.

Telford's heart was as cold as the water

overside. The two men wouldn't last long in that water, even if the sea had not killed them. There wasn't the slightest chance of getting a boat over, even if that gale had left them more than one boat intact on its davits. In spite of the chill striking through him Telford choked down commands which would only be called back.

From his spot on the ladder to the lower bridge he walked to the side of the ship and glanced aft. No sign of the two on the streaked surface. His gaze was a mere formality, a courtesy to the dead. He looked warily forward for another big one and then ran down to the empty well deck.

The sea had not been satisfied with its human prey. It had ripped away the top-most tarp covering the makeshift job on Number Two hatch. The sea wanted the ship.

Luke Telford motioned to Gower and to Cullop, the stiff-jointed old carpenter, for attention and pointed out the damage. He didn't like Gower's eyes.

He climbed up the ladder and they waited for him at the top. It seemed to him that their faces, between yellow sou-westerners and yellow oilers, were a bit grayer than they had been. Their eyes gave him a vote of no confidence. Gower cradled his heavy chin in his hand and old Cullop, looking away, rubbed his swollen wrist. Somehow men always sensed Telford's fear of the sea, no matter how many risks he took.

"I'm going to get her stern on to this," he cried, with a jerk of his head to the north-wester. "It's piping up again. Stand by to do a real job on that hatch as soon as I work her 'round."

Of a sudden Gower looked past him. His hand dropped from his jaw. Mr. Telford spun around.

This one was enormous, and dead ahead. That didn't mean much, if she would rise to it. But all three of them knew, well before the sea came over the bow, that she wasn't set to take it. Her bow was going down. The slant was too steep for her to lift. Her flaring bulwarks went right into that foam-streaked green mountain.

The sea crashed down. Telford sprang back and the others moved with him. Green water leaped in over the bow on either hand and, meeting, shot up in a foaming peak above the fore-castle head. Then the white,

writhing remnants of that collision thundered back onto the well deck, burying it deep.

Flying water stung their faces and pattered like shot on their oilskins. Solid water sluiced around their legs.

The *Marian Stearns* came up slowly wounded by that ram-like blow. Telford, eyes straining, saw what he feared he would see. The green and white water boiling off her deck was not all running overside. Some of it was pouring into her vitals, through the gaping holes that were Numbers One and Two hatchways.

"Stove in!" gasped Cullop.

Though she was coming up Telford could feel that those tons of water down below were deadening her under his feet. She was by the bow, now, and less able to stand up against the next boarding sea.

The eyes of the whole gang focused on the mate. The men bunched together, watching him.

The sea had trapped Luke Telford at last. His supreme attempt to save the ship could not be made by commands from the bridge. The time for that was past. The sea would be waiting for him to come down there on the well deck again. He must give the men a lead. He must go down on the well deck, where he had labored so long and so uselessly, to attempt again to repair those hatches. He could feel the great wave over his head.

The sea had arranged the trap very skillfully. The sea knew that he had the guts to go down there again and make a good stab at saving the ship.

Telford knew, too, that he had the nerve to try and to die trying. He knew. But nobody else knew. It was a secret. Those doubting eyes suggested the opposite. The way he had worked on the well deck, tensely, watchfully, always the first to sing out in warning—that had made the men doubt. He couldn't help the way he worked.

Their eyes were on him now.

"Storm oil!" he said to Gower. "Keep it flowing freely."

TELFORD ran up to the bridge where young Clarke, the third, was clutching the bridge rail with thin white fingers. Clarke lifted his head from the yawning destruction and took a hand from the rail to

A SHIP ON HIS SHOULDERS

wipe salt or sweat from his narrow face. The fat helmsman was holding the wheel as if it were hot.

Telford rang down the engines. With that weight of water in her forward she would lie to the sea like a weather vane. No need for way. Through her fabric, as he grasped the handle of the engine room telegraph, he could feel the racing of the screw. It was lifted almost clear of the water by the abrupt change of trim.

It was still witless homicide to send men down on that well deck. As she lost way she would ride a bit easier. He rang her engines slow astern.

