


E. HOFFMANN PRICE — FRANK GRUBER — W. L. ROHDE
A story of ring-men and racketeers by WILLIAM COX

Short Stories

ANC

June

25¢



**A
HURRICANE CAN
BREED MURDER**

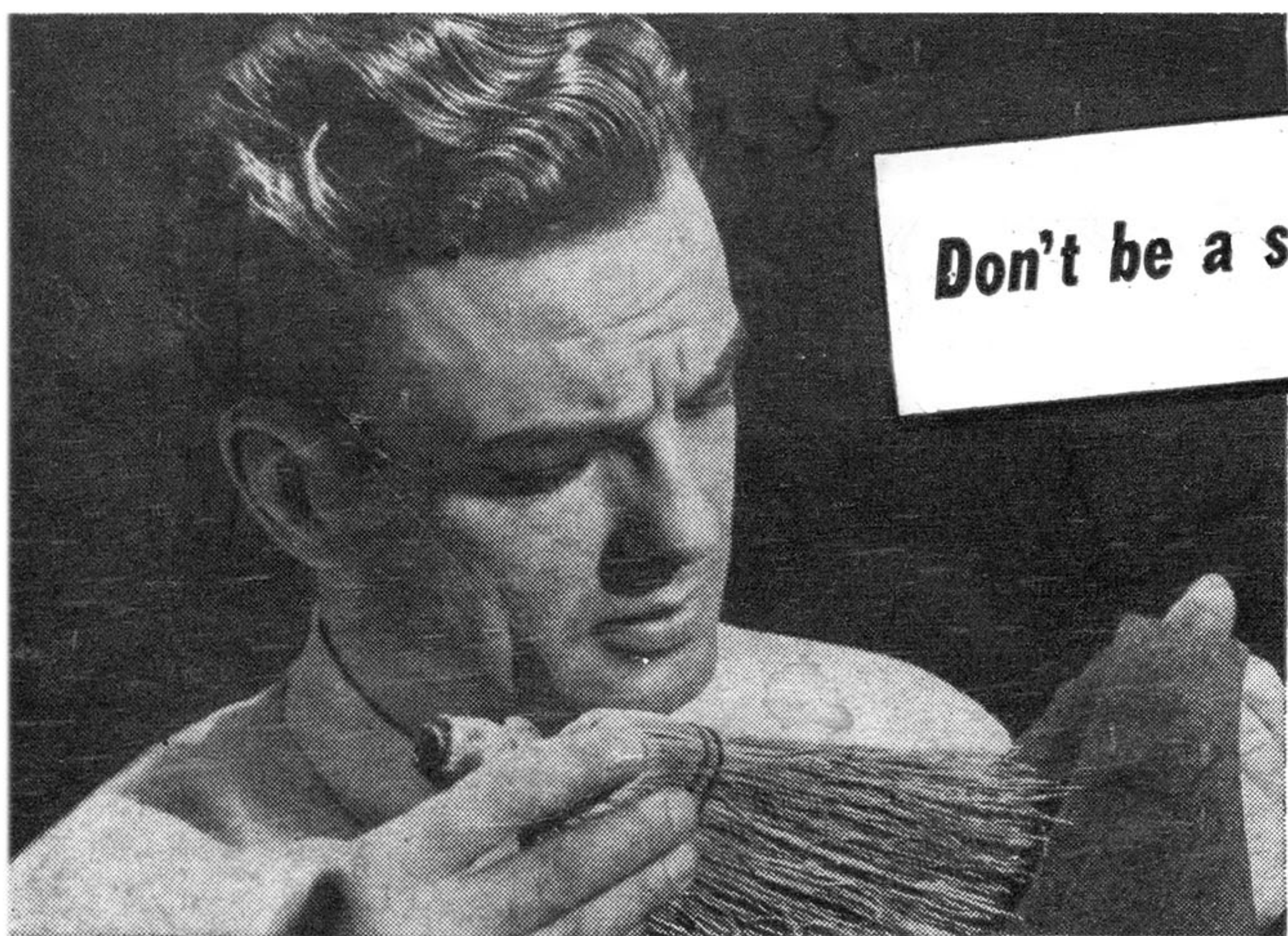
*A novelette of
peril off the Florida
reefs. by*

**Richard
Howells Watkins**



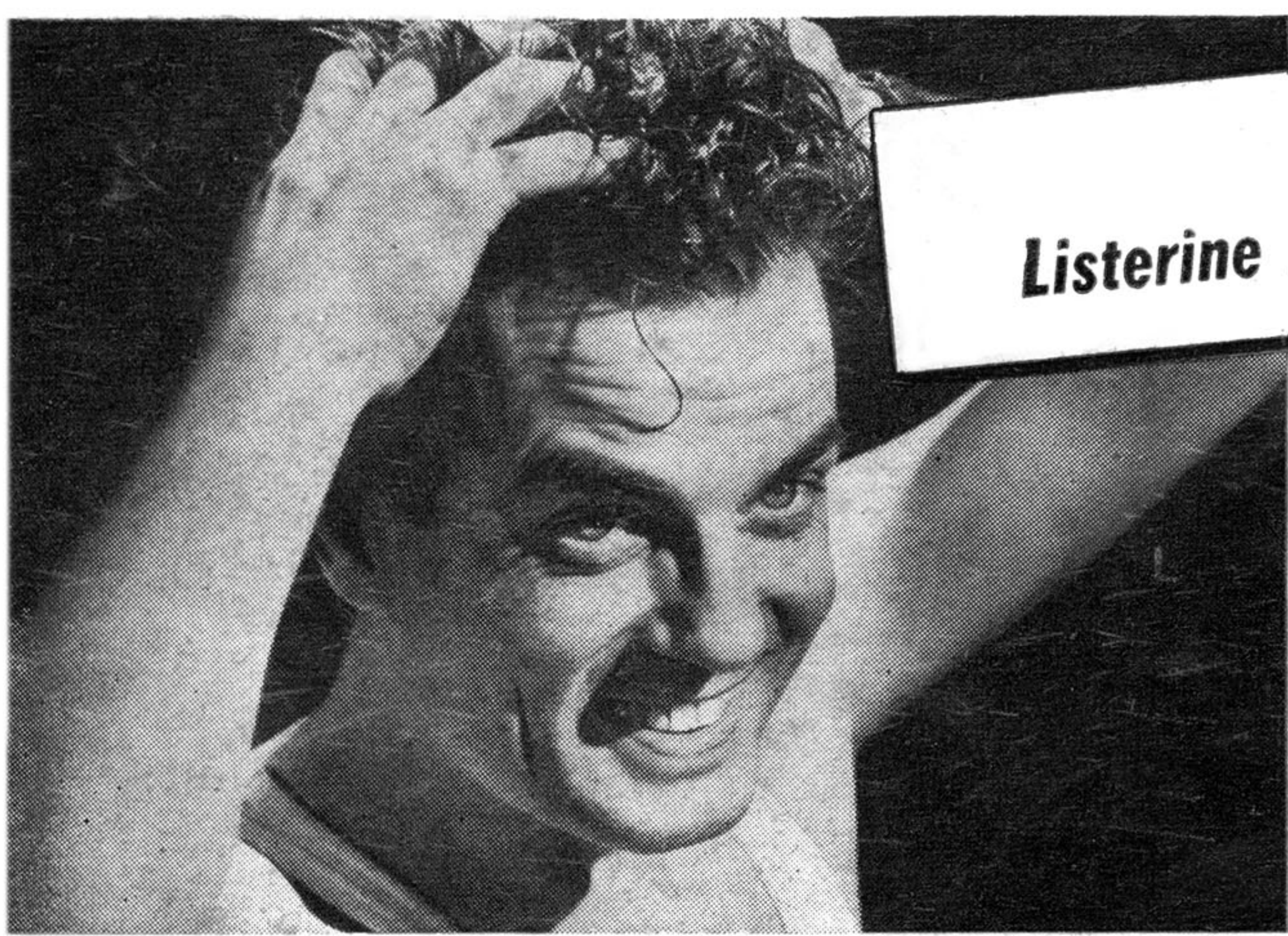
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LAMONT BUCHANAN

June, 1949

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M. DELANEY, Secretary.

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

CONDUCTED BY PETE KUHLOFF

A Fine Jap Sporter and a Handy New Gadget

THE Japanese Service rifles (Arisaka) Model 38 in 6.5-mm caliber and Model 99 in 7.7-mm caliber, as issued are sorry looking specimens at best—as are most military rifles.

If you are a regular SHORT STORIES reader you no doubt remember that I told about the experiments conducted by P. O. Ackley, the well-known Trinidad, Colo., gunsmith, to determine the strength of the actions of various military rifles. You may also remember that the Jap rifle in 6.5-mm caliber turned out to be the strongest of the group, which, besides the Arisaka, included the German Mauser Model 98, the U.S. Springfield Model 1903, the Enfield Model 1917, and the Springfield Model 1898 (Krag). I also mentioned that, regardless of the inherent strength of the Jap rifle it was almost impossible to picture this clumsy looking rifle converted into a good looking sporter. Also the Jap 6.5-mm as well as the 7.7-mm ammo, not being produced by the American cartridge making companies, is mighty hard to come by.

The other day I dropped in to yap a bit with Bill Schiessl at his Manhattan Gun and Repair Shop in New York City. A nice looking little sporter in one of the cases caught my eye. It proved to be a rebuilt Arisaka. And I want to say it is really a good looking sporting rifle.

Bill had utilized spare moments to do the job. He cut the barrel down to 24 inches, refinished it, and did a rechambering job for the 6.5-mm Mannlicher cartridge. The action was worked over and the bolt was mirror polished and engine turned (you know, like the inside of a watch) while the bolt handle was blued. A hooded ramp front sight was sweated on, and the original rear sight was somewhat modified. The rear

sight was the only part of the rifle that I didn't care for. I would liked to have seen a good micrometer receiver sight installed. I asked Bill about this and he said that he had completed the sight before he decided to do a real job on the gun, and to make the change would have necessitated repolishing the barrel and receiver and doing the bluing job over. Willie also carved out a fine stock from a good piece of French walnut and gave it a dull London oil finish. As I said before, it made a beautiful and nice-looking rifle.

The business of rechambering for the Mannlicher cartridge bothered me a little (but not too much) as the Mannlicher bullet is normally about .006 of an inch larger than the Jap 6.5-mm bullet.

As he had just finished the remodeling job, Bill hadn't had a chance to try it out, so I took the little rifle up to the farm to find out how it would shoot.

Being a cagey cuss, I tied the piece to a saw horse and fired the first shot by pulling the trigger with a long string. It worked OK. I put the micrometer on the fired case and found it to have enlarged about .003 of an inch at the base. This is not bad. I have seen cases swell a lot more than this when fired in some of our better sporting rifles. So, I took the rifle over to the bench rest and fired a five shot of group at 80 yards. It measured a little under 3½ inches which is good hunting accuracy, and as my eyes are getting on the old side and have lost some of their elasticity this is about as good as I can do with that type of iron rear sight. A shooter with younger eyes ~~may have~~ made a much smaller group.

I had only one box of cartridges so we used the remainder to get the feel of the gun in the standing or offhand position by busting gallon jugs of water which is a lot of fun if you like to watch minor explosions.

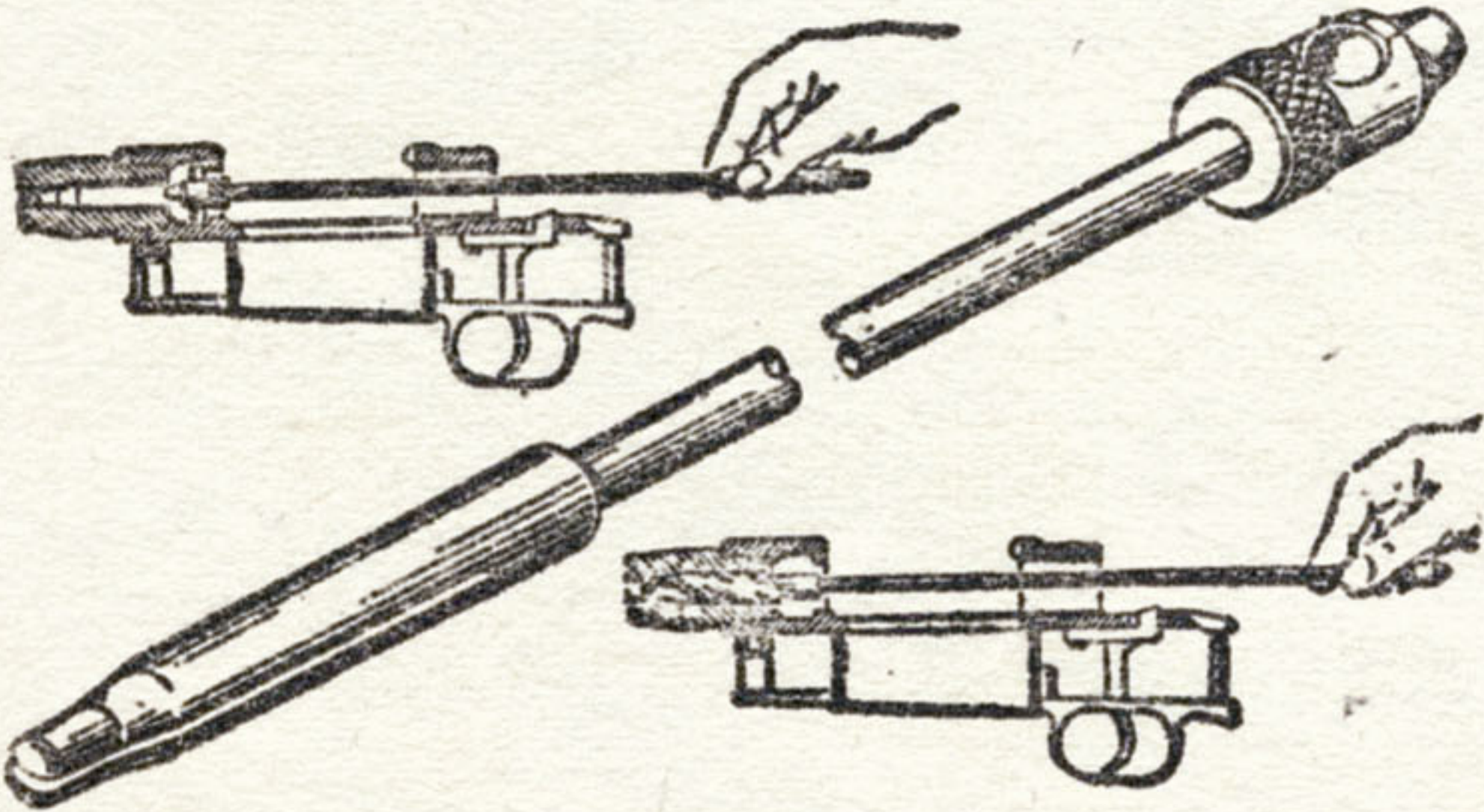
The little rifle handled so well I am going to have Willie make up another one for me.

If you have a 6.5-mm or a 7.7-mm Jap service rifle (the last may be rechambered for the American .300 Savage cartridge) and the idea appeals to you, why not drop Bill Schiessl a line at 200 East 20th St., New York, N. Y., asking for quotations?

I almost forgot, while in Bill's shop he showed me a little gadget that I have been looking for for a long time.

If you have a bolt action rifle there's one question I want to ask, "How often do you clean the locking lug recesses and the chamber?" Not very often? Well, me too!

When the locking lugs and the recesses accumulate a coating of dirt a certain amount of wear is bound to take place. If this condition persists, there may be enough wear to increase the headspace to a dangerous degree. So, it's important to keep these recesses as well as the locking lugs, free from dirt. I have talked to some shooters who have never cleaned the bolt lug recesses of their bolt action rifles.



It's a tedious job. In the past I have used a pair of dentist tweezers, and a small hunk of cotton for these hard to get-at recesses, and a .45 caliber pistol bristle brush for the chambers. Well, those days are gone forever. This new gadget (called the Neomatic. See sketch.) really does a perfect job with little effort. The Neomatic rod sells for \$2.00, and the cotton plugs for 35-cents for a bundle of fifty. It's the most useful gadget I've come across in many a moon. If your local gunstore can't supply this item, write to Willie!

Book of the Garand

THE U. S. Rifle, caliber .30, MI (generally known as the Garand) is, as most everyone knows, a semi-automatic shoulder

rifle invented and perfected at Springfield Armory, by John C. Garand. It was adopted as the service rifle by the Army in 1936.

The Book of The Garand (profusely illustrated with photographs) by Major General Julian S. Hatcher, the well-known Ordnance expert and one of our better gun writers, contains most of the dope about this rifle.

The book is divided into three parts. History of the MI, operation, and the Garand in Action. For the student of firearms the historical section is of particular interest. Here we find a detailed story of the development of semi-automatic shoulder arms for military use. Very interesting!

The second section (OPERATION) is really a manual on the functioning and management of the MI Rifle with complete instruction for disassembly and assembly.

The third Section (The Garand in Action) not only contains a report of the MI in World War II, but gives us a lot of information necessary when using the MI as a match rifle.

This last chapter is of utmost interest to the target shooter for it is rumored that as soon as the supply of Springfield and Enfield rifles is exhausted, the Garand Rifle will be sold to civilian members of the National Rifle Association, by the Director of Civilian Marksmanship (Department of the Army) for use in target practice.

I like to have "The Book of The Garand" handy for reading when I have a few moments to spare, as there are portions of it so interesting that rereading is a great pleasure. It is also an invaluable book for reference use.

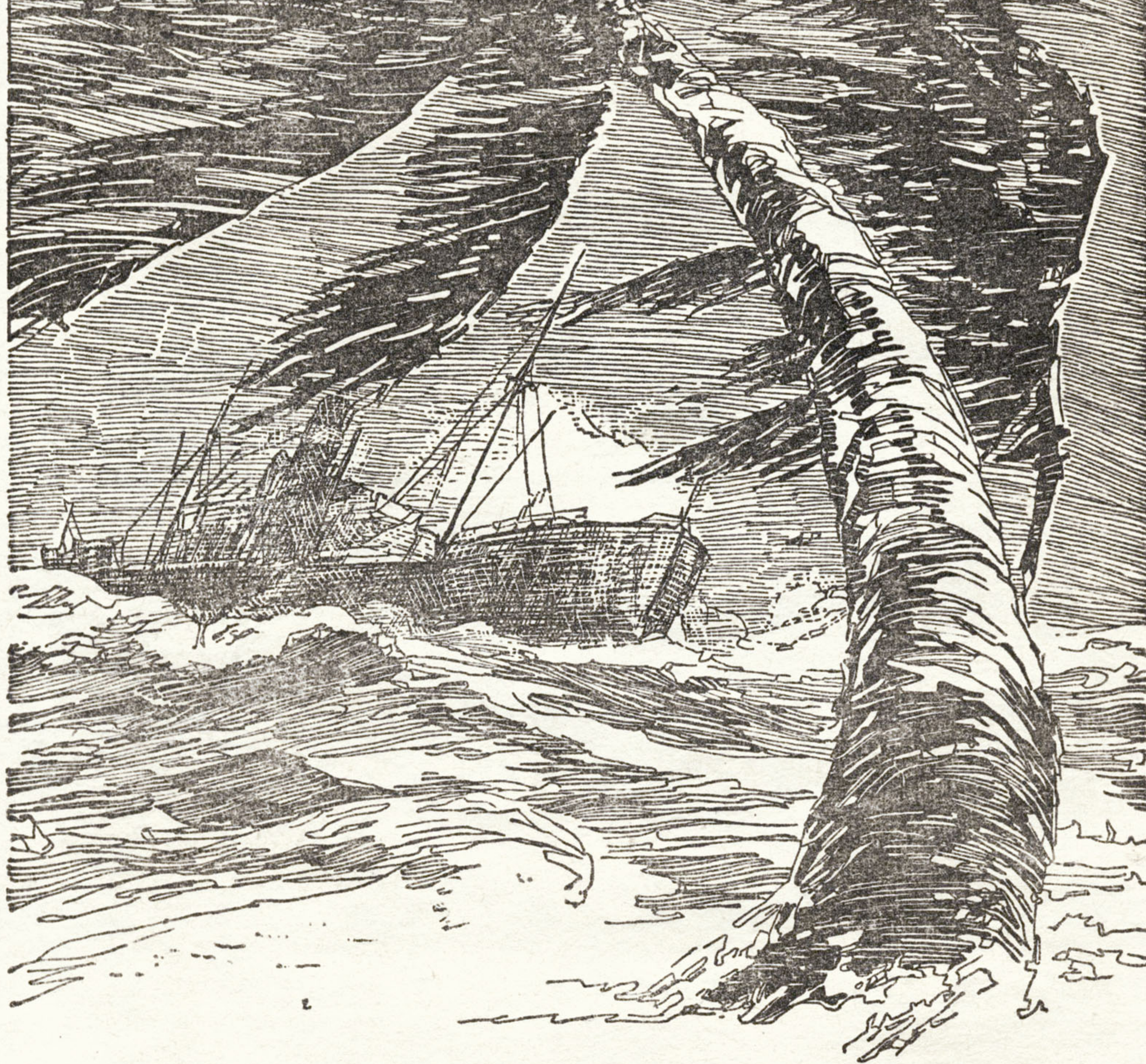
The Infantry Journal Press, 1115 Seventeenth St., N.W. Washington 6, D. C. has published The Book of The Garand as a National Rifle Association Library Book, and it sells for \$6.