Now, instead of challenging the seas she was backing away from them, giving to their assault. Her shuddering told him that her screw was not biting solid water. That was bad. There was a lot of water in her forward.

She would not answer a wheel hard over. Without a real grip on the water by that propeller he could never work her around and put her stern to the sea. He could not shield her forward well deck from the impact of the waves so men could clap on new hatch covers.

He called the engine room by voice tube. The chief was waiting for him. Already the news of what had happened was known below. Pumps were sucking sea water out of One and Two holds.

"No doubt there'll be plenty o' work for 'em," said Mr. Tabor, the chief.

As Telford turned away young Mr. Clarke was beside him.

"She sure has come unstuck this time," the third mate said brightly.

Mr. Telford grunted, disgusted. That would be Mr. Clarke's line, then, the flip-pant, heroic young man, wisecracking in the face of death. It wouldn't help. It was too close to giving up. He'd be thinking of bright things to say instead of fighting for his ship.

In spite of the screaming of the gale Luke Telford sensed a great silence in that ship. The men below in the stokehold and in the engine room, the men on the lower bridge and in all the other parts of the ship were waiting for his decision. He was the Old Man. What he said went. On how he estimated the situation depended their living or their dying.

He went out onto the bridge to estimate the situation.

Much more water would sink her. His defenses against the sea now were to go astern, to use oil cunningly, to pump and, if ever possible, to patch up the hatches.

The weather would sink her or save her. Neither the latest weather report nor the hard-looking sky promised that the gale would ease off. She was taking more water now than the pumps could handle.

The gusts of the northwester were coming closer together. And there was the weight of water in the wind.

He glanced aft at the fiddley deck. On the starboard side the lifeboat hung in splinters from the davits. On the port side was a good lifeboat.

He sent Mr. Clarke for the radio operator in his shack abaft the chartroom. He hailed Gower, below, and found a cluster of men staring up at him from the foot of the bridge ladder. He told Gower to get set for an attempt to cover and batten down the hatches. The men moved out of his sight almost grudgingly.

Smith, the radio operator, with fingers tweaking at his closely clipped mustache, came quickly and spoke fast:

"I got off an SOS for ya as soon as the hatches went, Mister."

Telford was jolted. It is not for radio operators to decide when a ship is to ask aid. His hands knotted up but he kept them at his sides.

"Send anything else without my permission and I'll iron you!" he said coldly.

Aggrieved, Smith jerked a hand toward the low bow and stood still, watching Telford's face. They all watched his face. What did they expect to see there? Was the sea watching his face, too?

Telford did not cancel the call. He had intended to order the general call for aid.

"What have you got?" he asked.

Smith moved his jaws in a peculiar way that made his nose and mustache twitch.

"The nearest's a mail boat—the *Eridanus*, sir," he said sullenly. "She's not far over the hill—strong signals. They got a direction finder working on us."

"Get me her position," Telford said. He went into the chartroom to work up his own dead reckoning.

"Abandon ship, huh?" said Mr. Clarke, at

his elbow. "Well, we won't be leaving much." He glanced out at the streaked and charging seas. "Getting away will be quite a trick."

Telford looked up from his chart. "No order to abandon has been given," he said. "Go down and help the bosun get the oil flowing to stream ahead of her bows."

CLARKE obeyed sluggishly, bending against a roaring gust. Telford worked out her position from the noon fix. She hadn't made fifteen miles in the three hours. Latitude forty-one degrees nine minutes North, longitude sixty-two degrees thirty-one minutes West. He took this D.R. position back to Smith, who looked up at him from under his headset with sullen suspicion, as if he was sure the figures were all wrong.

As Telford left the shack he saw Morini, the steward, and two of the black gang up on the fiddley deck beside the good lifeboat.

He went aft and looked at them. Though they were shamefaced under his stare they didn't move. He sensed the straining of their wills against his.

"Get going!" he said harshly.

With the slow reluctance that characterized movement on this ship since the confident Old Man had gone, they slunk away. They turned their heads back, as if, fantastically, they didn't like to leave him near that boat.