Michigan Gun Collection

SHORT STORIES reader G. W. I. from California has sent in a booklet by Andy Palmer, who has a collection of over 3,000 gun items in his Military Inn, on U. S. 24 at Telegraph and Warren, Dearborn, Michigan.

(Continued on page 101)

A HURRICANE



By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

I

THIS was the toughest watch tall Herb Ritchie had ever stood. The rain pelted his face beneath the sou'wester with the cutting impact of buckshot and the old *Susan Seymour* plunged and staggered as if she'd dive under the shallow sea or break in two.

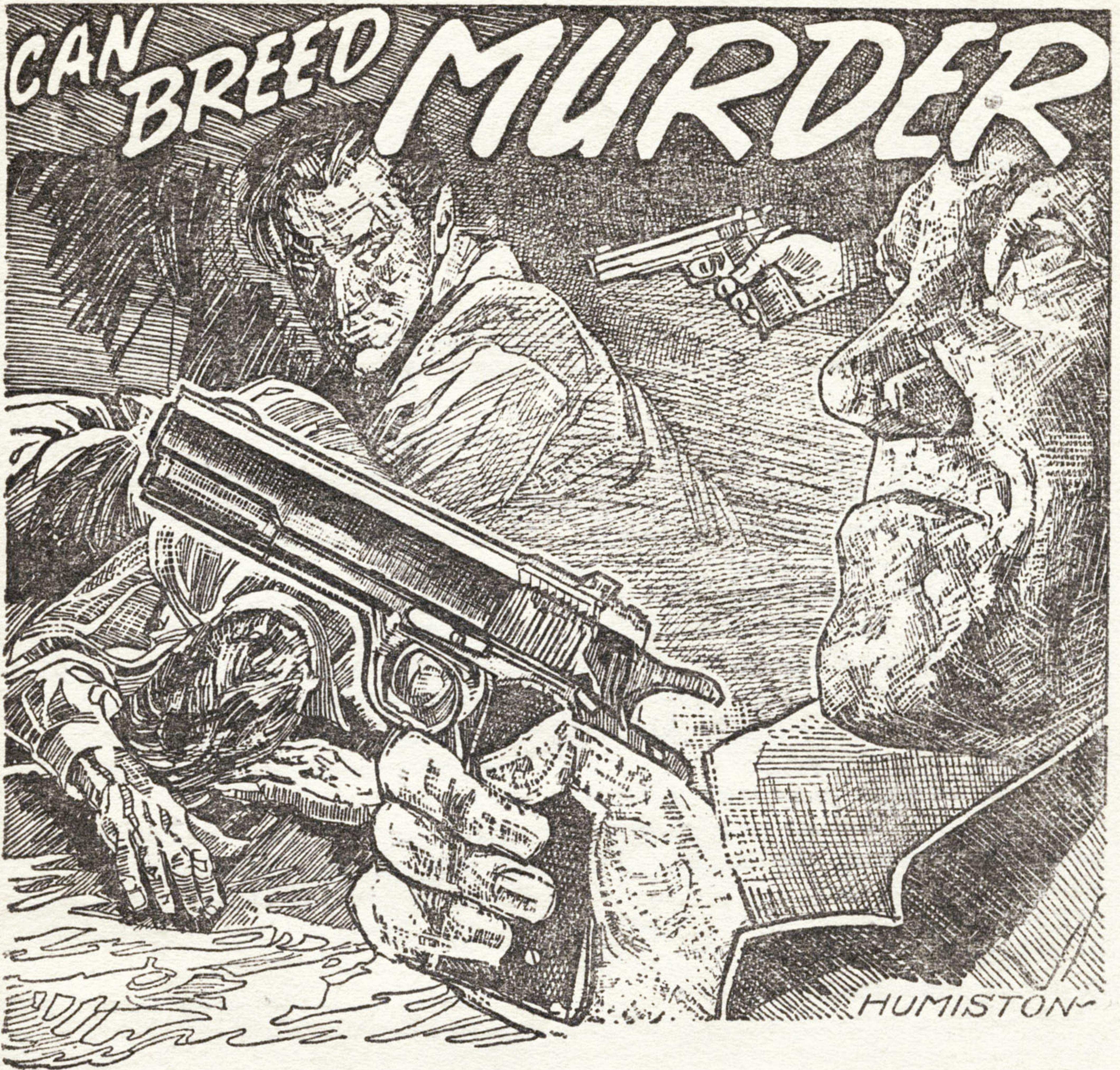
But weather wasn't the hardest part of the watch. Herb Ritchie had once taken the bridge in a full hurricane. This gale was nowhere near that, yet. The tough part was

that Herb must watch the captain and the mate as well as the sea.

"Wrong 'uns!" he whispered. "I'll bet my ticket on that."

Things were bad, rotten bad, in this harassed old coaster with a jittery crew, and there was no action a third mate could take. It wouldn't do to blow his top about it, he warned himself. A third should be able to brace his back against the men over him, to get aid and comfort from them for the ship.

But not from young Captain Horn, of the soft voice and the eyes that burnt a hole in you. And not from Stan Arndall, the mate,



***The Weather Was Not the Toughest Part of the Third
Mate's Watch Salvage Is a Magic Word***

thin-lipped, with high arching dark eyebrows, impassive as a leaden image, except for that occasional twitch of the left side of his face.

"What are they up to?" Herb Ritchie muttered into the rising wind. "They back me up? I wouldn't risk my back to either one of 'em. Crooks! But for all that they could be straight with the ship."

During all that forenoon watch, his watch, the old man or the mate had been coming and going on the bridge. Captain Horn kept the *Susan* hugging the Florida beach though you'd think he'd be heading east for sea room. But Captain Horn could be right about that course; there was nothing recent drawn in on the chart about the movement

of the storm center; there was nothing from the tight-mouthed radio man about what was coming from the Miami weather bureau. Maybe skinning the beach was the honest, the seamanlike thing to do. Herb swung to the starboard wing for another look at the golden beach that was the world's winter playground.

The scuttlebutt was that the skipper was going to take her in somewhere — Fort Pierce, maybe—in time to dodge the worst of the blow. In that case, Herb knew, she had to keep close to shore to escape the turbulence raised when the big swells, outriders of the hurricane, charged against the hurrying northerly current of the Gulf Stream.

"Sure she has to keep close, but not this close," Herb Ritchie told himself. He watched the ship, studied the location of the long reef that the chart showed parallel with the beach, and took bearings. His shots told him the coaster was edging in too close to outlying chunks of coral. She was several miles inside the edge of the riotous Gulf Stream. What more did they want?

"Breakers two points on the sta'board bow, sir!" Herb shouted, swinging to face Captain Horn and sticking out his long arm. The sea was boiling over rock mighty close to the surface. It wasn't the first time Herb had roared a warning. That was part of his job whether the master liked it or not.

Captain Horn's eyes flared at the tall tired mate; his massive body, thick bones thinly cased with flesh, shouldered past without a word. He went on pacing the bridge while Mr. Arndall stood with legs wide apart, braced, immovable as a stanchion in a ship that was plunging wildly.

Herb Ritchie spoke to the mate. Arndall's eyebrows were as superior as ever in their high arching course but the tic was working double time on his face.

"The old man has her," Arndall said. His narrow lips exuded contempt. "Button your face and keep to leeward!"

Herb Ritchie mastered his hot temper and turned away. Arndall didn't even belong on the bridge this forenoon watch but captain and mate were making him more little casino than a third mate usually was.

Well, they both had good reasons not to like him. He looked aft over the bridge rail at a couple of men braced against the leeward side of the radio shack staring sullenly at the sea. The involuntary passengers Angelo and Harris hadn't moved from that spot all this wild watch. There the two thugs could watch the leaping waves and the men on the bridge as well.

"I'd like to know more about those guys, but maybe I know enough," Herb Ritchie told himself.

It had happened only the previous evening. But the details of the rescue of Angelo and Harris and their injured companion were already blurring in the immediacy of the gale.

When the lookout had sighted that motor cruiser a good few miles further

up the coast she had already been low in the water and two men were waving frantically. Stan Arndall had done a smart job of getting away in the lifeboat and Herb Ritchie had done his job as second in command in her. The sea had been choppy even then.

When they had got alongside Angelo, the red-headed one, had shouted that a floating baulk of timber, water-logged and barely awash, had holed their boat. They were making a run to the Bahamas. Any chance of saving their boat?

"The Bahamas!" Stan Arndall had bawled at them. "With a hurricane reported a hundred miles sou'east o' here? What are you—fugitives from a nuthouse? Grab this line and jump for it!"

At the mate's crack the flat-nosed one, Harris, had blinked his eyes shut as if he had been slapped across the face.

"We got an injured pal aboard here, captain," Angelo had called to the mate. "We'll need help."

"I'll get 'em," Herb Ritchie had said to the mate. As the lifeboat worked closer to the heavy, filling motorboat, he had jumped the gap. In the cockpit lay an unconscious man with a bandaged head.

"He fell off the top of the cabin," Harris had said.

Herb had bent with Angelo to lift him; the boat had rolled heavily and Angelo had sprawled against the injured man's head. The bandage had been scraped aside.

Herb had caught a glimpse of a bullet hole, still bleeding. It had punctured the man's cheek, apparently slanting upward. Next instant Angelo had had both hands on the bandage, jerking it back into place with no gentleness at all.

"O.K., sailor," he had said. "How do we do this?"

Herb Ritchie had looked across at the lifeboat. Stan Arndall, standing on a thwart in the stern, had been watching impassively.

Arndall had maneuvered her in closer and Kallas, the heavy-shouldered boatswain, had flipped a line into Herb's hands. With Angelo Herb had half carried, half mauled the unconscious man across to the lifeboat. Once Kallas' strong fingers reached out the man was safe.

"Take the line and jump," Herb had

ordered. But Angelo had been looking around at Harris, and Harris was standing still, eyeing the lifeboat and hugging in his arms a small leather suitcase.

"Leave your gear!" Stan Arndall called. But the flat-nosed man, screwing up his face, had made a sudden, frantic jump, arms wrapped around the bag. Arndall himself, cursing vigorously, had stretched out an arm in time to grab him as he teetered on the gunwale. Kallas had jerked him into the bottom.

"I told you—" The mate had arched his eyebrows at the bag, at the wounded man and at Angelo and Harris. Then he had closed his mouth and swung his steering oar. The lifeboat had drawn clear of the settling cruiser. Queer, that sudden silence.

But even queerer had been a flash Herb had had of Captain Horn later that evening in his office under the bridge. Herb had come down with a radio report on the hurricane. A sudden pitch had flung him against the door. He had plunged in as the door swung and there inside was Captain Horn, with blood on his knuckles and an automatic in his hand, standing beside his desk. On the desk was his passengers' brown leather bag, with Stan Arndall's arm steadying it lovingly against the motion of the ship.

Were Angelo and Harris and their bullet-riddled friend Bond crooks who had pulled some stick-up or a bank robbery in a coast town and then baffled the cops by trying to run to sea? It seemed likely, but if so why hadn't Horn ironed them. Did his inaction have anything to do with the rumored story that Horn himself had got into some trouble with the police over a lady in Baltimore and perhaps had a fellow feeling for fugitives? Was it a deal? Or was he, Herb Ritchie, imagining things under the stimulation of an imminent hurricane?

HERB went back to his tramping from wing to wing of the bridge. He kept out of the way of Captain Horn, when the master swung up the ladder to the bridge. Herb watched the ship and the sea and he watched Stan Arndall out of the corner of his eye.

Abruptly Herb forgot such things as crime and money. He was squinting hard,

trying to get a long look ahead before a blinding shower rushed over the ship. A burst of white water erupted from the sea, almost like a geyser. It was dead in front of her.

Herb Ritchie spun around, mouth open to hail the helmsman. Already the sheets of rain had dropped a white flickering curtain between him and the wheelhouse. Stan Arndall loomed abruptly beside him. Arndall's palm slapped across his mouth.

Herb jerked back. Other hands behind him dug into his neck. He twisted his head and caught a glimpse of Hugo Lang. The beefy steward locked an arm around his throat. Then Stan Arndall lifted a marlin-spike.

II

WHEN Herb Ritchie struggled back to consciousness nothing made sense. He was lying under a blanket on the deck. But although the wind was howling like a hellhound in agony the ship was steady as a rock. Breakers were pounding, but they weren't pounding the ship.

Some of the crew were talking but there was only a little light. Were they talking in the dark?

Herb Ritchie's head was aching. He felt as weak as if somebody had hollowed him out with a chisel. He fought his way over onto his side and then, slowly, up onto his elbow. He looked around wearily, trying to figure this.

He wasn't on the ship. He was ashore. He peered at a sizeable room, a room of bare white plaster with a huge front window, boarded up outside. All but one of the smaller windows were boarded up, too. Outside the sea was roaring.

A smoking lantern illumined the place. It must be the huge living room of an unfinished house on a beach. He got that straightened out before he went on to the next thing.

The men of the old coaster *Susan Seymour*, a hardcase bunch at best, were scattered around the room, folded up on the floor, sitting on saw horses and on piles of shavings. They looked as if they'd taken five or ten years of very rough going since he'd last seen them, and their heavy weather clothes were wrinkled and wet.

Every man of them turned scowling at Third Officer Herbert Ritchie, as if he were a nasty long drink of potassium cyanide. Even the wind sounded sore at him.

"Easy, sailor!" said some guy Herb Ritchie had never seen before. "You're safe now. Just relax, huh?"

Herb focussed on him. His khaki shirt and pants were wet but newish. He looked harder at his shirt. Insignia. A fat young coast-guard, a rookie by the look of him, and the blanket around Herb was government stuff.

"What is this?" Herb asked. His voice sounded weak as water.

"You got a little rolling 'round in the surf when the ship's lifeboat pitchpoled in the breakers," the coast-guard said soothingly.

"And—" he hesitated—"you'd had a little trouble on the bridge, they tell me, before that. But you're safe now."

Herb remembered, stiffened his arms and sat up, pulling off the blanket. In spite of the coast-guard's half-hearted opposition he climbed uncertainly to his feet.

"Easy, big boy!" the rookie said. "I'll have a bus here to 'vacuate all hands to town any minute now. Lucky I was patrolling when you landed. The beach ain't safe in this hurricane, but it ain't really hit yet. Easy now!"

Herb staggered between a couple of squatting A.B.s to the little unboarded panes in the front door. Dirty gray light was filtering in. He grabbed the doorhandle to hold himself and stared out into howling tumult.

On the other side of the road, right on the edge of the beach, a cocopalms fronds were streaming out in the gale like a dozen tattered flags.

Though the wind was off shore enormous seas were pounding the beach, seas no wind could stop. The tops were blown back seaward off them but the breakers drove on. White water was rushing up almost to the narrow black road in front of this house.

Herb strained his eyes across half a mile of driving spume. He saw the old *Susan*—what was left of her. She had broken into three pieces on the coral reef. Her bow was low and her whole stern was twisted, beam down on the rocks. Her funnel rising high in the midships section, wavered as he

watched. It crumpled like a rust-eaten length of stovepipe and disappeared. The wind and sea were a lot heavier than when she had hit.

Hit? He straightened up, turned and peered through the dim yellow light. He searched for Captain Horn.

"She's gone," he said. "Gone!"

"You tellin' us, you screwy cowa'd?" burst out Tex Martin, the gangling A.B. in Herb's watch. He shook a knobby fist at the end of a long awkward arm. "Tellin' us, that come mighty close to dyin' 'cause o' yo' gettin' hysterics on yo' job?"

That didn't make any sense, and certainly not from Tex, who'd been taking pilotage lessons from him.

"An' all our gear on the bottom," another A.B. said.

Looking at the glowering crew and at the wrecked *Susan* Herb Ritchie slowly brought back to mind snatches of that tough forenoon watch.

"Where's the old man?" he asked the chief engineer.

Old Warren shook his head. "Horn didn't make it. His voice was toneless. He and Sparks had been swept off the lower bridge when I reached the deck."

Lost! Then there was no sense in cursing out John Horn. He'd paid off for his reckless skinning of the beach.

Herb's gaze fell on two men huddled together by a doorway leading back into another room in that unfinished house. So Angelo and Harris had survived two disasters at sea inside twenty-four hours! Beside them was Bond, the wounded one, motionless under a blanket with only his bandaged head showing, ghostly white in the lantern light.

Herb's eyes slid on around the room. He saw Stan Arndall and Hugo Lang, the steward. The sudden finish of his last watch came back to him. His eyes blazed.

The mate was watching him impassively but his left cheek twitched.

Standing by the little glass pane that framed the finish of the *Susan* Herb lifted a shaky hand to his head. He touched a lump in his hair above his left eye. So those two had schemed to wreck her! And only one had paid for it.

He started toward Stan Arndall. "You crooked—"

Tex Martin jumped up and blocked his way. The tall, ungainly Texan sailor was in a fury that matched Herb's own; his loose-jointed body hit Herb like a snapping hawser.

"Pipe down and sit down, Ritchie!" he cried. "Yo' done enough damage this run, you big canary! If you'd sung out an order instead of goin' crazy yella she'd never have struck! Sit down, I said!"

Other men clambered to their feet. They backed up Tex Martin with growls and curses. Hatred or scorn contorted every face that confronted him.

Stan Arndall had lifted himself alertly to one knee. He waited, motionless, except for that spasmodic tic.

"No fightin'!" cried the harassed coast-guard. "You guys all got a case o' hurricane nerv—"

HERB planted a long arm on Tex's shoulder and jammed him against the wall. A dozen hands clamped on him. Raging, he fought to break away. They held him.

"All right, you fools, listen," he cried. "You've been played for suckers, every man of you!"

He wrenched loose an arm and pointed at Angelo, Harris and their wounded pal.

"Want to know why she hit? Because those three crooks were running from the law with loot in that bag you saw them hugging so tight when they came aboard—"

"Baloney!" said Angelo, shaking his curly red head in innocent indignation. Harris's battered face framed surprise.

Tex Martin laughed. "That sho' is changin' the subject," he said. "We're telling you you got jittery an' lost yo' ship, big yella belly."

"Lost? She was wrecked by the old man, with Arndall there and the steward bearing a hand."

He tried to meet all the jeering faces.

"Maybe it wasn't just chatter, that story Horn was wanted in Baltimore for questioning about a fight over a woman. Suppose the other fellow's died. Maybe Horn knew the cops would meet him at his next port. I think he was in deep and grabbed that bag of big quick money to help his getaway."

He leaned toward his shipmates urgently. "Horn wrecked her before the sea got too

high to swamp a lifeboat. He couldn't face a port; he risked piling her up to grab a fortune."

"He was a tough mug but it's safe to hand it to him now," somebody yelled. "Give him hell; he's dead. It's safe."

"His luck ran out, just as Sparks' did, as yours or mine might ha' done," Herb cried. "You can't slap a ship on a reef without risking your own neck. I warned the old man and the mate we were getting in too close. They shut me up. Why?"

He pointed across the room at the disdainful face of Stan Arndall. Beside him sprawled Lang, intently examining his fingers.

"The minute I saw that coral coming up dead ahead the mate, shielded by a heavy shower, slugged me with a marlinspike while Lang throttled me. Maybe I was due to be dropped overside but the rain lifted. I'm asking 'Why?'"

Stan Arndall got to his feet and lifted a hand to stop the yell of derision.

"That's true, men," he said. "It's true in part, I mean. I hit Ritchie with a marlinspike, but it was *after* we struck. As I've told you, he was ramping 'round the bridge, completely out of his head from fear. He could have started a panic. We had no time to calm him down. I hit him."

"That's—" Somebody's cap was jammed hard against Herb's mouth.

Arndall smiled at the men. "Now I'm beginning to wish I'd hit him a little harder," he said. "I haven't seen any bag of treasure myself. Has anybody else?"

His eyes were on Herb, deriding him, sucking enjoyment from his angry, puzzled face.

"How do we know that the old man was swept overboard by a sea?" Arndall asked. "Maybe this big screwball got at him before Lang and I calmed him down."

Herb saw red. Strength came flooding back into his tall body. His arms and legs went limp in the grasp of his captors; then his muscles released like springs. He sent a couple of men flying as his elbows jabbed sideways. His shoulder knocked another into the wall as he lunged toward the grinning mate.

A couple of men still clung to him. But Herb went bulling across the room, right

arm hooking back to land one decisive wallop on Arndall's curling lips.

Outside the wind skirled up the scale, urging Herb on with a shriek. The solid building shook.

Another man threw up two deflecting hands as Herb plunged at Arndall. The swing of Herb's fist went wild. Arndall, waiting quietly, jerked his head to one side and stepped in. More men jammed in around Herb, pinning his arm.

Arndall's hand stretched toward him, reaching carefully for a place on his neck.

Behind Arndall he glimpsed in that moment of fury red-headed Angelo and flat-nosed Harris sliding out the back door.

Herb fought to free his right arm. Arndall's fingers were closing on his throat and the beefy face of Hugo Lang was close to him. They were confidently staging a repeat performance.

Something happened to Herb Ritchie's brain under that pressure on his neck. Almost as abruptly as when Stan Arndall had slugged him with a marlinspike he went completely out.

III

OLD WARREN, the chief engineer, was trying patiently to light his pipe. His tobacco was wet and he had the pipe upside down, judiciously applying a cigarette lighter to the charge in it, drying the stuff before he attempted to get it to burn.

Herb Ritchie sat up abruptly. The movement blacked him out. When he came to the chief was still toasting his tobacco.

Herb sat sagging against the wall, looking around. He was deeply ashamed of himself, sounding off like that. Less excitement would have been more convincing. The lantern was still burning and the wind was still screaming outside. But the population of the room had thinned considerably.

Nearly half the *Susan's* crew were gone. Reluctant to move lest he black out again, Herb sized up the situation.

Stan Arndall and his questing fingers were gone and so was Hugo Lang, the steward. The two thugs, Angelo and Harris, who had been heading through that door that led to the back of the house, had apparently made it. A funny thing was that Bond, the

thug with a bullet in his skull, was also gone, blanket, bandage and all.

Besides those, Tex Martin, the fiery Texan, had also vanished. Kallas, the hairy-chested boatswain was gone and at least six others of the deck department, A.B.'s and O.S.'s.

The dripping coast-guard came stamping into the room. He glowered at them all impartially. He was panting.

"I go to call up next door to find out what's keepin' that bus an' that Arndall and some other guys steal my jeep to run that bandaged guy to a hospital!" he complained angrily. "I'll get a court for it sure. Why'n't you stop him? And the 'phone wire's down now; I can't send out no alarm."

Experimentally Herb Ritchie bunched his fist.

"Who went with Arndall?" he asked.

"A sailor told me him and that red-faced guy—the steward, is he?—loaded aboard the wounded man and headed inland," the coast-guard said.

"A hospital might be a good idea," Old Warren said. "We've been waiting quite a while."

"I don't care what they're doin'; that was my jeep and I got orders to keep ev'body here till the bus comes. How do I warn people to 'vacuate this beach without my jeep?"

He shook his head. "An' half o' this crew suddenly go airin' out into the gale lookin' for something to chase the guys in the jeep in."

"That's right," said Warren. He looked at Herb Ritchie. "Tex Martin helped carry that wounded man to the jeep," he said. "A minute later Tex came running back here waving a packet of twenty-dollar bills with a wrapper pinned around them. He said the money blew against his leg just after the jeep got away."

Herb Ritchie didn't speak but his eyes gleamed.

Old Warren puffed once, carefully, on his pipe.

"Tex Martin still thought you'd wrecked the ship, Ritchie. But he reckoned you were right; that those three off the motor-boat were fugitives from justice. He got a gang together to chase the mate. Figured the loot might have been hidden in the wounded man's pockets."

"What happened to these guys Angelo an' Harris?" a fireman asked.

"They sneaked out o' here while the mate was pacifyin' Ritchie," said the second assistant engineer.

Old Warren returned to the toasting of his tobacco. "Tex was after—he called it salvage. He was going to tear the mate loose from his head if he caught him. A tough bunch went with him."

Herb Ritchie nodded his head. The coast-guard was talking but Herb didn't hear him. Afraid to move too soon, he had a chance to think. The size of the disaster that had befallen him was growing on him.

They'd take his hard-won ticket away. The whole ship's crew would testify against him and what they hadn't seen they'd imagine they had. Gone panicky on the bridge, they'd say.

The sea was Herb Ritchie's life, command of a ship his beckoning goal, and now he was damned as a coward and a fool. His big hands writhed. The swelling on his head ached harder.

The hell of it was that there was a small kernel of truth in all this calumny. In his heart he knew that after he had given that command to the helmsman his hot temper would have driven him to use his hands, not his head, on treacherous Captain Horn.

THAT wasn't the way to handle such an imminent peril. The old man and his sycophantic mate and steward could only have been stopped by cool brains, not by a swinging fist and a raging fury.

The reason this crew believed Arndall's lies was that they had seen Herb Ritchie fly off the handle. Herb had never thought his quick temper was anything but a minor fault, followed as every outburst was by apology or recompense. But now by Judas, his hot temper had come home to roost! They figured a guy who blew his top like that had blown up in a jam, too.

Maybe they were right. But in cold misery Herb Ritchie came to a decision. It might be too late now but he would fight for his ticket and his name with his head first, not his fists.

Impulsively he started to get up. Then he slumped back again. The rookie coast-guard's gaze turned suspiciously toward him.

That was Herb Ritchie, all right; make a resolution and then start cracking it at once in a surging impulse to get going with his muscles. This coast-guard had authority in an emergency; maybe he would use that pistol in his holster to keep under his control the man all hands charged was responsible for the shipwreck.

Herb looked around. These men, the calmer spirits among the crew, would wait for authority to plan their course. The bunch with Tex Martin, jazzed up by prospects of getting their hands on stacks of money with no legitimate owner in sight, might do anything. Salvage is a magic word. But Stan Arndall and beefy Hugo Lang would fight savagely to keep that loot. In the release of inhibitions, the return of primitive emotions, brought about by this gale, there was murder dead ahead. Authority was holed up in a hurricane shelter.

If Herb Ritchie could prevent that clash from coming to a bloody conclusion the board of inquiry, the shore cops, would have to listen to his story. If he could keep Arndall and Lang alive for rigid questioning in a court he might have a chance. If he could get hold of that money and turn it in to the sheriff of this county he would command respect. But finding them! Impossible, and yet it was his one chance. And it was also his job, as well as a man could reckon his job in this unholy tangle.

It couldn't be done with muscles. He sat there, thinking, gathering strength.

He ran his tongue over his lips. "Any water out there in the kitchen?" he asked and pulled himself to his feet a lot more feebly than he was feeling. Nobody answered him.

The worried rookie was talking to old Warren about the overdue bus. Herb shuffled past him out the inner door, through a small dining room and into the kitchen. The windows here in the back of the house were not boarded up. He turned the knob of the kitchen door and threw his weight against it. The wind hitting the other side of the door closed it against him before he had pushed it two inches. Air swirled through the kitchen.

He heard the coast-guard call a question. Desperately he put all the power he had against the door. Sudden sweat streamed

down his face; the lump on his head shot pain through his straining body.

A momentary lull in the gale helped him. He forced the door open, jammed his shoulder into the opening, pushed with bending knees and bent arms and began squirming through. He let it slap shut in the coast-guard's face and ran blindly southward, away from the northwesterly wind.

IV

WHEN the wind hit Herb he felt his feet grow light under him. It was a weird sensation. He dropped into a crouching, stumbling gait. He covered the back of his head with his locked fingers as rain, sharp as needles, pelted down on him.

He stopped abruptly. He had gone down wind by mere instinct. That was what Tex Martin and the others would have done; if there had been any car deserted along here they would have found it. To do anything he must get a car.

A coconut rolled past him, leaping and bounding as if alive.

He turned around, facing the buckshot of the rain with his arms flung up across his face. The wind ballooned into his open shirt blowing the tail up out of his pants. He staggered and dropped to his knees. Before he could control the shirt it began ripping up the back. He tightened up his belt. Hunched, bent-kneed, he fought his way to windward, back past the front of the new house.

Nobody spotted him or pursued. No cars stood on this exposed road. Doggedly he fought on, taking shelter against the front and south sides of houses scattered thinly along the beach road. All were deserted or else their owners waited behind barricaded doors and windows. It was tough going in the spaces between them. Where the wind had a clear sweep it picked up wet sand and leaves and flung them with excruciating force against his protecting arms.

Something hit him on the shoulder and whirled him around. Off balance, he was thrown on his back by the wind. Above him boards flew through the air, clattered and rolled on the sand. He crawled on hands and knees against the shelter of a housewall and flattened out.

Some small wooden building to windward had gone down. It would be suicide to go on while that stuff was blowing away. He edged up to the corner, covered his head and took a quick look out in the slit between his arms.

The garage belonging to the old wooden house against which he was crouching had crumpled in the blast. The board walls were ripping off. The framework, though collapsed, was still on the foundation. It was held there by an ancient pickup truck which had been left standing in that dubious shelter. Now, rocking on its springs, the truck was criss-crossed over with a nailed network of two-by-fours, corner posts and stray boards.

Herb stared at that old vehicle till the pain of his stinging eyes made him close them. Abruptly he backtracked, circling the house to get to windward of the flying debris. He approached the wrecked shed from the other side. He stumbled to the side of the truck, pulled away a splintered timber and opened the door. He climbed in and shut the door. He drew deep, gasping breaths. The window on the driver's side was still intact; this was shelter.

It was more than that. The key was in the ignition switch. He churned the starter without much hope. The motor leaped into life at once. He listened. Paint, this old jalopy lacked but she had a motor.

He put the truck into gear and began backing and going ahead, shoving the car against the web of timbers enmeshing it. When they broke loose from the framework the wind whisked them away.

Five minutes later he was backing out along the driveway with the last of the framework clattering off to leeward. He had transportation. But if he failed, looting would be piled on his weighted shoulders.

He turned downwind along the ocean road, holding her with the brakes, clenching his teeth now and then as the empty truck rocked in the wind. Though the wind was diagonally off shore the level of the riotous sea on his left was rising. He passed the new house. A couple of hundred yards further south he came to a wide road that led inland. And inland would be where they'd go.

The pickup truck took a list to port as he made the turn. It wouldn't take many more

miles of wind to roll this thing over and over like the coconut. He drove fast. He reckoned he would meet no people, find no trail, till he got further from that threatening sea.

A sudden heavy shower blinded him with spattering whiteness on the windshield. He slowed down. The pain passed. He opened up.

Something black stretched across the road. He latched up the parking brake, stood on the footbrake and the car skittered to a stop.

A palm tree was down across the road, a man bending over the massive trunk. He straightened up a little and motioned to Herb.

Herb got out. He took three steps and stopped.

The heavy shouldered man in the road was Kallas, boatswain of the *Susan*. His broad face wrinkled up in a scowl as he recognized Herb Ritchie. Then, slowly, his eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Gettin' away, huh?" he shouted above the storm. He pointed at the palm. "Bear a hand here, you!"

Herb looked down. There was a man's body jammed under the bole of the palm tree. He dropped to his knees. His eyes widened suddenly and the wind stung them.

The man under the tree was Hugo Lang, the steward. He had the look of a dead man.

Together he and Kallas strained at the palm. They edged it sideways, until it was off Lang. It wasn't putting much pressure on the beefy steward, Herb noted. He rolled the man over.

Lang was in no need of a doctor. The right side of his head above the temple was caved in.

Herb glanced up at Kallas. The boatswain was standing over him, watching him through those narrowed blue eyes. His right hand was in his pocket.

Herb's impulse was to leap up to face him. He restrained himself. Brains, not temper, he warned himself. He ignored Kallas and returned his eyes to Lang. There was a red streak on the other side of Kallas's head, scoring through his hair an inch above his ear.

Herb's eyes went to the hand in Kallas's pocket.

Kallas was staring down at the body, now. "Got burnt by a bullet, huh?" he said slowly. "Got it maybe before somebody cracked in his skull."

He kicked at the tree. "This is just window-dressin'. It couldn't ha' caused that burn."

"That's right," said Herb expressionlessly.

"I got a gun," Kallas said. "The mate issued it to me after we hit—in case of panic." He pulled out a thirty-eight revolver. "But don't get no idea I did this, mister. You been around here long?"

V

HERB straightened up. They looked at each other across six feet. The wind whipped at them, unregarded, but they had to shout.

"No," said Herb. "I haven't been here as long as you."

"That's right—but it wouldn't take long," Kallas said.

"Which bunch did you leave with?" Herb shot at him. "Angelo and Harris? Arndall, Lang and the wounded man in the jeep? Or Tex and his bunch?"

"I been on my own—same as usual," Kallas said doggedly. "After Arndall took off in the jeep and Tex found them bills I started walkin'. I didn't want in on nothing. I didn't figure the bus would show up. Things jam up in a hurricane."

He shoved the revolver, and his hand with it, back into his pocket. He said:

"I wanted to get somewheres, not wait for no bus with no grub in sight!"

"You didn't get far," Herb said.

"During rain squalls I took cover down on my face. But before I come to this tree I saw Tex and the mob go by in a yellow bus—a school bus."

"The whole crew?"

"No. The guys who'd gone outside with Tex. And they wouldn't stop for me." Kallas frowned. "Funny thing," he said. "Tex himself was drivin' that bus. I don't get it."

Herb thought it over, slanting his head from the wind.

"That's probably the bus the coast-guard sent," he said. "Tex jumped it for his own reasons—before it got to the house. Probably ditched the driver."

He took a step toward Kallas. The boatswain stiffened alertly.

"Tex is heading into murder and robbery, though he probably doesn't figure it that way," Herb said. He flicked a hand at Hugo Lang's body. "Maybe Tex and his bunch did this in a fight."

"Maybe," said Kallas uncomfortably. "It ain't a smart killing—though a few hours of this blow would fix Lang so nobody could figure what killed him."

"My game is to grab Arndall alive and whatever loot there is to clear myself and my ticket," Herb said.

"You'll have to go some, mister, to clear—"

Herb Ritchie's hand shot out and closed rigidly on the revolver and hand in the big boatswain's pocket. He forced the muzzle downward, in spite of all Kallas' efforts to raise it. His other hand had an arm breaking grip on Kallas' left wrist. One leg was set to ward off a lifted knee in his groin. He had Kallas.

"The point is," Herb Ritchie said coldly, "if you plan to stop me, bouse, you'd better start shooting now."

He released his grip on the gun and stood still, facing the seaman while the wind wailed above them.

Kallas studied his face; his eyes brooded as he thought it over slowly.

"I'm going with you—but don't start nothing bright, mister," he said. He took his hand out of his pocket. "I'll be watching. I'm slow, sure, but you know I turn out a job."

"Right!" said Herb. "Come on!" Together they lifted the body of Lang off the road and struggled with it to the base of a straining and lashing hedge of Australian pines. The hurricane sucked at Herb's strength like a bleeding wound.

"You goin' to leave him here?" Kallas asked doubtfully.

"I've got live men on my mind," said Herb and led the way to the truck. Kallas climbed in. He shifted his gun to the pocket away from the third mate.

Herb drove far over onto the shoulder of the road and crunched across the palm fronds.

A hundred yards further on he stopped. There was water over the road.

It came flooding high above the bank of a rushing canal. The swing bridge that carried the road over the torrent now stood open, like a half submerged derelict. Water lashed through the interstices in the steel framework.

"That's the inland waterway," Herb said when Kallas turned to him. "We're marooned on this barrier beach."

"An' so're the others, unless they c'n find a better bridge than that," Kallas said. "What's the flood? Rain water? The wind's blowin' off short, not on."

"The sea's rising," Herb said. He was talking to himself as much as to Kallas. "A hurricane's a low pressure area." His hands sketched a mound. "When the air pressure on the sea is low in one place the ocean rises—piles in from all sides. There'll be more trouble from water than from wind on this beach."

He started to turn the car.

"What do we do?" Kallas asked.

"Head south—down wind," Herb said.

"How d' you know where the mate—"

"I'm using my head." To himself Herb added, "I hope."

THE wind, harrying the torrent, tuned up to a shriek. Herb leaned forward to peer through the windshield. Suddenly he jabbed down his throttle foot. The old truck bucked; then leaped ahead. The curving trunk of a palm came toppling over. Kallas ducked.

The steel top over them crackled; the truck bounced on its tires and green fronds covered the windshield. Sluggishly the motor dragged on and the fronds dropped away, like seas draining off a well deck.

"Close!" Kallas snarled. "That might ha' cut us in half."

"It didn't," Herb said. "Watch for the next one."

He detoured around the tree under which Lang had lain and backtracked slowly, watching for a wide road leading south. South was where they'd go—down wind since they couldn't get to the mainland. He was betting on that.

"It's gettin' tougher," Kallas said.

Herb made the turn into a wide road with a marker, AIA, still standing. This must be the beach highway. Though he eased his

throttle foot the truck picked up speed as the wind roared and thundered at it from behind. He threaded a way around fallen trees and debris, watching tensely.

Kallas grabbed the door handle as the truck weaved on the road. "I'd rather ride this thing out in a ship," he shouted above a gust. "How hard can that wind blow?"

"The anemometer usually carries away. It acts as if we'd get the center"

"Cheer me up," said Kallas sourly.

HERB stepped on his brakes. Ahead was another sheet of hissing white water, covering road and palmetto scrub on either side. The storm's gray curtain, cutting visibility, made it seem unending. Herb ground ahead in low, feeling his way. The water deepened. On the right he caught a glimpse of a spot where scattered cabbage palms ended abruptly. That marked the submerged bank of the inland waterway. A few more inches of water would drown his motor, if the wind, picking up dollops from the surface, didn't put it out first.

Feeling for the edge of the road he backed around.

"The mate's jeep might have got through here," he said. "We'll try the narrow road over along the beach dunes. I think it's higher than this."

At the ocean edge the wind looked almost due north. Big seas were crashing in on the beach in lumpy diagonal ranks.

Both men strained their eyes through the windshield for a final look at the old *Susan*. All they saw was a welter of white water and what looked like a section of side plating. Kallas glanced at Herb and his eyes were like a stab.

"Did you see the old man and radio operator swept overside?" Herb asked.

"No. There was plenty o' loose water over her after she hit, all right. Once the sea got them—" He pointed a finger downwind. "The wind was off shore."

"Arndall suggested I slugged the old man and threw him over. I'm wondering if that was what the mate did to Sparks. The op could have picked some alarm out of the air and caught onto what he and Horn were planning."

"Deal me out of it," Kallas snapped. His slumbering suspicion was aroused. "That

don't explain how a seaman like Cap'n Horn got it."

He shoved a finger at Herb. "As I figger it, there're three witnesses who saw you go screwy on the bridge—only two of them are dead now. Lucky, huh?"

Herb did not answer that jab. He headed south and here on this bare ocean road the wind shoved the truck faster. They bumped over drifts of sand that formed and dissolved all over the surface. An inch or two of water covered the road when a rain squall hit.

The road bent away from the beach. The white structure of a gas station showed vaguely ahead through the horizontal rain sheets. Beside the gas pumps something huge was stretching across the road. Kallas cursed. Herb jammed on his brakes, fighting the wind astern, squinting hard.

The thing was an enormous overturned yellow bus. Apparently its front wheels had hit a three-foot drift of sand and the wind had flipped it over sideways when it slid.

"That's prob'ly the bus Tex grabbed," Kallas cried. "Look out!"

VI

IN FRONT of the swaying truck a couple of palms lay across the side of the road, not blocked by the bus. They lay close together, as if they had been dragged there by someone.