He returned to the chartroom. He was there when Smith came in with a message from the *Eridanus*. It was her position. He laid it off on the chart and picked up the dividers. She was to the westward, twenty-eight miles away.

Twenty-eight miles. He caught his breath. She was an eighteen-knot ship, the *Eridanus*. The wind and the sea would be little hindrance; they would be on her port quarter. Call it an hour and a half. Unbelievable luck!

He went out on the bridge and paced from wing to wing once. A man might well be justified in keeping his men out of the savage peril on the well deck with a rescue ship an hour and a half away. You traded your ship for your men's lives.

The wind snarled in a sudden gust.

He shook his head. That argument was full of holes. He thought of the difficulty of

getting a lifeboat crammed with thirty-odd men away from the ship in this hard-hitting sea. Even up here on the bridge he wasn't getting the full force of the gale, for the ship was going astern, yielding to it.

He leaned over and stared down at the well deck. At the moment only a little loose water was sloshing innocently over the steel plates. Through Telford's mind flitted the vision of a seashell, tumbling over and over in the trickle of a receding wave on a shining beach.

He set his jaw. "Even if a man were willing to quit his ship without a fight—" he said and shook his head again.

He went back to the engine room voice tube and spoke to Mr. Tabor. He explained what he wanted—as much speed astern as the half-immersed screw could give her. Tabor understood, though even his voice was doubtful.

He turned and found Mr. Clarke at his elbow. There didn't seem much to tell that narrow-headed young man.

"Keep a good lookout for the *Eridanus*," he said and descended to the lower bridge.

Gower and Cullop were waiting there with the others. He looked over the spare covers, tarps, battens, wedges and mauls they had collected. He frowned at the sight of a cumbersome sea anchor that had been dragged out of the boatswain's store. Gower should know they'd never get her stern around to the gale with a sea anchor.

The boatswain spoke:

"A lucky break, sir, a ship within thirty miles. She'll be floating a boat down to us on a line before dark, sir."

As fast as that the news had been disseminated in that jittery ship. Luke Telford's fingers were twiddling with the flap that drew the sleeve of his oiler tight around his wrist. He stopped that as he caught Gower's appraising eyes on his fingers.

Cullop, the carpenter, was coiling down the tripping line of the sea anchor, a move designed to draw the mate's attention to it. Getting over that sea anchor and the hawser attached to it would be much less risky than working on the hatches. It would occupy time, while the *Eridanus* came on.

Luke Telford ignored the boatswain's words and the carpenter's canvas anchor. He jerked a finger toward the well deck ladder.

The sea flung a roaring chunk of water up

over the low forecastle head. It came leaping aft, to the break of the head and poured down over the gaping hatches.

The storm oil streaming down her sides was not preventing the seas from breaking. In that bitter weather it was congealing too fast to be effective.

Telford's voice sounded as brittle as an icicle in his own ears as he spoke to them.

"Your chance is down on the well deck—all of you," he said. "It's a thin chance. But it's getting thinner with every sea that boards her. Come on."

Weak, damnably weak, that voice of his, and the gale's skirling made a mock of it. He tried to achieve something of the Old Man's confident movement as he picked up a coiled rope that would serve well enough for a lifeline to cling to. The other lines had carried away.

The sea was waiting to leap. The sea had planned well.

"Come on, bosun!" he said, but his voice was still as thin as ever.

He started down the ladder, and he knew that every move he made was jerky, somehow fearful. A fine leader of men Luke Telford was! He could feel eyes on his back but he sensed no movement to follow him.

He got to the bottom. He did not dare look up as he made fast one end of his Manila line to the ladder stanchion. He did not look up but he knew the gang were clustered around the squat Gower at the top of a ladder. And Gower wasn't moving.

He gave a final pull on the knot he had thrown around the stanchion and then he started across the well deck with the line uncoiling as he headed forward. Down here he could not see over the forecastle head what might come over the bow. But he knew that the sea was crouching there and he did not need to look.