Herb wrenched at the wheel. Another palm barred the turnout inside the two gas pumps. Still braking ineffectually Herb swerved that way. His front fender hit the tree trunk with a thump. The truck thudded to a stop.

Tex Martin came lurching out of the concrete gas station. His eyes were wild; he looked rather on the high side.

"Jest a li'l accident—" He stopped at the sight of Herb Ritchie in the driver's seat. "You!" he said. He dragged an automatic from his pocket and flung open the truck door with a whip-like flip of his stringy arm. "Whut you wanderin' 'round loose fo'?"

Herb stared at the gun.

Tex gave a yell of laughter. "That's right!" he said. "It's yo' own gun. Grabbed it out o' yo' room when it looked like a little trouble on boa'd."

He waved the pistol. "Get out o' theah, mister! I c'n use that truck."

Herb's nostrils flared. He sat rigid a moment. Then he laid a hand on the ignition switch. His foot thrust quietly in under the truck's dashboard and pressed hard against a tangle of wires. Abruptly the motor cut off. Herb turned the switch and meekly got out. Kallas followed him in silence.

"Been looking for you, Tex," Herb said. He kept his voice casual, and glanced through the streaming glass into the station. Half a dozen men of the *Susan's* deck department were staring out at him. One held a bottle, arrested on the way to his lips.

They merely looked. Nobody joined Tex outside. So far the glass of the windows had held; it was still dry in there.

Tex jerked his pistol toward the lee of the building. Herb walked that way with Tex at his heels and Kallas close behind.

"You been lookin' fo' me?" Tex asked importantly. "Whut fo'?"

"To stop you from making a blasted fool of yourself," Herb said.

"You can quit lookin'," Tex said. "I'm no fool, chicken heart!"

"Will Arndall hand over that loot to you peacefully?" Herb asked. "Tex, you're heading into dirty weather, maybe murder. You're too good a man for that."

"I'm handling this," Tex said stubbornly.

Herb pointed. "Can you hold back your army of drunks if you run down the mate?"

Tex frowned.

"They ain't tanked," he said. "They got a shock when the bus rolled and this service station fella heah is so scairt he's been right free with a couple o' bottles."

He parked his pistol between his teeth, thrust his head around the corner and shouldered into the wind. With cupped hands against the streaming glass he peered uneasily inside the gas station.

Herb took a step toward him.

"Lay off, you," Kallas growled, reaching for his revolver. "I'm listenin', but no rough stuff!"

Tex ducked back, pistol in hand again.

"Nobody's passin' out," he said. He pulled from his coat a soggy mass that had been a Jacksonville newspaper. "I found this inside heah," Tex said, with his eyes fixed intently on Herb. "On the front page is a

story 'bout a hundred thousand dollar payroll stick-up in a big shipyard. A hundred thousand dollars! The three fellas got clean away somehow but one was reckonized. That man's picture's in heah—and it looks like that guy with the curly red hair we picked up. Angelo, ain't it?"

Herb nodded.

"You wouldn't be out fo' that money yo'se'f, now, would you?" Tex asked, with a knowing grin. "Seein's yo' ticket's sho' to go down to leeward like a dead leaf?"

As if it had been turned off the rain squall passed. The wind roared harder.

"I'm out for my ticket, not loot," Herb said. "I'm going to grab Arndall and turn him over to the cops. I'll charge him with assault. Then his accusation against me will be thrashed out in the open."

"Sounds right fine, only I don't believe it," Tex said. He shoved his jaw out belligerently. "I'm goin' to get mine—salvage, it is, not stealin', an' if Arndall makes a fuss—"

"You'll murder him," Herb finished quickly.

"I won't! I want my—"

A thin little man with scared eyes eased out of the service station and blew around to them.

"They're gettin' pretty lively in there," he said anxiously. "Who's this Arndall they're goin' to work over? Say, that barricade across the road ain't scarcely legal."

"Look; I had to stop a car," Tex said. "Now I got one."

Herb focussed urgently on the little man.

"Seen a jeep pass here, heading south?"

"Yeah, sure," said the service station man. "An' a big sedan, too."

He pointed to Tex. "I told him about it. Two guys in the coast-guard jeep, a little while before the school bus hit." He jerked his head southward. "They'll be comin' back. I heard before the 'phone went that the bridge over the inlet down there is out."

Herb leaned toward the gas station attendant. "Two men in the jeep?" he asked. "Two?"

"Yeah, two."

"Arndall and the steward, stupid," Tex put in. "The wounded guy would be lyin' down out o' sight."

Kallas said:

"The steward has been—" He scowled in bewilderment. "Could that wounded guy Bond be sitting up?"

"Not unless he was tied to the seat," Herb said slowly. "That hole in Bond's head had put him in a coma. I'd figured he'd die."

"Not him," said Kallas. "He's one tough boy. He clawed up on the beach by himself after the boat capsized but then they had to carry him to the house."

Herb nodded. He turned to Tex:

"Are all the men who followed you out of that house still with you?"

"Why sure," said Tex. He hesitated. "I guess so. Why wouldn't they be? You mean some son switched to the mate's side?"

He grabbed the gas man by the arm. "You keep yo' nose out o' this, brother. Go back inside."

Propelled by a shove, the little man turned scared eyes back at them. Then, with shoulders hunched, he crawled around the corner.

Tex scowled at Herb Ritchie and waved his automatic. "While I'm usin' you' truck to catch Arndall yo' goin' to be locked in the men's room, mister," he said. "You'll be safe theah an'—"

"All right, Tex," Herb said mildly. "In there?" He took a step toward Tex.

Kallas jabbed his revolver in Herb's back. "I said no rough stuff," he warned.

A couple of A.B.'s came boiling around the corner. They were still in full control of their limbs.

"What's goin' on, Tex? When do we—"

Herb jumped sideways. He ran and the wind lent him speed. Tex yelled a command to halt. Herb kept going. The bending palmetto scrub gave him no cover but he did not dodge or zigzag. He made distance.

An automatic cracked behind him. That meant Tex had got the safety off. The pistol barked again, but no lead screamed close. Faint yells of command pierced the clamor of the gale.

Herb reached the dark shelter of some scattered, bending pines. Grabbing one, he swung around it, stopping.

A hundred feet behind Kallas was pounding along. Panting, he halted beside Herb.

"Them souses, the crazy dock sweepin's! Tried to jump me!" he raged. "Me! I clubbed one with my gun an' the other, the

lucky slob, knocked it out o' my hand with a wrench. I had to run! That nut Tex shot right over my knob!"

Herb grinned. "Stick to a steel marlin-spike, bose."

"What's funny?" snarled Kallas.

"You're with me, but against me."

"That's right," Kallas growled. "I'm neutral. I'm the only guy not screwy on this screwy beach. I should ha' showed that stringbean somethin' about shootin'."

"Meek as Moses, that's me," Herb said. He touched his unbruised knuckles in some regret. He added:

"But I was counting on borrowing your revolver when we catch up with Arndall."

"Maybe," said Kallas. He glanced back. "Hey, look!"

Tex and some of his men had pushed Herb's pickup truck around into the lee of the gas station and had the hood up. Other seamen had dragged aside the palm tree.

"They'll be on our neck!" Kallas warned. "We better keep off the road—"

"There's a good chance they'll decide the wiring's soaked," Herb said, keeping on. "I busted a couple of wires under the ignition switch."

The rain hit again. Kallas cursed.

Herb plodded south, neck pulled in, converging on the road. Scowling in gnawing perplexity he paid no more attention to Kallas' mutterings. He had something more startling on his mind.

VII

THE road swerved back toward the beach. They came once more out into sight of the ravaging sea. Wet sand was flying; blood oozed on Herb's stinging cheeks.

The tops of the small dunes were blowing off now as the tops blow off a choppy sea. They were both fighting to keep themselves from being picked up and flung to leeward. No houses here; just scrubby desolation. Their ears were tortured by the incessant howling of the hurricane. They caught hell. Kallas kept throwing quick glances at Herb. There was no doubt about it; the wind was rising beyond a man's ability to combat it. Herb nodded ahead. A few houses were showing up in the wet murk.

"Arndall will be holed up down here to

south'ard somewhere," Herb shouted. "He hasn't tried to buck it back. And Tex's menagerie isn't apt to chase us on foot in this."

Kallas grunted. The wind beat them on. At a spot where the road dipped a couple of feet sand had blown in on it, filling the hollow. There was a car stuck in the drift.

It wasn't a jeep. It was a big smoothly curved sedan. Its wheels had churned deep into the sand until the underbody hung up on the drift.

Herb grabbed at a door handle and flung himself in with Kallas crowding him hard. The car was empty; the windows tightly closed; the keys gone from the switch. They sagged back on the cushions but even as he relaxed Herb's eyes stared southward through the windshield.

"Probably the car the gas attendant saw," he said aloud. "Pointed south. And this drift hasn't been here too long."

"This is where I heave to," Kallas said, sticking out his long legs sideways.

Herb laughed. "Little close to the breakers, aren't you?" he said. "You're in a big blow, bouse. This hurricane is what's known as man-size."

Kallas pivoted his neck apprehensively toward the sea. Big seas were bucking the wind to crash up on the beach.

"Wind's not off the sea—yet," he said.

"No."

HERB studied two houses close ahead. One, a modern creation of concrete with a white cement tile roof, clung, perilously now, to the edge of the beach on the seaward side of the road. The other, almost opposite, was an older frame house, none too sturdy looking, but it stood on higher ground. Both were boarded up, probably awaiting the return of winter residents.

"I'm going on," Herb said. "That gas station fellow said the one bridge, south of this place, was out. Arndall's down here somewhere. At the first lull he'll shoot north."

Herb grabbed at the front seat with both hands. Kallas, face tensed, stared at him.

"What is it?" he muttered.

The wind had stopped roaring. There was no wind. The effect was painful, excruciatingly painful and somehow weird, menacing,

horrible. And then the thunder of the sea filled that sudden gap.

Herb reached for the door handle.

"The center's over us," he said. "Dead calm. Come or stay."

Kallas climbed out. He stretched his thick arms and took deep breaths, frowning around challengingly.

"How long?" he asked.

"A minute or an hour," Herb said.

"Cripes!" said Kallas softly. Terror started up in his eyes. "Look at that sea!"

The cessation of the wind had done something hideous to the sea. It was no longer wind beaten; it leaped and rioted wildly, without purpose or compulsion; mounds of water battering each other like lunatics contending. The unending pressure of the air above was lightened now. Water, green and white, bulged and exploded skyward; then crashed back on the surface. No direction; no control; madness!

"An' when the wind comes back—" Kallas muttered.

"Right!" said Herb grimly. "There'll be easting in it. The sea will come calling on the land. You haven't seen anything yet."

He clambered over the sand drift, took to the side of the road and started cautiously to move southward toward the two houses. There was no cover; the scrub was beaten flat. He eyed the houses nearby and the ones beyond with intent speculation.

Kallas slouched along a little behind him, head jumping jerkily to watch the sea. Above them rushing clouds swirled and lightened steadily as if the sun might break through.

Beyond the scattered cluster of houses stretching out from the beach was the black line of a stubby breakwater. They were getting close to the inlet ending this barrier beach.

Herb started slanting toward the ocean. "Try to spot that jeep!" he commanded. "Once we—"

In the menacing stillness two shots cracked out almost together. Herb spun around and flung himself flat. His hand went to his left arm. He was hit, drilled through the flesh of his upper left arm. The slug hadn't passed too far from his heart. This wasn't Tex Martin's style of shooting at all.

"They came out o' that house!" Kallas panted. Flat on his stomach he pointed a

finger toward the frame house on the landward side of the road. "Say, did they get you?"

"Not yet," said Herb. "Two shots that close—must be two revolvers. And there were two men sitting up in that jeep."

He lifted his head long enough to see that the shutter covering one front window of the frame house awning fashion was pushed out at the bottom.

Another shot split the stillness. He ducked.

"Keep down, bose!" he warned.

"Come on!" called Kallas. He had squirmed backward. Now, under cover of a rise of sand he ran to the beach. He jumped down on it. Crouching low he went racing toward the safety of the solid looking concrete house at the edge of the beach.

"Kallas! Back!" Herb cried. A bullet screamed over his lifted head. He flattened again, anxious eyes on the boatswain. He called again and again, his voice strong in the unnatural stillness but the boatswain paid no heed.

Kallas got to the seaward side of the beach house. He slackened pace, then looked up some steps and mounted them in two jumps. He disappeared. Next instant his voice rose in a sudden yell. The cry was cut off as sharply as the wind had quit. There was surprise in it; maybe something more than surprise.

Then nothing happened. Nothing at all. The house stood there, shuttered, empty looking, like the old frame place on the rise across the road. Kallas was gone.

Herb licked his lips. Keeping down, with his eyes working over both houses in turn, he fumbled for a wet handkerchief. He stuffed it around the slash on his arm under his sleeve. It wasn't much.

He glanced up at the sky. The lightning of the clouds had ceased. It didn't look now as if the sun would break through.

Herb glanced from the big smooth sedan behind him to the silent concrete house into which Kallas had vanished. He turned then to the slit under the shutter of the frame house. The place might have been painted on canvas. Still life.

He began methodically to shove himself backward.

A sudden gust hit him on the left side of

the face. Wind! It died instantly. His eyes leaped toward the tumultuous sea. That puff was out of the east. He heard a humming sound. Maybe it was in his ears.

He kept on worming backward until, with head lifted a bit he could no longer see the slit under the window. A gust hit and, on the heels of its dying, another. Then solid wind came roaring in off the ocean, with cutting salt spray riding it like birdshot. Off the sea! His bleeding face turned very grim. The house into which Kallas had gone, the house on the edge of the beach stood rigid, disdainful of the wind in its concrete might.

Herb lowered his tortured head. Spray and spume, like a whitish, flickering veil, sailed along between him and the two houses. He forced himself to his knees, then to his feet. He began running madly northward. A shot cracked behind him. They had seen him. He raced on till he was sure he was out of sight. Then he turned directly inland. He hurried, trading his dwindling energy for a little extra speed.

VIII

HERB kept the frame house of his enemy just within view and curved southward until he was in the bare land, staked out into building lots, that lay behind it. He closed up on the house slowly, protecting his face from the agony of the flying sand and spray with raised arms. A couple of cocopalms, with massive clusters of roots heaved half out of the earth and fronds touching the sand, afforded a momentary chance to breathe. His slitted eyes suddenly made out the jeep. He gave a relieved grunt. It was standing behind the frame house, out of sight of the road.

He edged around more to the south where seagrapes, though stripped of leaves, made a thin screen. He closed in on the house.

The changing sound of the sea drew his attention. He dropped flat on the ground. His eyes almost quit aching.

In the few minutes that had passed since the lull the sea had changed again. It no longer rioted aimlessly, surging high. Spume covered it like a thick fog but the edge was visible. The sea was charging the land. The breakers did not look big, but breakers climbed on top of each other.

The level of the whole ocean was raised. It was moving on the shore. Broken white water suddenly encircled the concrete house and flattened out across the road in a thin sheet. Next instant the water sucked back onto the beach and froth blew inland. Next time a wave rolled around the house there was more solid water with it. The seaward side of that house must be taking a pounding. It would not last long. Soon—

The front door of the battered house suddenly swung open. Kallas, his burly body resisting, was shoved out into sight by two men clubbing him from behind. Savage desperation animated them as they fled the assault of the sea. They drove the boatswain into a run northward, using him as a shield.

They needed a shield. Shots spurted from the shuttered front of the house beside which Herb stood staring.

The men behind Kallas were the two thugs, Angelo and Harris. They had guns in their hands and together they answered the fire from the frame house, shooting past Kallas, not aiming, but running.

The top of a wave, a sudden puff of churning white water, swept in from the beach, around the corner, enveloping their legs. It slowed their rush.

Kallas stumbled as a gun barked. He grabbed at his thigh. He whirled around, freeing himself from the gripping hands. He broke back toward the dubious shelter of the house. His sudden rush knocked Angelo sprawling.

Kallas reached the open door. The attempt to escape the sea had broken up. Harris had turned with Kallas, and Angelo, scrambling up, was not five feet behind him.

They burst into the house. The door slammed. A bigger sea came rushing up around both corners of the house. Its two arms, curving up to the doorstep, met in a spout of white water, then went rushing across the road. From the roof of this prison a few cement tiles went flying like paper in a harder blast of wind. The sea thundered.

Herb's bleeding face was grim.

The mysterious sedan was explained; Herb Ritchie and Tex Martin and his mob were not the only hunters of Stan Arndall and his partner on the beach. But Angelo and Harris had been unlucky enough to find him. Their refuge wouldn't hold together

much longer. They were doomed men and Kallas, their prisoner, would die with them.

Herb Ritchie twisted over onto his knees. He could not face that wind from seaward on his feet. He crawled up to the jeep behind the frame house and held onto it. The wind curled around both corners of the house, buffeting him from two sides and stealing his breath.

Wearily he raised his eyes. The back of this house was shuttered, too. He looked again. The shutter on the smallest window was wedged open a bit.

He understood. The window under the shutter was cracked open to prevent unequal pressure inside and outside from conspiring with the wind to tear the old house to pieces. Stan Arndall was taking no unnecessary chances.

Herb crept up under the small window. To listen for sounds within in this screaming gale was ridiculous. Besides, he had no time. He straightened up, reached for the shutter fastenings and with muscles hardening, raised it higher. He looked into a bathroom. Empty.

He gripped the frame and began pulling himself in head-first. He landed on the tile floor with a thump. For a moment he lay still, trying to hear some sound from his enemies. It was impossible.

Inside here the noise of the big blow was different. The house was creaking and working, giving vent to a chorus of noises that made a persistent undertone in the mighty bellow of the wind.

Herb climbed to his feet. His body was a chunk of aching, beaten flesh and blood dripped from his sand-scored face. The hurricane had drained his vitality and his hands were bare. He tried to listen again. No good.

He looked around the small square room. He pulled a narrow shelf of heavy glass from its fittings on the wall. His long fingers just fitted around it. He wielded it experimentally. Heavy, anyhow.

He faced the door. He lifted his head and abruptly lunged toward it. His jaws were set tight.

And then he stopped. No blundering blind bull rush would beat this enemy.

"Temper is out," he whispered to himself. "I've got to win!"

With infinite caution he opened the door. He looked out at a narrow little hall. It seemed to run from back to front of the place. There was a current of air stirring in this leaky house.

He moved forward along the hall, shoving his feet along as if a footstep could be heard in all this creaking turbulence. His glass shelf was lifted, tightly gripped.

Light died behind him but a faint light grew ahead. He crept to the entrance of the front room. It stretched across the whole front of the house. Narrow slits of light showed around a couple of poorly shuttered windows. A broader oblong of light showed beneath one facing the sea.

Before that window, with the sash down tight, crouched two men. The backs of their heads were black against the gray light. They kept intent watch on that fated house across the road. The gray light glinted on the barrel of a pistol resting in one man's fingers on the window sill. Not a movement from either of those men.

Herb took a long step toward the waiting killers. His body screamed at him to charge; the glass shelf quivered in his restrained fingers.

Stan Arndall and this other watched for three men to die or come out to be murdered.

Herb took another step.

A sudden warning buzzed in his head, as persistent, as compelling as an alarm bell. You can't knock out two armed men with one swing of a glass shelf however much your body craves to act. And if he failed Kallas would die. A good enough guy, the bosc. Herb took a step backward.

ONCE out of the living room he moved fast. He glided into a room at the back, lit only by the faintest light from slits around a south window. He blundered into something—the corner of a stove. This was the kitchen.

He shuffled toward that window, eased up the sash and with groping fingers found and worked at the fittings of the storm shutter. At last it began to shake and rattle in the wind. The sound filled the house, ominous, increasing, as if at any moment the wild wind would tear away the shutter altogether and burst through the house.

Swiftly he planted himself close to the wall beside the doorway. Only seconds passed before the rays of a flashlight came glancing through that opening.

Unexpectedly the man with the torch came through on the run. There was no time to slash downward with the heavy glass weapon. He was past. Herb stepped out behind him. With his wounded left arm he planted a solid wallop below his ear.

The injured arm did the job. The man buckled at the knees. He went down on his face. Herb caught up the flashlight, still glowing, as it rolled on the linoleum.

His victim was Stan Arndall. The thin, contemptuous lips were slack now and the cheek no longer twitched. Swiftly Herb pulled a pistol out of Arndall's right trousers pocket and laid gun and flashlight on a chair. He turned to the window, quieted the rattling shutter with quick impatient fingers. He headed for the front room with gun ready, with the flashlight blazing carelessly ahead of him.

The crash of rising seas warned him to move fast. Something heavy thudded against the house front; then two or three similar blows landed. Not much time! Probably cement tiles were flying from the disintegrating roof across the road.

The man at the window was raising the sash. "Door's moving!" he said in his penetrant voice as the wind rushed in the narrow slot. He did not turn his head. "Jump, Stan! They're set for another run."

His pistol cracked.

Herb Ritchie, coming close, plastered him suddenly with the glare of the flashlight. The man snarled.

"Get that blasted—"

Herb's foot kicked the bucking gun out of the taut fingers.

The man whirled around. Herb shoved his own pistol forward into the glow of the light. The muzzle bore upon the taut face of Captain John Horn, master of the late *Susan Seymour*.

Herb's voice lifted above the turmoil of the storm:

"When I heard a dying gunman had nimbly saved himself when our lifeboat hit the beach, Captain Horn, I thought I'd find you in his clothes."

Captain John Horn lifted his thick body

from a crouch beside the window. His face, only thinly fleshed over heavy bones, was now as impassive as a skull.

"Stand still!" Herb commanded.

"You, Ritchie?" Horn said. "I thought —" He paused. His slitted eyes, despite the light, were drilling Herb.

"You thought I'd just backtracked over the hill," Herb said.

John Horn nodded. "Just as I thought you'd believe a big one had swept me over the *Susan's* side," he said calmly. "My error, Mr. Ritchie."

"To take Bond's place you made some deal with Angelo and Harris—and kept it—till Arndall loaded you into the jeep and you drove off with the loot?"

John Horn spread his massive legs and locked his hands behind him. "Don't worry about Angelo and Harris," he said in a pleasant voice. "They ambushed us near the bridge when we had to turn back, and shot the steward. He fell out of the jeep but we kept going. Then they stole a car somewhere and followed us. They wanted it all, too."

He shook his head. "Deceitful fellows. They found the guns I had taken from them last night—ransacked my office while I was on the deck below tucking Bond away and shifting into his clothes and bandages. One point for them. But I had the payroll money on me, not in my old safe. A point for me."

He took a step toward Herb. As quickly Herb backed away. A significant twitch of his pistol stopped Captain Horn.

"Don't be a fool now, Ritchie," the shipmaster said. "You're a busted officer. Finished! You need me to get you clear away from the States and set for an easy life. I know the ropes."

He pointed to a corner and Herb, flicking the torch, saw a canteen cover, doubtless from the jeep. It was bulging with some unseen contents.

Horn's voice was reasoning, unexcited:

"There's the loot—a hundred thousand. Enough for two to live a good while as gentlemen in South America. I've got those two thugs still cornered in that beach house and the sea will finish them—or I will—inside five minutes. You and I will deal Arndall out—or perhaps you've already

done more than knock him sillier than usual?"

His large-boned arm swept out from behind him to indicate the storm with a half contemptuous gesture.

"When the wind lulls we'll move fast, son. There isn't a telephone line intact for a hundred miles and not a cop or sheriff who isn't on rescue duty. We'll pull that sedan out of the sand. The jeep would be conspicuous. We'll be a thousand miles away before it comes out there was a fortune on my ship. It's ten to one you'll be listed not as wanted, but as an unfortunate hurricane victim, body not recovered."

He bent alertly to peer out under the shutter.

"They're coming again!" he said tensely. "We can't let those rats live to squeal to the police. Yes! Here they come—I'll get 'em this time!"

"Don't!" snapped Herb. But Captain John Horn seemed quite past believing that his friend Herb Ritchie would suspect him of any treachery. His right hand went on reaching confidently for the pistol Herb's kick had landed in the corner.

His fingers closed on the weapon; he crouched beside the slit with eyes intent and the gun came up.

And in the same movement the muzzle of the pistol flicked sideways. Horn's burning eyes flashed with it—to bear on a closer target, the body of Herb Ritchie.

Herb's fingers had been tight on the trigger. He got a shot away but even so Horn's gun sent powder stinging into his wet belly with a simultaneous roar. Before he could realize he was alive, unhurt, his finger jerked again.

The shipmaster spun half around and back against the window. The pistol trickled from his relaxed fingers.

His body, with a hole above the breast pocket of his khaki shirt, wavered a moment. Then the wind blew it over.

SHAKILY Herb picked up the fallen gun. He took a quick hard look at the captain. His compelling eyes were masked under sagging lids. There was no fake about what that bullet had done to him; this was a seriously wounded man, no longer conscious.

Herb headed for the kitchen. His flashlight revealed Stan Arndall leaning against the door.

"I made out—enough," Arndall said thickly. "That double-crosser—I'll tell them, Ritchie—unless—Horn murdered Sparks when he picked up an alarm—"

His eyes were not pleasant; his weakness not too convincing.

"With a hundred thousand in the house I can't take chances," Herb said. His fist came up with not enough warning for Arndall to dodge, though he tried. The knuckles cracked on the point of the mate's chin.

Herb dragged him into the kitchen closet and turned the key. That door would hold—for the moment. Herb had more pressing business.

He unlocked the back door and pushed out into the eddies behind the house. Staggering, he fought his way to the front corner and stopped there with his shoulder planted against the clapboards. He stared at the place across the road uncertainly. A sea that ringed the house began to recede.

Then the door really did open. Kallas was driven out first. Limping, he tried his furious best to run south, to get away from Angelo and Harris who clung to him behind his broad body. Each gunman wasted a shot on the shuttered slit across the road but their hearts they put into their legs.

Another sea thundered at the house. Wind and water, leaping high against the concrete back wall, sent tiles cascading from the roof. And then a solid, waist high mass of water came pouring from the doorway the men had just quitted. The house was going! There was no retreat.

A whirling tile crashed against Angelo's head. He went down. Before the sea could take him the front wall poured over him like a comber of concrete blocks. Herb had seen that one tile on Angelo's head was enough. Only a dead man was buried.

Kallas, running, felt hands relax and twisted his neck. His burly arm, moving like a scythe, exploded a hard fist against Harris' jaw. The man went plunging under three feet of water.

Kallas' legs churned as he got going faster in a remarkable burst of speed. He ran on and flattened against the south end

of the frame house, beyond range of the front window. There he stopped, panting, staring at Herb.

Herb splashed into shoaling water. He grabbed the unconscious Harris and towed him up on the sloping lawn in front of the frame house. He found one gun in the wet sand and looked briefly for the other. A sea piled through the ruin. Herb ran up the slope to where the boatswain hugged the frame house.

"Come on, bose; I need a witness," he said, and with three guns weighting his pockets he led Kallas around to the back door.

The boatswain entered gingerly, with suspicious eyes. Herb unlocked the closet door and shone his flashlight on Stan Arndall.

"He'll have a different story from the other one," Herb said and moved on into the living room.

"The other one?" Kallas repeated. "What lousy mug teamed up with that no-good son—"

He froze as Herb's flashlight displayed Captain John Horn.

"The old man!" he said hoarsely. "Alive! So he didn't go overside! So—he was in it!"

"He ran it. Both good seamen, Captain Horn and Mr. Arndall, but that's all I'll give 'em. They won't hang together in court and the truth will come out," Herb told the surprised boatswain.

Kallas gulped, licked his salty lips and slanted his eyes at the canteen cover dimly visible in the corner.

"The truth has come out, Mr. Ritchie," he said hoarsely. "You took 'em both, didn't you? How's anybody goin' to make you out anything but as tough a gent as ever signed articles?"

Herb grinned soberly. He lifted his head and listened a moment to the terrific blast that was tearing up men and their plans and houses like bits of wet newspaper. He handed one of his guns to Kallas. The wind would be dropping; Tex's private army might turn up and need a show of force to keep them honest and unwounded.

"I'm not as tough as I was, bose," Herb said in dead earnest. "I'm not one of those hot-tempered guys at all."

Inspected and Condemned



By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

I

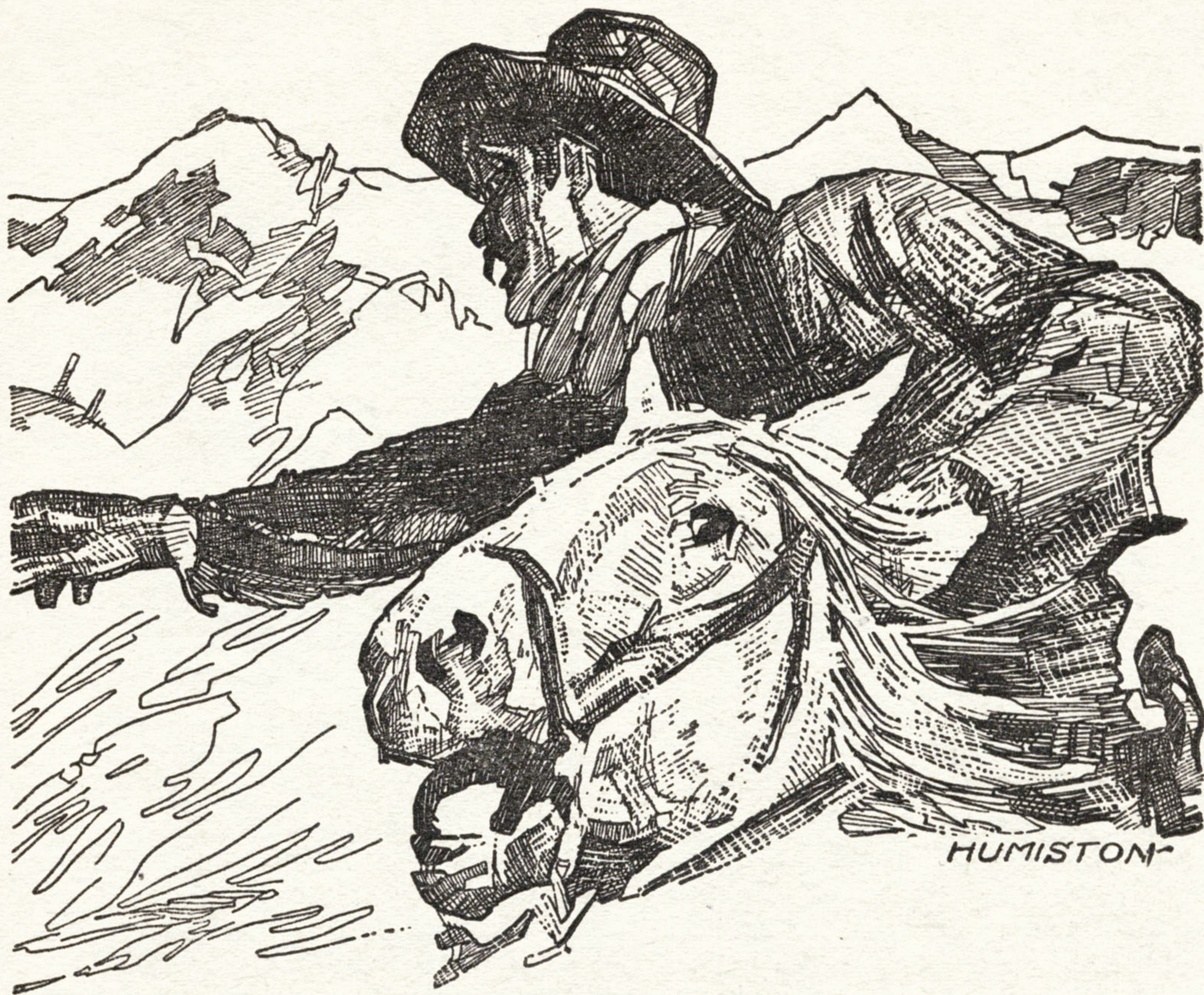
THE MINUTE Dave Howell felt that Running Wolf was up to a piece of Indian cussedness, he seated himself on the ground beside the borrowed camera and tripod he had set up in front of the chief's *hogan*, and settled down to wait. If it took till Judgment Day, he was going to get that varmint's picture.

Success would win him a job with Carl Gilman, who had become famous for his pictorial records of the old West. Being the right hand man of a veteran who had done important work for geological and other surveys sent out by the Department of the Interior would be starting at the top,

instead of at the bottom. So important was that prospect to Howell, that there was the urgent and immediate necessity of making good on the telegram in which he had assured Gilman that Running Wolf, who had always refused to face a cameraman or artist, had finally relented.

There wasn't enough shade for a horned toad. Two hours high, the sun already beat down into the upland valley on whose flat floor Running Wolf and his band had built their *hogans*. Near the lip of the flat stretch was the Indian Agency, and the corral into which cattle were driven, when beef was to be issued.

There were neither men, women, nor children in sight. They, like their chief, were in the bee-hive shaped *hogans*, watch-



When Word Got Around That the Photographer Had to Get Out or Shoot It Out, Business Picked Up With a Rush

ing the fool paleface sweat it out. And since they were apparently enjoying their game, Howell decided to show them that he also had his pleasures. He took a jackknife from his pocket, contemplated it with satisfaction, and pressed the spring release. The blade flicked into line, and locked with a click. After giving the Indians time to develop a healthy hunger for such a knife, he dug out a plug of Hudson's Bay, and began absent-mindedly shaving off shreds, fine and curling.

Deliberately, he rubbed these in his palm. He loaded his bulldog pipe, and with ritual care. He released the blade lock, put his knife back in its chamois case. He pocketed it, and the plug of tobacco. Then with a slow, ceremonious gesture, he fired up. Once the charge was going, he took a long draw, and exhaled the savory fumes.

No doubt at all that Running Wolf, who

in his day of glory had been able to scent, from miles away, a chance to loot, burn, and massacre now had a noseful of fragrance such as no reservation Indian ever got out of his own pipe.

Howell was lantern jawed and poker faced as the red man who baited him, though his eyes, dark and restless, made up for the habitual immobility of his long and solemn features. He took the pipe from his mouth, reversed it so that the stem pointed toward the entrance of the chief's *hogan*, and said, "Running Wolf, you smoke up. Heap good."

This was the first utterance in the two hours which had elapsed since the Indian had refused to come into the open.

"Nuh-uh. No good," Running Wolf answered.

But getting any answer was an achievement. Face fixed as hewn from a block of

oak, Howell lowered the pipe to his mouth, and took another drag.

"Heap good," he said aloud, but to himself, not to Running Wolf.

The whole business was taking a crazy twist. The previous day, the chief had accosted Howell, to say, "Me want picture. You make." He had popped up from behind a clump of mesquite where he had been lurking, a mile or so outside of Benson's Crossing, apparently for no purpose other than to wait for Howell to return from his daily rounds of the countryside.

WHILE it was easy to understand why the one-time hostile had defied every photographer and artist who had come to picture him, once he was helpless and harmless, living near an army post, it was beyond Howell's guessing why the Indian should have gone to such trouble to wait for him, only to balk when it was time to face the lens.

Howell was a "spot-knocker." He drove about with sample case and order book, calling on cattlemen and sodbusters and town dwellers, to get pictures from family albums and mantelpieces and whatnots: tinctypes, calotypes, daguerreotypes from years back. These he sent to Chicago, where enlarged copies were made. Until meeting Carl Gilman in Kansas City, where Howell had been working in a studio, he had been content enough—but after talking to Gilman, he had quit his job, to become a "spot-knocker."

"No, I can't take you with me, not even as an unpaid assistant," Gilman had told him. "Standing in a studio and saying, 'Look pleasant, please,' is not the right training for the field work I do."

Gilman had been so pleasant about it all that despite the rebuff, Howell had no less liking for the man whose albums were so popular. From coast to coast, people bought stereoscopes with which to view the scenic wonders presented in Gilman's pictures. Congressmen, studying his work, decided that the unknown West had not been exaggerated; and they ended by setting aside one area after another to be a national park.

Howell, recognizing the justice of Gilman's argument, had thereupon headed west to be a spot-knocker. Thus he could earn the price of equipment for an expedition

of his own, and at the same time get acquainted with the country. And so, when Running Wolf accosted Howell, Howell had wired Gilman—who himself had failed time and again to photograph the stubborn and resentful chief. Gilman's reply was brief: "Show me the plate and the job is yours."

And as Howell sat there, frozen faced as any Indian, he was thinking, "If I don't make good, I've made a pretty fool of myself, sending that telegram!" And then he took another drag, and again exhaled fragrant fumes.

At last Running Wolf came out.

Howell offered him the pipe.

The Indian made a gesture to mean that he'd not smoke with any pale face. He could not fight any more, but he could make them wait on him.

The chief's nose had been broken at least once. He had a mouth hard as a sabre's edge, and as thin. Deep wrinkles seamed his dish-face. Corded scars showed white against the muscular brown torso which was visible through rents in the denim jumper.

Running Wolf wore an army blanket ragged as a last year's bird's nest. Burned through in several places, as with a cattle brand, were the letters, "I.C." The jumper, worn inside out, was lettered, "Smith, J.M. 87." The denim pants inside out, were marked, "Higgins, W.L. 22." Running Wolf's dirty-gray hair was bound turban-wise with a bleached bandanna. Nevertheless, he stood proudly in front of his *bogan* as if he had himself scalped a regiment of cavalry, and eaten the horses.

As he took his stand before the camera, other braves came out. They, and the squaws and children who emerged, were ragged and hungry looking, starved looking as their chief. None spoke. They merely stared at Howell as if he had been a stump.

Howell, ducking his head under the black cloth, took his time. No telling what notion would pop up if he showed eagerness. He was about to get the lens into perfect focus when Running Wolf raised his blanket before his face; he said, "Nuh-uh."

Howell took his pipe and began loading it. He looked as though he had nothing to do, and a lifetime in which to do it: but he could have bitten a ten penny nail in half.

THEN he heard the bawling of cattle, and the yells of the men who hazed the critters up the draw, and toward the reservation. A shift of wind brought the strong scent of animals.

"Me want *wobaws*," Running Wolf said.
Wobaws: oxen, cattle, beef.

Howell could well understand how these sunken cheeked Indians would want a square meal: but to himself, he cursed the agent who had picked this of all times to be issuing beef.

However, he seated himself on the ground, got knife and plug, then said, "Eat plenty."

"Nuh-uh. Make picture *wobaws*. Make 'em good."

And that made it an idiot's nightmare. The gleam in Running Wolf's eyes worried him. More than the scent of cattle was in the wind.

Howell shifted the camera into the shadow of the *bogan* to keep the slanting light from causing lens flare. He focused on the weathered rails of the corral. Already, the critters were coming up over the ledge. One of the riders, a big man in a red shirt, was opening the gate, which was at the end furthest from the agency. This was Ben Larter, the Indian Agent.

Two others emerged from the dust: Tim Cassin, Larter's clerk, and Oscar Tait, the contractor who supplied the troops at Fort Benson with commissary stores and beef. He also ran the post exchange, seeing to it that the soldiers got no bargains. Much of the time the three lolled around Benson's Crossing, which was why Howell recognized them at once, despite dust and glare.

In the slanting light, the ribs of the cattle made a shadow pattern like a picket fence. Their hip-bones fairly poked through their hides. They were skinnier than the Indians who would eat them. Howell snapped the shutter, jerked the plate holder and grabbed another. As he wheeled the camera he said, "*Got wobaws.*"

"Got man, got horse?"

"Got man. Got horse. Got everything."

Running Wolf lowered the arm which had supported the blanket. His men came up from either side of him. They were dressed as he was. Howell drew the slide, and thrust it abruptly away from him, to arm's length, to fix the attention of his sub-

jects for an instant before snapping the shutter. But Howell got no picture.

The ground quivered under pounding hooves. A man bawled, "You, there, what you think you're a-doing?"

Howell jerked about to face the man who rode straight at him. The rider was big enough to burden two horses. As he reined in, bringing his mount's haunches to the ground, he tossed his head like a bull on the prod. His long hair whisked out, then settled back, a heavy mane which reached his shoulders.

"Who said you can take pictures of these Injuns?"

Howell was taken back by the agent's fury, for Ben Larter had seemed agreeable enough, in town; he'd given an order for an enlarged copy of his grandfather's picture.

"Why—uh—what's wrong, Mr. Larter?"

"Get offen this reservation with your camera, and you stay off, you hear?"

The army contractor, leaving the agency clerk to keep the cattle moving into the corral, rode up. He was a pudgy, unpleasant fellow at the best, with a sneering mouth. Now he sputtered, "You get out afore Ben tans your hide, and pronto!"