He was past the gaping ruins of Number Two hatch when, against the shriek of the wind, he heard frantic voices shouting. Then he felt her shudder under him, even before he saw the big one piling up over the bow. It was as big a sea as that first sea had seemed to the boy chasing the shell. The sea was coming for him.

He dropped the line and darted toward the foremast.

But the sea was coming for him. With

implacable speed it came hurtling aft over the anchor windlass and down onto the well deck.

It caught him. He never had a chance to reach the foremast. It swept him off his feet—away from every solid thing. He went down into a tumbling, bitter vacuity of water, as bewildering as a nightmare.

HIS head broke through the surface into the biting wind. He realized in one agonized glance that he had been swept over the rail into the sea. He saw the ship—the whole length of her—as he had not seen her since Lisbon. He struggled, but the water was numbing. His brain knew his struggling was the mere muscular reaction of a doomed animal. The sea had him.

He flogged the sea with his arms. Puny blows! He was spun around by the whirling water and saw another sea towering—a cross sea running at variance with its mates. It was coming to finish him. It was leaping, leaping, higher and higher as it rushed toward the broken bulk of the wave that had clutched him and that had destroyed itself against the ship.

Skyward it leaped. Then it curled over in a fury of foam. It buried Luke Telford and again he knew thunderous confusion.

He brought up with a crash against something solid. The shock overcame the numbness of his body. Pain went racing up to his brain.

But faster than the impact of pain was the darting of his cold-trickened fingers toward the thing he had hit.

The water dragged at him, draining away from his body. He hung on. He shook his head and looked around.

He was sprawling on the well deck and his hands were gripping the lowest tread of the ladder. It was the ladder down which he had come seconds before.

He knew what had happened. That cross sea, a sea like the one that had finished the Old Man and the second mate, had swept him back on board the ship. That had happened to him. He remembered, of a sudden, that it had happened to men before him.

But more than that had happened to him. He clambered to his feet and turned to look at the sea.

The sea had had him in its grip. And it had let him go. Abruptly he realized that

the monster, the living, malicious thing that had haunted him since boyhood had never existed. The sea bore him no malice.

The sea was a helpless, sprawling thing, with no conscious life in it save what terrified children and savages endowed it with. It was not drowning that he had feared. His was the ingrained and buried fear of a cunning and all-powerful Unknown that had come leaping up the beach at him after it had lured him down the sand with a tumbling shell.

The sea was not even so much as an idiot.

And Luke Telford was a man grown now, as good a man as another, and fit to command and willing to stand the gaff of command.

"Be damned to you," he said, and he knew he was speaking to a thing that did not exist. "You don't mean—anything!"

He liked the sound of his voice. It was calm and full, made that way by the relaxed muscles of his throat. He could feel his body standing up, lengthening out, firm planted on his feet.

The overpowering weight that had made him jerky and overborne was gone. He might be drowned any minute now, but the

Old Man had been drowned. Plenty of good men had been drowned. They had not been devoured; they had been drowned. It didn't prove anything.

He bent and started to pull toward him the line he had made fast to the ladder stanchion. The other end dangled over the side. He drew it in. He lifted his eyes to the cluster of paralyzed men at the head of the ladder.

He opened his mouth and his voice came out, full-bodied, calm. His eyes were blazing at Jack Gower.

"You dirty dock walloper!" he said. "You always were afraid of a little water! Come down here or I'll drag you down!"

His voice was as steady as a rock.

Jack Gower lifted his head. He gave vent to a roar of laughter, the mirth of a man who has no doubts about what he is going to do. What he must do! He came plunging down the ladder and grabbed the lifeline from Luke Telford's numb fingers.

After him, with the makings of sound hatches in their arms, plunged the rest of the gang, yelling defiance, hot to fight, for they knew by the looks of their officer that they would win.



The Shooter's Corner

(Continued from page 5)

My personal opinion is that it will take anything on the American continent with the possible exception of the big Brownies, when used by a shooter who knows its (and his) limitations.