"Running Wolf asked me to take his picture."

"What an Injun wants don't make any difference."

"That's open to debate, but it happens I'm a white man."

Larter drew his pistol. "Pack up and git, or I'll shoot that camera full of holes."

Oscar Tait chipped in, "And for good measure, pistol whip you."

Howell answered, "I am outnumbered and unarmed, and I am responsible for a camera belonging to another man. I am working for Carl Gilman. You didn't order him away when he came here."

"He had permission. He had letters from Washington."

Howell produced the telegram. Larter snatched it, glared at it, and looked relieved. He gave it a crumple and a flip, spat tobacco juice, and said, "That ain't official. You could have put anyone up to sending this to you."

"I'll get something official!" Howell retorted.

Meanwhile to show his contempt for all

palefaces, Running Wolf had turned his back. He took three stately strides and stepped into his *hogan*.

Howell stowed his outfit and got into the buggy. He was barely under way when a pistol blazed. The slug thumped through the buggy top. A second shot buzzed past. Though it was plain that Larter and Tait were not trying to hit him, Howell got his shoulders up around his ears. The livery nag snorted, crow-hopped, tossed his contrary head.

"Easy, boy," the dude said, soothingly. "Easy—"

Larter and Tait, now joined by the clerk, began to yell and cut loose another volley. A bullet glanced from a rocky outcropping. It screamed like a hornet. A sharp chunk of lead gouged a fleck from the animal's hide. The frightened horse bolted.

Howell did his best to give and take with the reins. He had horse sense, as far as harness animals were concerned, but the critter was now plumb loco and running hog wild.

The buggy bounced and careened down the steep road. Wheels and hooves kicked up a cloud of dust so thick the enemy no longer had a target. This relief, however, came too late. A wheel smashed afoul of a rock. The buggy tipped, pitching Howell and the camera gear into a clump of mesquite. The horse kicked clear of the shafts and raced hell-bent for home.

When Howell picked himself up, and found that he could hobble, he opened the camera case. Apparently nothing had been broken. So, shouldering the tripod, he set out to hoof it for town.

THREE hours later he stepped into the Elite Studio to return the borrowed view camera. He said he'd had trouble with the horse, and then, "See if anything is damaged, Jonas, and let me know what I owe you."

"Get a picture of Running Wolf?"

"Exposed only one plate, and it may be cracked."

Before Jonas Wheeler, owner and operator of the Elite, had time to realize that the dude had not really answered the query, Howell was at the counter of the telegraph office, next door to the stage station.

There Howell wrote a message to Carl

Gilman. After counting the words, the operator said, "No use sending this. Here's one from Gilman, it arrived half an hour ago."

The wire was from Tecolote, Colorado. It said, "ARRIVE BENSONS CROSSING TEN DAYS. ANXIOUS SEE RESULTS. GET ALL PICTURES POSSIBLE."

Howell demanded, "Can't you get word to him at some station between Tecolote and here? It's important!"

"Sorry, but Tecolote is the end of the line. From there on, nothing but mountain passes twelve thousand feet high, with snow the year round. He'll need ten days and more for that trip."

Without picking up the unsent message he had composed, Howell hurried to the street. Ordinarily, he walked with a stoop, but now he squared his shoulders, lest his usual careless slouch make his spirits even lower. Gilman, while he would not believe that Howell had cooked up a wild yarn about having talked Running Wolf into capitulation, would still be inclined to feel that a man who was richer in wishes and notions than in performance, would hardly be good as an assistant.

The only solution Howell saw was to get that picture, and in spite of Ben Larter. If he got himself pistol whipped instead, that was just another risk he had to take, if only as a matter of principle.

II

THE proprietor of the Elite Studio was a bug-eyed person, with puffy cheeks; his big hands were stained with pyro, and his pique vest was splotched with gravy from many meals at the Chinaman's, across the street. Jonas Wheeler, never drunk and never sober, was likeable enough, once you got used to how unprepossessing he was in appearance. And he had dropped everything, then and there, to develop the plate which Howell had exposed at the reservation.

Together, he and Howell looked at the print as it floated in a tray of combined fixing and toning solution.

"I still can't see why Larter blew up in such a rage," Howell finally remarked. "Or why that fool Indian made such a point of my snapping the *wobaws*."

"If they'd had another mile to go, they'd've dropped."

"Whose brand are they wearing? Who'd let cattle starve that way?"

Wheeler answered, "Brands from all over hell's half acre, out of the state, every one of them."

"Wait a second! They're all branded I.C."

Wheeler grinned indulgently. "That's the trail brand."

As he explained trail-brands, Howell listened, though with only half of his attention, so that when the man was done, Howell said, "Why would the Indians' blankets all have I.C. burned right through them, in several places, as though some idiot had run wild with a hot iron?"

"Shucks, that don't make sense!"

Howell grimaced ruefully. "I wish I had a picture to show you!"

"You think that Injun will face a camera later?"

Howell decided that while he had no cause to mistrust Wheeler, he might still profit by changing the subject. "Maybe I'd better stick to spot-knocking. You say I didn't damage your view camera. Judging from the dust on it, you haven't used it for years. Suppose you sell it to me. My idea of saving up and financing an expedition into wild country is the wrong way of going at things.

"Instead, I can combine spot-knocking and working up a collection of negatives as I go along—a bit at a time—make side trips—though the isolated places aren't by any means the only ones worth photographing."

"That's downright smart, Dave. Let Gilman have out of the way stuff."

AFTER some amiable dickering, Howell paid for the camera and took it with him. He was sure he had kept Wheeler totally in the dark as to his actual aim. Wheeler had made it clear from the start that he, like a good many others in Benson's Crossing, was none too fond of Ben Larter. The former buffalo hunter, while by no means disliked, nevertheless put too much stock in being an old timer; and whenever he got a skinful of red liquor, he overdid things by reminding the townsmen that they were Johnny-Come-Latelies. All this

was well established, yet Wheeler was good naturedly talkative. His loose-lipped mouth was a dead giveaway.

That night, Howell set out for the reservation. Instead of driving, he rode. The livery stable hostler joshed him, insisting that a hoss and buggy was a heap more efficient for courting the daughters of customers. Howell retorted saying that after that runaway, he wouldn't mix horses and women, but instead would stick to the front porch hammock.

Howell rode with the camera lashed to his back. He'd not fool with a tripod. Any picture, good, bad, or indifferent, just as it clearly represented Running Wolf, would save the day.

At the foot of the rise which culminated in the edge of the shelf on which the reservation was sprawled, Howell left his horse. There were lights in the agency. He could not risk having any of Larter's animals whinny at the scent of a strange mount.

As he reached the level of the reservation, he noted a slaughter house reek. The Indians had butchered the beeves, and what they hadn't been able to eat at once, they'd dried for future use. Whether they'd made soup or moccasins out of the hides was an open question.

Once past the Agency, he flattened to the ground, so that by squinting upward, he could distinguish the silhouettes of the *hogans* against the background of sky and stars. The building and the corral behind him helped in getting lined up as he had been during his long wait, that morning. Once sure of direction, he got up and walked, with no attempt at stealth.

There were no dogs. Doubtless the Indians had eaten them.

Finally he came to what must be Running Wolf's *hogan*. In a low voice, he called the chief's name. After several repetitions came an answer: "What you want?"

"Want palaver. No noise."

"You come in."

The Indian caught him by the arm and guided him into the dark hovel, so that he would not step on sleepers, or those who pretended to sleep. Howell gave the chief a plug of tobacco and a can of peaches, after which he said, "Make picture at sunrise. Where Larter does not see us."

"Got picture *wobaws*?"

Howell handed him the print and struck a match. Running Wolf looked, and said, "Good."

"Make picture at sunrise," Howell repeated.

"Nah-uh. You show *wohaws* to big chief pony soldier at fort."

This began to be understandable: since Oscar Tait, the contractor who supplied the "pony soldiers" at Fort Benson, had helped Larter drive a handful of walking skeletons to the reservation, the cattle might have been stolen from the army, and hidden in some canyon until the search tapered off. Meanwhile, they'd practically starved, which of course would bother no one but the Indians; Tait and Larter would pocket the cash Larter was supposed to have spent for prime beef.

While this was purely conjecture, it made sense, and it tied in with Larter's unreasonable attitude toward photographic evidence of how emaciated the cattle were. Nevertheless, Howell wanted a clear cut story to lay on the table when he saw the commanding officer at Fort Benson. So he asked for details.

In the dark, sign language did not work; and while Running Wolf knew enough English to cope with discussion of cattle and blankets and things which could be handled, he bogged down horribly when he tackled intangibles, the relationships between things. And Howell bogged down when he tried to convince the Indian that while Gilman and other visitors to this reservation had had official connections, the mere fact that he, Howell, went about the country dealing in pictures did not by a long shot indicate that he knew important people in Washington, or that army officers would take any notice of him. And finally, that crucifying Larter was not quite as simple as Running Wolf had hoped.

One thing however was made plain: that Running Wolf was not allowed off the reservation; that going even so far as to way-lay a spot-knocker was a technical violation of parole. He could sneak to Benson's Crossing by dark, but not by daylight for a studio picture.

What "I.C." meant, and why blankets were branded to destruction with those letters was lost in a muddle. Running Wolf ended by pointing to the agency and say-

ing, "You go, you hear Larter talk, hear Tait make talk."

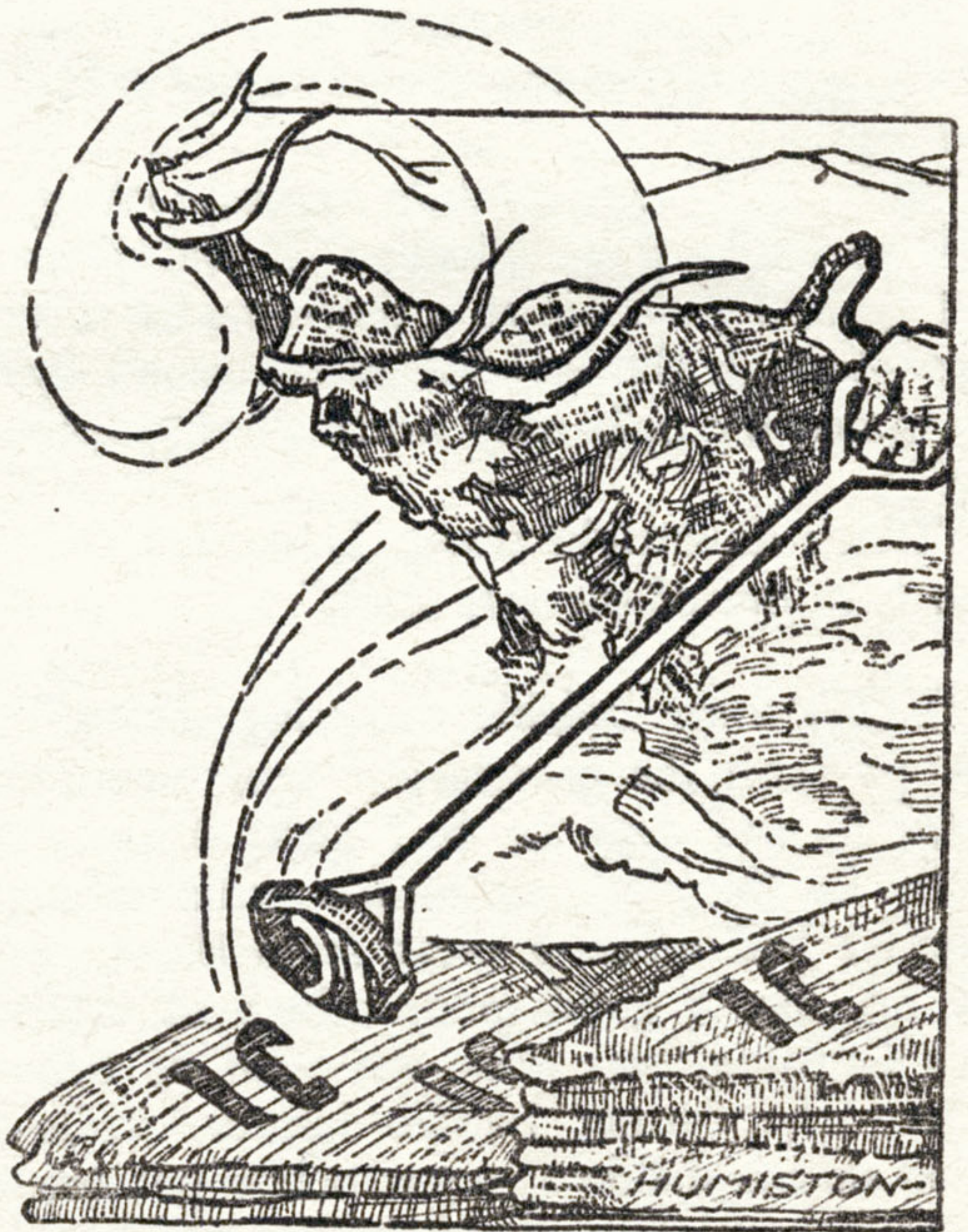
And that ended it. There'd be no snapshots at dawn—not until Howell had Larter's hide peeled off and tacked to the barn door.

"You go. You hear."

Howell went. The chief had evidently concluded that Tait would not have ridden from Fort Benson to the reservation merely for sociability; or, he may have been listening and thus had reason for figuring that since discussions usually go in circles, Howell would have every chance of overhearing what he, Running Wolf, had understood but could not explain clearly.

When he got directly under one of the windows which pierced the thick dome wall, he recognized the deep voice of Ben Larter, and the half-snarl, half-whine of the contractor. The latter was saying, "I been trying to get it through your thick head, the dude won't have a permit till Gilman gets here, and with him in Tecolote heading this way, it won't be less'n ten days."

"You're the idiot," Larter grumbled. "We got to get busy right now, like I been trying to tell you for two hours now, getting them red varmints some blankets that ain't



been marked with sojer's names and troop numbers. That dirty son of an Injun was a wearing his jumper inside out so's it'd

show in the pitcher he had army stuff, that'd been throwed away—that's why the foxy devil decides he likes photographers all of a sudden. So we—"

Tait cut in, "That 'we' stuff is plumb loco! It ain't we, it ain't us, it is you. I am not Injun agent. It is your problem. I tell you again, damn it, no! Until the next freight comes in, there ain't any fatigue clothes, and there ain't any blankets I can let you have—and when they do come in, you pay for them same as the army pays. Gosh, I hardly make a living as it is!"

LARTER bawled a couple of words which the editor of the Benson's Crossing *Advocate* would not possibly have set up in print, and then went on, "You been skinning the army and rendering it for tallow, and taking half the gravy from me collecting for prime beef and stuff, stuff that's a dead loss to you, and all you got to do is sign a voucher, and it is me that risks his hide!"

As the two went round and round in re-creation and wrangle, Howell began to get the picture: the colonel at Fort Benson, to make sure there'd be no tricks played with beef unfit for issue to troops, had branded all culls I.C.—inspected and condemned. He had done the same with worn out blankets and other expendable items. This had protected the men of his command against the doings of a crooked contractor and had kept Q.M. sergeants from being tempted to connive with Tait by getting good things condemned so that the stuff could be peddled elsewhere. In so arranging, he had played into the hands of the Indian agent.

That Tait and Larter knew of the telegram which Howell actually had not despatched and had evidently quizzed the operator concerning Gilman's whereabouts and plans made it clear that the pair of crooks were thoroughly worried. Howell had to step fast and lightly. And since there was nothing more to be learned by shivering in the biting wind, he quit his listening post and went down to get his horse.

Once back in town, he left his camera in his hotel room, and only then returned his mount to the livery stable. The hostler blinked at him in the lantern light, and said, "You pick the damndest places to do

your courting. Betwixt soot and white-wash—"

"My horse threw me."

"Wonder you didn't take a buggy in the fust place."

IN THE morning, Howell drove to Fort Benson, which was six miles away from town. The houses of civilian employees, hangers-on, gamblers, and "laundresses," as they styled themselves, encircled the palisade which enclosed the military area. The fort itself was of dobe. Within its thick walls were enlisted men's barracks. The officers' quarters were in a line near headquarters, which Howell readily identified because of flagpole and reveille gun.

A leathery faced sergeant major listened to Howell's reasons for wanting to speak to the colonel, and then took him to see the adjutant, a ruddy captain with straw colored mustaches and a nose like a red onion. It was quite plain that this officer had the basic requirements for an adjutant: ability to carry his liquor, and a voice that could reach across any parade ground.

"Indian trouble, eh? Tell me about it. The colonel's busy."

Howell gave the details, and showed him the photo.

The captain asked, "Where's the evidence about the clothes?"

"I saw them."

"That's not enough. The Indians could have stolen the stuff, or a civilian, any civilian, could have, while it was heaped up, pending destruction as ordered."

"But these cattle, herded by Tait," Howell persisted.

The adjutant scowled. "Inspected and condemned, no doubt. But since that is the case, the government did not pay for them. So they were never government property. If Tait and Larter are conspiring to cash vouchers for prime beef, and issuing skeletons, that is not army business."

"The devil it is not, sir! Running Wolf is getting desperate. He could make trouble."

"What with? If he had the wherewithal to buy guns, there'd be point to what you say. See here, Mr. Howell, you're new in this country. I appreciate your viewpoint. I agree that those Indians should not be starved. But you'll agree that the army has

its hands full, without meddling with what is in the province of the Bureau of Indian Affairs." He chuckled grimly. "They, the skillet-headed civilians and politicians, get things into a mess and then yelp for us. If you know someone in Washington—good day, sir, and sorry I can not do anything for you."

And as he drove from the post, Howell knew that he could never convince Running Wolf that he'd done his best. Not unless he practiced up in sign language. Failing in that, he could only face Carl Gilman and admit he'd gone off half cocked.

Back in Benson's Crossing, Howell found a telegram and an express notice waiting for him. The message was from Gilman: "LOST ALL EQUIPMENT IN AVALANCHE ASSISTANT CRIPPLED I AM SNOW BLIND DEPEND ON YOU PHOTOGRAPH RUNNING WOLF HE WILL CHANGE MIND BEFORE I CAN WORK." The date line showed he was back in Tecolote.

Before wiring Gilman to pull official strings, Howell decided he should have one more meeting with Running Wolf.

The parcel, as he expected, contained a batch of enlargements from Chicago, along with pieces of moulding mitred and ready for assembly to frame the pictures. And having dented his bank roll by purchasing Jonas Wheeler's outfit, he had to get some fast action on his own job as a spot-knocker.

Once in his room he set to work, and with good will. Nearly every enlargement was colored in oils, and was to get the most elaborate of frames. In addition to the down payment which Howell kept, he got an extra commission based on the price of the completed job; and thanks to his good salesmanship, hardly a customer had insisted on one of the cheaper finishes, such as in charcoal or crayon.

In the morning, Howell went to make the rounds. He had so much territory to cover that he planned to spend the night at whatever ranch house he reached at dusk. The following day, he would complete the circuit, returning to Benson's Crossing.

Somewhat more than a mile beyond town, the rutted road dipped steeply down into a dry wash whose bottom was dotted with thorny acacia scrub, and mesquite. He

had scarcely begun the descent when he saw the two riders, well up the bank, as though they had been watching the road from a point at which it was at their eye-level. Now, satisfied that their time had not been wasted, they were mounting up, and riding for the crossing.

Even had the distance been much greater, Howell at first glance would have recognized Ben Larter. His size, his red shirt, and his long hair left no doubt. As a guess, the other man was Oscar Tait. Howell, however, was not dallying to make sure.

III

THE two were cutting slantwise down the banks to intercept Howell. This was so certain that he wasted no time debating as to their direction or purpose. They were sure he could not possibly turn the buggy on that brisk slope. He had only one direction to go—forward.

The meeting, he had to conclude, was anything but accidental. And they wouldn't be waylaying him simply to make threats. While he realized that he had not a Chinaman's chance of retreating, or of winning a race, he grabbed the whip and gave his horse a smart cut. That the two had picked a wash, instead of lurking at ground level offered him this hope, that if he got up to the surface and into view of riders who might be heading for or from town, he might have a chance. Some chores were best done without witnesses, even in a new and rough country.

The downgrade favored him. He had a fresh horse, the best one in the stable, a choice on which he had insisted because of the long route he had planned. His quick decision caught the riders off guard. He had reached the bottom before they got the idea that they'd have to hurry if they were to be out of eye shot when they nailed him.