I used a rifle of this caliber for about seven years, exactly the same action as the Woodsmaster but made by F. N. in Belgium. A good-looking and finely made rifle, but fancied up a bit as compared to the Remington product. I traded this rifle off just before the war (to my everlasting sorrow) and found it a very reliable killer on soft-skin game.

We do a lot of white tail hunting around this part of the country (Maine, New York and Pennsylvania) and two of my hunting friends swear by the .35. One chap used the Auto. and the other a Remington trombone job. Both fellows are excellent shots and to the best of my knowledge have never lost an animal after making a hit. As a matter of fact, I have never seen or known personally of a head being lost after a solid hit with the 200-grain pill.

Also I have never seen the action of the Model 81 Woodsmaster fail, although I would be a little leery about using such a weapon on dangerous game. The secret of keeping the 81 operating is to see that it is clean. Gunk in the action will sometimes cause malfunction.

Your coming trip sounds good to me. Would give my left eyetooth to be able to make such a jaunt.

Also, I would certainly like very much to hear about the results of your experiment.



Deer Gun

QUESTION: Recently I bought a .32 Winchester Special rifle and would like a little information about bullets, muzzle velocity, trajectory and killing power.

I notice in a gun digest that a 110-grain soft-point bullet backed with 36 grains of No. 4198 powder, delivers a velocity of 2,775 feet per second.

Now, it seems to me that is pretty good,

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but will such a load have enough wallop to put a deer down, providing a hit is made in a not too vital spot?

Is the 170-grain bullet as loaded by the factory best for all-around shooting (excluding varmints) or can I get a better cartridge hand-loaded? Will you give me the dope on any other loads, if any are better than the above? Also, what about a 150-grain bullet?

Deer is probably all I will ever hunt but if I ever do need a little more power would like to have it.

The gun is a Model 64 lever action, 24-inch barrel, and new.

Thanks a lot, whether you can help me or not.

W. H. W., Calif.

ANSWER: In my opinion, the factory .32 Special load, 170-grain bullet at 2,260 F. S. is the best for all-around use (excluding varmint) in the Model 64.

As a matter of fact, the 110-grain bullet in front of 36 grains of Du Pont 4198 powder is supposed to leave the muzzle at 2,825 F. S. I do not think so very much of this combination, as (for me at least) it has never given good accuracy at fairly long ranges which is so necessary for varmint shooting. It is worthless as a deer load due to the fact that it loses velocity very fast and is an unreliable killer.

A lever action rifle does not give the gilt edge accuracy at long ranges that may be obtained with a good bolt or single-shot action.

Nevertheless, the .32 Special is one of the best medium range deer rifles. I have seen them knocked flat at 200 yards, but that is a little far out for the average hunter.

I am told that a good load for general plinking, varmints at medium range and deer at short range where a well-placed shot is a certainty, is the Lyman gas check bullet No. 321427 (140-grain) and 23 grains of Lightning powder, at around 2,100 F. S. I have hesitated to use this load as I do not believe it completely safe to load a round nose bullet in a rifle having a tubular magazine.

I would not recommend the .32 Special for use on game larger than deer and black bear.

The Story Tellers' Circle

Clothes and Critters

WHEN Rosalie Bodrero's story "The Wolves," which is—you've guessed it—about wolves, arrived in this office there was much clucking and cogitation about the fictional action of those critters in a yarn that interested us a great deal. We asked Author Bodrero to substantiate her thesis that animals can be influenced and/or deceived by the costumes of human beings. On a basis of interest, we think her reply belongs to you readers as well as to us and we're passing it along herewith.

We might add, incidentally, that when our "animal-expert" and hunting friends have dropped by these precincts recently to reprimed their muzzle loaders we've put it to them. Without exception they've voted in favor of the plausibility of this interesting plot. And if you haven't read the yarn in question yet we'll say no more.