Larter's horse stumbled and rolled, landing in a heap with its rider. Tait, who had apparently come along with the intention of letting the Indian Agent handle the morning's business, lost a moment blinking and gaping.

"Rope him, you idiot!" Larter bawled as Howell appeared.

Howell plied the whip. Tait's first cast missed, and while he fumbled to build another loop, Howell was belting it up the opposite slope.

"Drop that rope, you're all thumbs!" Larter bellowed, after leaving off cursing his horse. "Grab his bridle!"

Tait charged up. He was a clumsy rider, sitting his mount with the grace of a bag of meal. Howell, now that he could give his horse its head, had a free play with the whip. He slashed the contractor, slashed his animal. It shied, breaking Tait's hold on the cheekstrap. And the brink of the wash was now near. Howell gave another cut. Tait's horse snorted and went out of control.

But Larter had wasted no time trying to regain his own horse. He had grabbed Tait's abandoned riata and casting from afoot, he brought the buggy horse up with a jerk. The Indian Agent dug in with his heels, and made it good.

"See what you're good for now," he rumbled.

Tait rode in to grab the bridle. That left Larter free to attend to Howell.

The spot-knocker, knowing that he was in for it, jumped down to get what advantage he could. His abrupt switch from flight to attack caught Larter off guard, and with hardly time to let go the riata. Howell uncorked a punch which sent the agent staggering. He followed through with a drive to the solar plexus. There was a grunt as the blow knocked the burly hulk another pace backward, though without upsetting or paralyzing him.

While Larter was recovering from his amazement at having a dude work him over, Howell punched and jabbed—but with no more effect than if he had been slugging a stone wall. Then Larter hauled off with a ham sized fist which could no more be blocked than could the sweep of a grizzly's paw.

The impact had none of the explosive shock of the fast moving fist which knocks a man witless. Though a hard wallop, it was rather a push than a blast. It sent Howell staggering. He stumbled among outcropping rocks and roots, bashed himself painfully, yet recovered in time to meet Larter's rush. Shaken and disorganized, he nonetheless contrived to belt the agent a brisk one.

Larter merely shook his head as if to clear

it. He made no effort to cover or guard. He took everything as he waded in with both fists. He lifted them from the ground. He lifted Howell, first with one, then the other.

The spot-knocker landed in a heap, conscious but unable to get up. Larter booted him in the ribs. "Get busy," he bawled at Tait, "and never mind the gawking!" Then, standing over Howell, he said, "I am plumb fed up with your meddling! Thought we'd not know about you hooting off to the colonel to blab? Quicker you get out of town, the better. And I am fixing now to make sure you do get out, you hear?"

Tait, meanwhile, had been getting busy.

He took the framed enlargements out of the buggy and kicked them about. He trampled them, and when they were free of their frames, the wind seized and wafted them far and wide. He did this while Larter knocked the neck from a bottle of whiskey, most of which he splashed over the buggy cushions, and over Howell.

"You'll get out," he thundered, "afore you're tarred and feathered for not giving back the folks their own little pitchers—Oscar, you got 'em?"

Oscar had them. The two mounted up, finished the bottle, and flung it at Howell. Then, once on the level, they broke into a gallop. As they rode, they scattered the small originals, the family mementos which had been entrusted to Howell only on his assurance that they'd be carefully handled, and safely returned after enlargements had been made. The wind scattered them like shingles ripped off by a cyclone.

Barely able to totter, Howell had not a chance of retrieving the originals. It cost him tooth gritting effort even to collect the battered enlargements. Each time he stooped, he went dizzy, and came within an ace of lurching to his chin. Bit by bit, however, he gathered the evidence which he hoped would sustain his story when he faced his customers. Later, he would comb the brush, trying to find as many of the small originals as he could; however thankless that task, he had to attempt it.

He was not leaving Benson's Crossing. Instead, he would face the music. But he'd rather take a pistol whipping than knock at the door of the old sod buster and his wife, to say that he'd lost the picture of their only son, who had been killed in the war.

Driving to town was painful work. When he came to the livery stable, he lurched from the vehicle and would have fallen had not the hostler given him a hand.

The man chuckled and said, "Bub, you have the dangdest luck! If you can't fight your liquor better'n that, you stick to saspilla."

Howell was too done in to argue. Talk would have got him nothing. Claiming he came in drunk as a boiled owl would make the yarn better, and the town would stick to that version.

He went to see old Doc Wilby, who patched him up while Jonas Wheeler stood by. The two told him that going to the town marshal to make a complaint would do no good. "In the first place," the bearded doctor set forth, "there were no witnesses, and the justice of the peace in this man's town won't let himself be bothered by assault and battery cases. Your chances of collecting for the destruction of several hundred dollars worth of enlargements, for which you'll have to make good, are practically nil. The two would claim you had another runaway and that all they did was help you gather the remains. Or if you did make a case against them, you'd be waylaid and handled more roughly than ever before you could get a judgment executed against Larter."

"Making good to the company," Howell said, as plainly as he could manage with battered lips, "won't be half as hard as facing

all those people. That's what worries me."

"Well, now," Doc Wilby said, "it's not hopeless. Since you are not going to leave town, get yourself a gun. Borrow mine, you're welcome to it. Have it all drawn and ready while you wait for *him*. Call him a dirty name and when he reaches for his gun, pour it to him and if you work from close range, you can't miss. As long as there are no witnesses, no one will ask questions. He's always armed, and if a tenderfoot settles him, it'll be held it served him right. And, your customers will feel that you did the right thing—though no one will ever accuse you of having done the right thing!"

But Howell shook his head. "I have never carried a gun, and I am not starting now. Your advice is sound, and I see that in this country, it is practical, perhaps necessary to work that way. Still and all, setting out to ambush a man is against my principles."

Jonas Wheeler said, "You're bucking a critter that has no principles."

BY THE following day, Howell was able to make the rounds of his customers. However, the news of the loss had spread, going ahead of him, along with the garbled yarn that having been pig drunk, he had caused a runaway. And those who did believe his side of it figured if a man is going to be a spot-knocker, he should stick to spot-knocking and not fool around with Indians.



Howell, getting nowhere by facing it out, turned back to town early in the day. He went to the office of the Benson's Crossing *Advocate*, where he paid for a quarter page advertisement in which he outlined the entire story. He announced that he was sending boys out to comb the sagebrush to recover as many pictures as possible; meanwhile, he was not leaving town until he had redeemed himself in every way possible.

The announcement concluded, "*While I shall be able to recover only a few of your pictures, I have made arrangements with the Elite Studio to photograph, without charge, individually or in family group, everyone who has suffered a loss. My personal services as an artist will at least assure all concerned that in rejecting Mr. Larter's advice to leave at once, I am setting a higher value on integrity than on personal safety.*"

The editor looked up from the copy, shifted his cigar stump, and said, "Mr. Howell, I am here to sell space. You have paid in advance. Whether you live long enough to see the final printing is your business—but I assure you I shall faithfully repeat this advertisement until I have earned my payment. You have as good as challenged Ben Larter. That is reckless. Can you shoot?"

"Somewhat, but I have no firearms."

"Hmmm . . . you've probably read that an unarmed man is never shot down, out here. That's nonsense! Though in your case, you will probably be kicked to death. Our marshal is plumb set against shooting unarmed people. Only, he is often out of town."

The editor opened his desk drawer, regarded the several weapons lying in it, and offered Howell a snub-nosed .38. With a grin of good humored malice, he said, "The copy you have given me as an example of how far you will go to protect the interests of your patrons inspires me to follow your example. Take this gun. I want to protect my customer!"

"I can not deliberately design to kill a man." Howell however paused at the door to soften the bluntness of refusal. "Thank you very much, I'm most appreciative."

"Wait a minute! Give me some information for an obituary. Your past, and your plans for the future. For your art, and for the Indians. The cutting short of such an

idealistic person will be tragedy, sir! Drama. A great story."

Howell studied and liked the twisted grin, the cool, twinkling eyes, both mocking and friendly. He stayed and told all. Then, having committed himself to the finish, he went to have a showcard written, for the studio window, to get things going at once, instead of having to wait for the paper to come from the press.

HOWELL got fast action from the start, first from customers who happened to be passing through town, and then from those who got the story as it was spread by cattlemen and sodbusters going home with supplies.

Jonas Wheeler received those who came to see if Howell meant business. "He sure does, gents, he sure does. Far as you are concerned, he is the operator. You have patronized me in times past, so I am obliged to help Dave make good to you."

This appealed to them. Howell got friendliness from some of those who had cursed him, saying that if Larter didn't run him out of town, they would. Quite a few who had no claim against Howell came for a look. Many stayed and sat for pictures, just to see what the dude could do. Since such trade went to the house, Jonas Wheeler, far from losing, was actually gaining from having given a hand.

"You wait," Wheeler said, during a lull. "Don't know as Larter'd come busting right in to raise ructions, with the way you're getting folks on your side, but I'm getting me a shotgun—keep your shirt on, Dave! I just aim to protect my property. If he wants to beat you up, outside, I am respecting your wishes."

But Larter did not show up that day, nor on the one following. Meanwhile, Howell had not abandoned his plan of going up once more to parley with Running Wolf. Despite his isolation, the Indian did seem to keep track of what went on. And that Howell had taken a beating because of trying to play the Indian's hand made it more than an even bet that Running Wolf would pose, if only to spite Ben Larter.

Then Wheeler said, "You're doing right well, Dave, killing your own snakes, and getting me a lot of extra business. You take charge while I run out to Ojo Caliente to

see some kinfolk, I've not been out of town for a couple of years."

Howell readily agreed to Wheeler's proposal. Such an expression of confidence on the studio owner's part contributed substantially to building up the public opinion which in the end could make Larter pull in his horns. Now that the newspaper announcement had done its work, patrons of the studio became interested in the reservation Indians and their sorry plight. While none abandoned their fixed opinion that Running Wolf was a murdering varmint, it was conceded that as a matter of principle, the white captors and guardians should not pocket the ration money, or starve the critters.

Somewhat before noon, the stage came clattering into town. Howell followed his sitters to the street when they went to have a look at whatever newcomers might be alighting.

A TALL MAN with bandaged eyes stepped down. A Mexican boy helped him make his way toward the hotel. Despite the blindfold, Howell recognized the rugged man with the graying beard. Carl Gilman, still blinded from the glare of snowfields across which he had been compelled to make his way, had come to town. He moved with a stiff, jerky stride. He carried himself as though he had suffered severe bruises and wrenches in getting his crippled assistant clear of the avalanche and back once more to safety.

Howell hurried to meet him. Though they had chatted only an hour, months previously, Gilman recognized the voice and addressed him by name. "When you didn't answer my wire," the expert said, "I suspected you'd met trouble, so I sneaked away, ignoring doctor's orders. Tell me about Running Wolf, I can hear even if I can't see."

"Your eyes—when can you unbandage them?"

"Didn't wait to find out. Snow blindness is unpredictable."

"Well, I've had trouble," Howell confessed. "With the Indian Agent. But your official credentials will settle that. I'd hoped to handle the matter myself—I've got nowhere, and I feel foolish about everything. No picture at all!"

Gilman chuckled sympathetically. "I've

had that experience many a time. All my credentials were lost with my equipment. If necessary, we'll wait until I can get official letters which Ben Larter can not ignore. How's spot-knocking?"

"It takes unusual turns," Howell answered. "Right now, I am operating the Elite Studio, while the owner happens to be away."

But Howell's attempt to keep his griefs to himself got a setback when the editor of the *Advocate* came to interview Gilman; the editor talked more than the newcomer. Howell, leaving the two at the hotel, felt that despite Gilman's friendliness and approval and understanding, it was a fatal let-down not to have had the Running Wolf business concluded.

"Any way you look at it," he told himself, "I've been a false alarm, making rash promises."

He estimated the time it would take for Gilman to get an official letter in reply to a telegram. He had to photograph that Indian and strictly on his own. He would have set out for the reservation that very night except that he was still stiff and aching from the mauling he had been unfortunate enough to take.

In the morning, as Howell stepped from the Chinaman's restaurant to go to the studio, Ben Larter loomed up from the swinging doors of the Buckhorn Saloon. In one fist he had a copy of the *Advocate*. He wore neither knife nor pistol. This was far from reassuring; it was plainly his intention to proclaim to the town that whatever happened, the dude had not been intimidated by armed force.

"Look here," he rumbled, as he intercepted Howell at the studio entrance, "I gave you fair warning. You ain't taking any pictures for Gilman—he can wait and use his own eyes. You are getting out of town now, you hear? Right now! Or I'm a-fixing you and your camera so's neither'll be in working order."

Larter booted the unlocked door. It slammed open.

"Make up your mind. Whichever you crave, you can have it."

Gilman's arrival had brought matters to a head: and this was something which couldn't be handled with credentials from Washington.

IV

THE cow pony, ground hitched within a few yards of him, tempted Howell sorely. Larter's scowling presence gave a new reality to Howell's bruises, and stirred him to panic which, though resisted, found expression in an almost uncontrollable urge to mount up and ride, and to hell with everything! Instead, he retorted, "I have a picture of you and Tait herding inspected and condemned cattle into the agency corral. I had a number of prints made. They have been sent to several people. I couldn't get them back for you even if I tried to. You'd better listen to reason before you go too far."

Triumphantly, Larter grimaced and wagged his head, shaking out his long hair. "Laugh's on you. I talked to a lawyer. No law against bedding down cattle in that corral. You got no proof that them critters was issued to the Injuns."

He was quite right. On the other hand, he was fighting for time. By getting Howell out of town, he would have a chance to feed

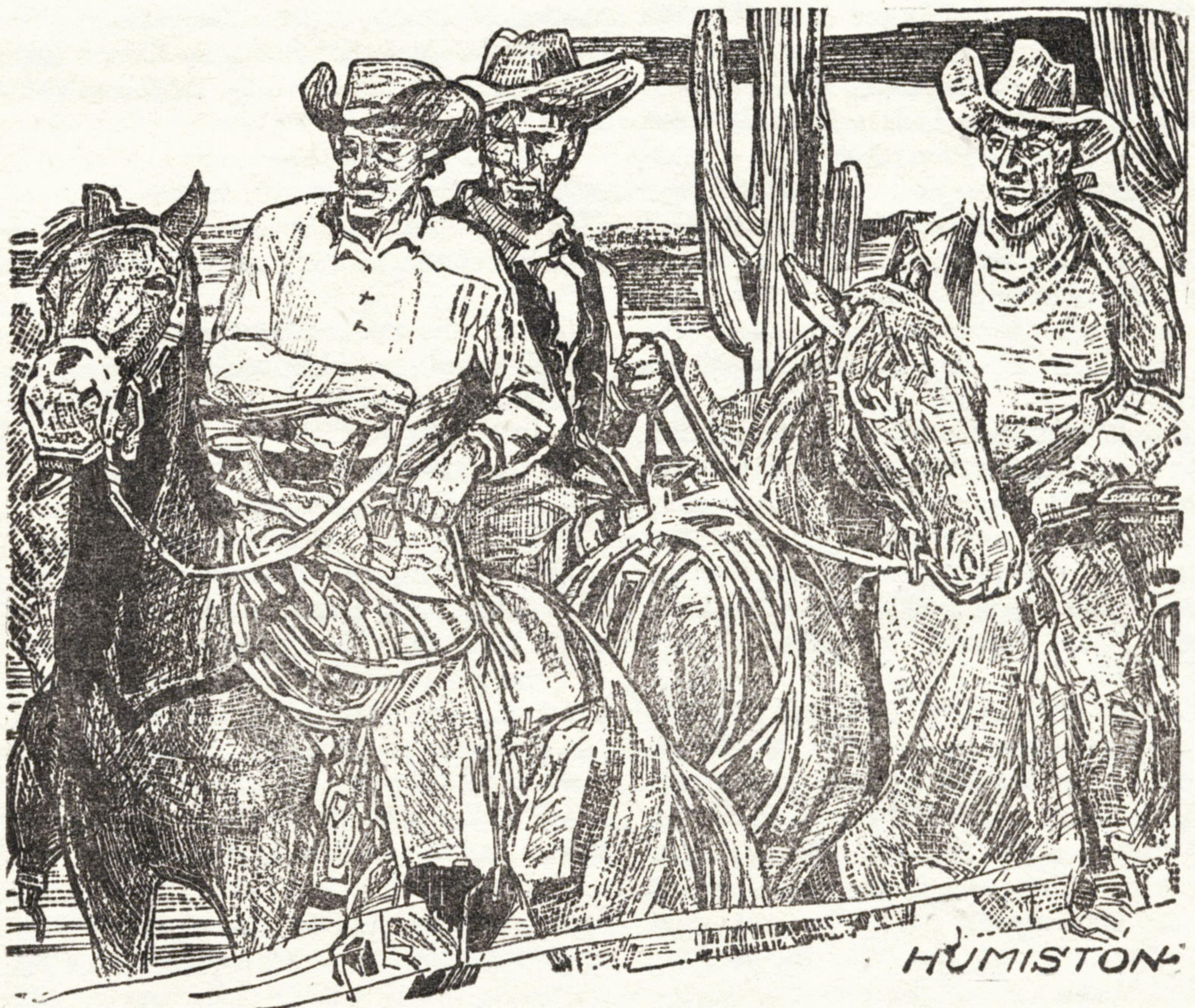
the Indians so that when Gilman was at last able to compose and focus a picture, the betraying cast of starvation would have vanished.

"I'm staying," Howell declared. "And stirring up public opinion against you till you are run out of town! Get out of my way!"

And to point his words, to make them irrevocable, he hauled off and socked Larter a brisk one. He knocked him groggy with the snap, rather than the weight of the blow. Though his taped ribs hampered him, he sidestepped the bullheaded rush and the prodigious fists. Kicking up dust as he recovered, Larter wheeled to finish the spot-knocker.

"You dude stinker!"

Howell nailed him again. Level ground gave him an advantage he had lacked in the dry wash, and that he was not outnumbered strengthened his spirit. Spectators were gathering. There was a bare chance of winning through footwork. But the battered ribs hampered him, so that he



could neither block nor evade the third counterattack. Larter's fist, though glancing, shoved Howell to his rump. Rolling, he clawed the dust.

"I'll fix your pitcher taking!" Larter bel-
lowed, and yanked the studio door open.
"I'll fix your cameras!"

Howell scrambled painfully to his feet. He snatched the quirt from the cowpony's saddle and raced after Larter. As he ran, he reversed the quirt. Its butt was loaded.

The men who had gathered at the first rising of voices shouted,

"He's fixing to whip and scratch Ben! This sure is it!"

The marshal wasn't in sight. Nobody missed him.

"You, there!" Howell croaked, and bounded into the studio.

The crash of a chair and a bench knocked over by Larter drowned the sound of Howell's approach. Larter kicked the furniture for luck, and turned on the studio camera. Just then the spot-knocker swung, neatly as though he had been felling men all his life.

The blow caught Larter alongside the head, and a little above the ear. The big fellow lurched to his knees. He crumpled slowly, as though it took a long time for his entire body to learn that he had been cold-caulked by an impact which might have killed a man less rugged, or with a thinner skull. And when he dropped to his knees, he regained a semblance of control. It seemed that he was knocked out, yet by sheer will and cussedness bearing up, refusing to go down.

Howell snatched the slowly recovering hulk, using Larter's own groggy rise. Little actual lift was required, yet it looked as if the spot-knocker had yanked him to his feet. Then, still gripping him by the collar, Howell gave a jerk and a boot. The kick, landing dead center, propelled Larter through the door.

Fighting mad, Howell followed through. He took the quirt by the grip, as though warned by instinct that repeated blows with the loaded butt might kill even Ben Larter, and slashed right and left. He got in a final kick which sent Larter face forward and the head against a hitching post. And that was too much, even for the durable buffalo hunter. He didn't even twitch. He

breathed hoarsely. Several men picked him up to tote him to the doctor.

There was a moment of silence, broken when one of those remaining said, "Bub, the marshal's outa town, and there will sure be a killing when Ben comes to and remembers his own name. When you quirt a man, you done declared open season on yourself—I ain't blaming you, only a fact is a fact. It's get out or shoot out."

BUSINESS picked up with a rush. People came to eye the dude who had lar-
ruped Ben Larter, and stayed to sit for a picture. All this kept Howell too busy to brood over consequences. He said to those waiting their turn, "I'll take care of you, but no others. If Jonas doesn't show up by noon, I'll have to close shop and drive out to the reservation to talk to Running Wolf."