Rosalie Bodrero says, "As to whether animals can be deceived by the costume of a human being, I don't know that there's any scientific way of substantiating whether they can or not. But the theory has long existed and so far as I know has never been disproved. In 'The Man-Eater of Kumaon,' Jim Corbett tells of borrowing a sari and assuming the dress of a hill woman to bring the tigers up to him. On two of those occasions he was stalked by tigers, and he considered the experiment a failure only because he was unable to shoot them. But he has spent his lifetime hunting and apparently thought he could fool tigers by dressing like a woman. In the only verified case of a mountain lion killing a human, E. T. Seton points out that the victim was a woman. This occurred near Morgan Hill in California, and I've heard the story told there that as soon as a man heard the noise and came up to investigate the lion left the woman and ran into the brush where it was shot.

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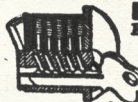


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"The idea for my story, however, came to me on a fox farm in Montana where the theory was proven to my own satisfaction. The farm was owned by a man and his wife who were near alike in size. The man was the one who inoculated the foxes, cut their tendons and their teeth, etc. The foxes were afraid of the man because he hurt them. The woman went to the kennels only to feed them. The kitchen door was more than a hundred feet from the kennels, and the scores of foxes would watch that door from where they sat on the roofs of their boxes. If the man, or any man, opened the door, the foxes immediately dropped into hiding before the scent could have been carried to them. But if a woman appeared they stayed in sight. During whelping season when the vixens may kill their young if frightened, men were kept away from the kennels. When the woman fed them I have often gone with her, and the foxes showed no fear of me. The woman told me the foxes would hide if she wore men's clothing, and I would not have been allowed to go with her had I been wearing slacks. Old-timers around there have told me of the days of early homesteading in the West when wolves were plentiful, and if a woman was left alone on a ranch she was always cautioned to wear men's clothing when she went out to do the chores.

"In the time of which 'The Wolves' was written, somewhere around the eighteen sixties, wolves were already, according to E. T. Seton, becoming afraid of guns. But in the story I'm not attempting to show that the wolf was entirely taken in by the costume of the man. The man in the story believed they might be, but it was my intent to show that the ruse was successful only in so far as the wolf was momentarily confused by the general outlines and the behavior of the man so that it permitted itself to be backed into the fire. Its attack then was brought on as a result of being cornered."

Rosalie Bodrero.

Rampaging Rivers

NOT many issues ago SHORT STORIES published an interesting piece by Crawford Sullivan entitled "Year of the Flood." Just after the publication deadline we re-

ceived a letter from Mr. Sullivan with some pertinent and interesting remarks which we found ourselves reading over again today.

The title, "Year of the Flood" seems particularly appropriate to good old 1948 with the recent violent uprising of the Columbia River and extensive floods throughout the whole Northwest fresh in our memories.

For instance, our subject is the Wabash which gets songs written about it when it's a good river and not on the rampage.

"When the Wabash River went on the rampage which serves as a background for 'Year of the Flood,' " writes Crawford Sullivan, "I had a ringside seat. The water came up as high as our front porch, rowboats and rafts were the only means of locomotion, people were marooned in trees for days and wild animals from a nearby circus encampment escaped to terrorize the countryside.

"At least, that's what they told me!

"I was about three years old at the time and unable to appreciate the excitement. Nevertheless, I got most of the details later on from more qualified observers, and, according to my grandfather, it was a rip-snorting flood.

"Grandpa ran a blacksmith shop down near the river. He did all the work for the circus people and the place was always full of bright red wagons and swan chariots. I remember the hippopotamus wagon particularly. It contained a tank which was ideal for scrabbling about in and pretending to be a hippopotamus.

"Grandpa was an adamant Baptist and an unmitigated Republican. I think he almost believed that all the evil in the world was caused by non-Baptists and Democrats. He had a soft heart, however, and was kind to children. Whenever I visited him he would open the trap door at one end of the dining room and let me climb down into the cellar. The cellar contained a number of strange and wonderful things: apple butter, cranberry jelly and a string of canvas decoy ducks which popped into shape when you twisted a handle.

"And invariably Grandpa would point to a mark on the cellar wall and tell me that that's where the water rose to, doggone it, during the year of the flood. The 'Big Flood, that is!'

Crawford Sullivan.