Like everyone else, Howell figured that Larter would be under the doctor's care for a couple of days; that he was allowing himself plenty of time to accomplish his mission, and that it would hardly be right to close the studio at once. But Larter's recovery was a matter of hours, rather than days. When he stepped into the studio, he looked little the worse for his clouting. Apparently his long hair had protected him.

Larter came in quietly. After nodding to several acquaintances, he said to Howell, "This here has got beyond being playful-like. The town ain't big enough for the two of us."

There was neither bluster nor bawling. Rough handling had brought to the surface qualities which Larter had long kept buried. The man now had dignity.

"I do not suppose it is," Howell admitted, with a calmness which amazed him. "Though we met twice, and we are even."

"Far as being cold-caulked, we are even. It is the quirting that gets us down to brass tacks. Next stage leaves around four o'clock. If I see you here after it's done pulled out, I'll know you've got yourself a gun and you're staying to settle things, and I am not waiting to ask you, are you heeled?"

He spoke without wrath or resentment. He was setting forth a necessity larger than himself or Howell. And Howell had the odd feeling that he had been wrong, not in slugging the man, but in wounding that burly ruffian so deeply that buried dignity came

to the surface, perhaps for the first time in Larter's life. It was as though the Indian question had ceased to exist.

Larter asked, after a decent pause, "You understand me?"

"Clearly, sir. I understand also that giving me a chance to leave is only to put you in the right, no matter what happens later."

Larter almost smiled. "Correct. I told you right out, and you heard me."

He turned deliberately to the door, neither strutting nor swaggering. For a moment there was silence in which everyone tried to read Howell's face. All they got was, "Who is next, please?"

When he had used his last plate holder, he straightened up and said, "I shall need time to reload. No more for today."

"When do we see the proofs?" one asked, and another, "You aim to finish 'em, or is Jonas doing that when he comes back?"

Howell glanced at his watch. "After the plates are developed, they have to be fixed in hypo. Then, washed for an hour. Thereafter, they must be dried, which takes an hour or more. By that time it will be dark and I shall not be able to make proofs. Not until tomorrow. Thank you for waiting on me."

After the customers had dispersed, Howell went to the general store and said to Old Man Bronson, "What kind of pistols have you?"

"Got a couple Peacemakers. And here's a .32 for women folks, and gals in the honky tonks figure it's a handy little gun for the bureau drawer. And a snub-nosed .38, mighty nice for a gambling man that don't want a belt gun."

Howell critically studied each weapon but did not take hold of any. "That .45 caliber is powerful, is it not?"

"Hard hitting, for sure."

"Er—does it recoil—ah, kick violently?"

"Well, now, it is thissaway," old man Bronson answered. "I've seen growed up men vow and declare a Peacemaker dang nigh yanks the arm off'n you, kicking like a bay steer. And I have seen slim little fellows half your size and heft say there ain't no kick a-tall. Depends on who is behind the gun."

Howell tried the balance of several, but apparently could not make up his mind. But when Bronson turned to replace the guns,

he palmed a box of .45s, leaving a dollar wedged out of sight, among the other boxes. The surreptitious purchase was pocketed before the proprietor faced about. Howell thanked him, and left.

He went to the hardware store, where he asked the same questions over again, and included new ones. Several cowpunchers, lolling around, volunteered information and suggestions, ending with this advice, "Lighting a shuck ain't no disgrace when a fellow don't know any more about guns'n you do, pardner."

But Howell bought a Peacemaker. He left the gun in the velvet lined packing box. "Since I do not intend to make a practice of carrying arms," he explained gravely, "I shall not require a holster. This container is neat and convenient. Will you be kind enough to wrap it up?"

The storekeeper, though amazed by the request, was willing to humor a dude's final whim. Then, watching Howell stalk for the door, the man said to his clerk, "Plumb loco, or the coolest son I ever seen—gosh, I got to tell Zeke Dawson about *that*, be right back—"

But Howell had retraced his steps to ask, "May I have some cartridges? I forgot entirely—yes, the entire box, please."

And when he left for the second time, the storekeeper had a better yarn than ever for his neighbor. However, before he left, he said to his clerk, "If the dude comes back and says, how do you load a gun, don't tell the crazy galoot, you load it for him."

Howell went to the studio to wait. Significantly, the place was empty. For that, he was grateful. Now that the time drew near, the people of Benson's Crossing knew that the best way in which they could show him friendliness was to let him alone, and not get him rattled with advice which he could not possibly absorb, or get him keyed up with reassurances in which they themselves could not possibly believe.

At last the stage rolled in. The driver shouted, and the hostler answered. An express clerk took a money shipment from the boot. For once, Benson's Crossing was not flocking to inspect newcomers. The town was too busy waiting for a departure, too busy hoping that the dude might develop a last minute flash of judgment.

When the stage pulled out, men began

shifting to spots from which they could watch, yet be secure against a tenderfoot's erratic fire, just in case he did get a gun smoking. Their voices were held down, so that Howell could not get any words. He did not resent their waiting, as for the beginning of a baseball game, for the encounter in which they believed him to have not a Chinaman's chance. Most of them wished him well: but when a man takes his course, what happens to him is that man's business.

Back east, there'd be an awful hooraw of people meddling, trying to stop what was about to happen. There would be police whistles, and the clanging gong of the patrol wagon, and policemen with drawn clubs, closing in to settle the disorder before it began.

He looked out the window, between and beyond the false-front buildings, and for the first time, he truly saw the country. The sight of it brought a catch to his throat, and a brief blurring of his eyes. He had been right in wanting to know more about this country, and to record it before it changed its nature. This was still a land where a man commanded enough respect to be entitled to go to hell in a handbasket any day he chose, provided he furnished the basket.

These men, this town, paid him the high

honor, the one honor neither his kinfolk nor his friends, nor any other town before, had ever paid him: it was not afraid for him, it was not babying him. It offered good will, it had advised him with kindly brusqueness, and now it was recognizing his right to play his own stack.

This was more than a place or a region. It was a way of living.

Then Ben Larter came up the street.

"You, there, Howell!" he called. "Come out a-shooting, or I am coming in a-shooting."

"Before we start shooting, let us talk this over."

"You got a gun?"

"I have. But it is still wrapped up in a box. I'll show you. I just bought it. Will you talk before we shoot?"

"Keep it wrapped, and you can talk a spell. Then it makes no difference if you run or shoot, I'm a-pouring it to you. Come out!"

"Hands up?"

"Don't need to. Not as long as the gun is wrapped."

WHEN Howell came out with his parcel in both hands, there was a fresh shifting of spectators. He sat down in the doorway and said, "I do not believe in



killing except in self defense. As a way of settling personal difficulties, it accomplishes nothing. You beat me witless, and I did as much for you. I flogged you, and the score can be evened by my taking a flogging of the same kind from you. I'll wait while you get a quirt."

Larter answered, "You are the damndest man! You ain't a coward, you are a pure strain fool. Get that gun unwrapped. I ain't drawing till you got a fair chance."

"I have a box of cartridges here in my pocket."

"Get 'em out."

Howell dug the box of .45s from his coat, and with unshaking hand, removed the paper which sealed the cover. He took off the cover without tearing or warping the cardboard.

"I do not know much about guns," he began, levelly. "How—"

"Unwrap that gun, I'll load 'er for you."

Howell obeyed. There was silence now, a silence such as he had never before known. He could hear the fine patter of windblown sand on the roofs. It was as though all the other men had begun to guess, to foresee, what Larter did not suspect.

The paper about the cardboard container in which the pistol was packed crackled loudly. Howell fumbled. Larter exclaimed, impatiently, "You're safe till she's loaded. Here, give me that—"

He thrust out his big hand for the weapon. But Howell presented the gun muzzle first, ramming it against Larter's red shirt. "She's loaded," he said, as the hammer clicked. "Raise your hands or I'll shoot."

His voice convinced Larter, and so did the immobile face and the unblinking eyes. Larter looked as though he had been hit on the head with an ox-yoke. Dazed, he muttered, "You fancy son!" His hands rose, slowly, but as high as he could reach. "I mighta knowed it."

"You might have. Get up, and follow me slowly into the studio. Keep those hands high, and move very slowly. Very slowly."

"What for?"

"First I am taking your picture," Howell explained, as he backed through the doorway. "Then I am taking your pistol. And then I am going to the reservation to photograph Running Wolf. He knows your gun

and belt, and my having them will convince him."

Those who had been watching came from cover. They were even more stunned than Larter.

Howell went on, when he had sidestepped with his subject toward the bench in front of the camera, "Take off that gun belt and sit down."

He backed off a yard. Tenderfoot or not, Larter risked no funny moves. Howell could not miss, and even if he did, the muzzle blast of a .45 at such close range would knock a man stem winding. Larter's holstered Colt thumped to the goor, and he sat down.

Howell laid his own pistol on the ledge of the camera stand.

"Look over that way a little," he commanded.

Intent on his man, Howell had jarred the stand, so that it moved on its castors. This was a mishap on which he had not counted. He pulled the plate holder out, plucked the black focusing cloth by the edge, and lifted it. The instrument was out of line, rather than out of focus. All he needed was a glance at the ground glass.

"I can see you on the glass," he warned, and poked his head under the cloth. "Hold that pose!"

The heavy jaw, the drooping mustaches, the shoulder length hair, the big nose and wrathful eyes and bear-trap mouth loomed up on the plate. This was a breath from old times. Here was the old West, all alive, furious, ready to burst with wrath; this was an old bull, set to go on the prod, but restrained by a force which was beyond his understanding.

With his left hand, Howell fingered the focusing pinion, just to make sure of the uttermost sharpness. And this would be victory; once an idea was beaten into Larter's head, there could be peace in town.

Howell knew faces. He was sensitive to changes of expression, so that, of a sudden, he knew that he had lost command. And he was right. Larter ducked to snatch the holster at his feet, left hand grabbing leather, right going for the walnut butt. This happened as Howell, with the image of death still before his eyes, whipped aside the cloth while his right flashed for the cocked weapon on the ledge of the stand.

A blast shook the studio. Smoke billowed, blotting out the face of the buffalo hunter. At the same time, Howell felt a concussion near him, a jerk of wrist and forearm. He didn't know what to make of it during that space in which he tried to get the connection between the roar of Larter's Colt, the jolt in his own hand, and the smoke in his own eyes.

Larter twisted on his knees and toppled sidewise. His fuming weapon skated across the floor. It came to a stop against the baseboard. He grunted, gasped, slumped in a heap. He clawed the floor, and scuffed it with his boots.

Unhit, Howell stood there, bit by bit beginning to realize that he had driven a shot home in time; that his hand had obeyed when his eye and instinct had warned him.

Men came pounding in from the street.

Those in the lead checked themselves in amazement. Those in the rear rammed up, forcing them forward and into the studio.

"He got Ben!"

Howell's stomach felt as though it had been kicked, dead center. His knees wobbled. When he staggered back a pace or two, he was glad that a chair was handy to receive him. An old timer said, "You ain't hurt, bub, though damn if I can figure why not—y'allus feel rocky, fust time you're in a shoot out."

"Is—he—dead—he drew first—"

NO ONE answered. All now crowded about Larter, who was groaning. "Get Doc Wilby," someone said, and another, "This'll make a Christian outa Ben, if he pulls through."

Towering above the crowd was Carl Gilman. He had a sawed-off shotgun. He wore smoked glasses instead of eye bandages. "Thank God!" he said. "You're all right—I didn't know about this—I was in my room till the last minute—" And then the men who picked Larter up to carry him to the doctor's office swept Gilman back with them.

Blinking and let down, Howell sat, feet poked far out. He still gripped the Colt, and muttered, "He shot first, I had to."

He was wondering why Gilman had not returned, now that the crowd no longer

blocked him, when he heard a light footstep, and sensed a shadowing of the doorway. He looked up. Running Wolf stood there, regarding him with eyes in which for the first time in years there was a human and friendly light when they were fixed on a white man.

"Shoot heap good. Heap big medicine."

Howell, not knowing what to say, simply got to his feet. The beef and clothing problem was solved. The Indian must have witnessed everything. Howell groped, trying to rearrange his sales talk to fit changed circumstances.

Running Wolf gave him no chance. "Me want picture."

Howell pointed to the bench. The Indian sat down. The light was still good. It slanted, bringing out the fierce lines, the angles, the long buried pride which had come back out of hiding.

The shutter opened and it closed. Howell exposed a second plate and a third. Without being told that the sitting was over, Running Wolf got up. "Where picture?" he asked. "Want picture now."

"Picture tomorrow. Me bring picture."

The Indian grunted, and turned toward the door, doubtless to go back to tell his people that "inspected and condemned" had been shot into the past.

And then Gilman pounced in, hand extended. "I saw him coming, I didn't dare poke my nose in, I was afraid of spoiling your show. Running Wolf, I mean. You'll do to take along, Dave! Congratulations, I mean, on your gun play."

"But your eyes?"

"Oh, I'll have to baby them for awhile. See here, suppose I buy your view camera, and we can set out, you doing all the work until I am fit for duty. And the equipment I've ordered can follow us until it overtakes us."

"Aren't you a bit hasty?" Howell countered. "After all, you've not seen the picture yet. It may not be up to your standard."

Gilman churkled. "Any picture of Running Wolf is a masterpiece! Or do you think I'd mark it 'I.C.' if it weren't just right? But let's develop it, right now!"

So Howell led his new boss into the dark-room, and set to work on the pictures of Running Wolf.

All His Life Chun Had Heard Whispered Tales of the Power of the Dragon Society—Ruthless Keepers of the Ancient Law



By **WALTER C. BROWN**

IT WAS built of stone, steel, and glittering glass, rising high into the sky, and crowned with twin penthouses. Its name was the Parkleigh Arms, but slant-eyed Chun Tai called it the Tower of Heaven.

Chun Tai was houseboy for Major Kemp-

ton and his wife, who occupied the Parkleigh's Penthouse "A". The Kemptons were very fond of their neat little Oriental servant, so polite and smiling, so soft-voiced and silent-footed.

"Smartest houseboy in the whole U.S.A.!" was Major Kempton's boast. "Worth a

dozen white servants, any day in the week."

"Chun is so clever about everything," Mrs. Kempton would add, "and absolutely devoted to us. Why, one time the Everetts tried to bribe Chun away from us—offered to double his wages. But Chun told them he was too happy here with us. Now there's genuine loyalty!"

And Chun Tai, in return, despised the Kemptons as a pair of gullible fools, and tagged them with derisive names. "Jelly Belly" was Chun's secret name for the paunchy, balding Major—"Old Horse Eye" for the Major's wife, who was rather long of face and bulging of eye.

But Chun's mocking contempt for his Rice Face employers did not prevent him from serving them with matchless efficiency and tireless patience, because Chun Tai, the peerless houseboy, was a fugitive from the law, a cold-blooded murderer for money—and the Tower of Heaven offered a perfect hideout for himself and his loot.

Not that Chun Tai had any fear of the Rice Face police. The Blue Coat Men had long since abandoned their search for the murderer of old Kang Lou. Aye, but there was the dreaded Dragon Society, of which Kang Lou had been an honored member. The Dragons were long of memory and long of arm. They would not forget Kang Lou's murder, nor the theft of the China Relief Fund cash, of which Kang had been custodian.

Chun Tai always shivered a little whenever he thought of the Dragon Society. But then he would consider the Tower of Heaven, and smile and shrug, thinking of the three thousand miles of crooked, zig-zag flight he had put between himself and the scene of the crime.

Tsai! How could they track him down, when they did not even have his true name written in their Book of Vengeance? "Wing Lee" he had called himself, at the time of the murder. No, by Tao, he had nothing to fear—absolutely nothing!

Thus Chun Tai assured himself, lying awake on his very comfortable bed in his very pleasant room atop the Tower of Heaven, with the morning sun a great golden gong. Stretching lazily, like a contented cat, Chun Tai grinned at the carved-wood figure of Kwan Yin on his dresser.

The head of the goddess could be pulled out like a cork, and the hollow inside was crammed with wadded rolls of stolen money.

Aye, it was not a great fortune, by Rice Face measure, but in China it would be accounted a sum of Number One wealth, for there the Rice Face dollar was more precious than *fei-tsui* jade.

And that was Chun Tai's silken dream—to escape to China with his stolen treasure. *Hai!* He would buy a wine-shop—or a Yangtze gambling boat. He would buy a dark-eyed daughter of Han as bride, and live in all the luxury of a red-button mandarin.

Aye, it was only a matter of time and patience. The great war had closed the far seas to all but fighting ships, but now there was peace again. A little more waiting and he would be able to purchase passage on a China-bound boat.

Then he would show the Kemptons a forged China letter, stating that his honorable father lay on his death-bed. He would humbly beg a leave of absence, promising a swift return, and they would swallow the double lie without the least suspicion. Aye, no doubt the stupid, trustful fools would even go with him to the Rice Face officials, so that his travel-papers might be made up speedily.

SO CHUN TAI wore a broad grin as he dressed and restored his room to perfect order. Then he went into the spotless kitchen and had a leisurely breakfast. The Kemptons had been out to a very late party the night before—they would not be up and stirring for hours.

After performing his usual household tasks, Chun Tai went to have a quiet look into the Major's room. Jelly Belly lay flat on his back, snoring. Last night the Major had celebrated his retirement from military service. Chun had never seen him without his uniform before, and Jelly Belly had looked paunchier than ever in white tie and tails.

Chun Tai found the dress suit flung carelessly over a chair, and gathered it up for pressing, departing noiselessly. Carrying the crumpled suit over his arm, Chun stopped at his own room to get a cigarette from his

bedside table, then went on into the kitchen.

When the pressing was finished, Chun put the suit on a hanger and stepped back, admiring his expert handiwork. And Chun Tai the house-boy thought of "Wing Lee" the murderer, and grinned crookedly. *Hai!* Let any one try to untangle the long and twisting trail that separated the two! Aye, that was a task beyond even the fabulous powers of the mighty Dragon Society!

Yet deep within him Chun Tai carried a hard core of fear and uncertainty. All his life Chun had heard whispered tales of the secret power of the Dragons, ruthless keepers of the Ancient Law. Aye, the Rice Face Law could be broken, and the Dragons shrugged. But if the sacred Law of Han was broken, then the guilty one was punished with death—swift death whose only warning was a white flower called *obakra*.

Obakra! A word of fear—of terror. The Rice Face police did not know the word—and the Sons of Han knew little about the flower itself, except that it was white in color, a dead-white. Only those who were marked for death ever saw one.

Aye, no doubt the Dragon Council had met swiftly after Kang Lou's killing, and voted death for his murder—the *obakra* death.

Chun Tai drew a deep, hissing breath. *Tsai!* He was a Number One fool, to shiver and shake at mere mention of a name. Not once in daylight hours had he ever set foot outside the Tower of Heaven, fearing a chance encounter in the streets with some sharp-eyed Son of Han who might have known him as "Wing Lee." He used the Rice Face telephone for all necessary purchases, and on the rare occasions when he went for a walk, he left the Tower only under cover of darkness, and by a rear door into a side street.

Aye, call it an excess of caution, but it was well said that a small stone can break a large vase. No, by Tao, he had left nothing to chance. He was safe here in his Tower of Heaven—as safe and secure as on an island of the moon.

Wah! They cannot have pigeon pie without first catching their pigeon!" Chun Tai reminded himself as he returned to his room. He would stretch out on his bed, feast

his eyes on the treasure-laden Kwan Yin, and give himself up to dreams of the beckoning future.

But on the threshold Chun Tai stopped dead in his tracks, staring frozen-eyed and speechless at his bed. For there, on the smooth cover, lay a flower—a short-stemmed, dead-white flower!

"Obakra!" The dread word screamed in Chun Tai's ears, but no sound came from his lips as he glanced wildly around, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead.

Chun Tai's thoughts whirled in panic, logic making a desperate attempt to wrestle with mounting fear. This thing was impossible—impossible! It could not be the *obakra!* No! True, it was a strange white flower, never seen before, but he must be mistaken—it could not be the dreaded *obakra!*

Aye, but what was it then? How had it come there to his room, to his very bed? How? *How?* It had not been there a little while ago, when he had gone through with Jelly Belly's suit on his arm—

Ai-ye, but there it lay, an undeniable fact! Chun Tai stood trembling, not knowing where to turn, what to think. And into his memory came flooding all those whispered tales of the merciless power of the Dragon Society. Terror was like a cold steel blade in his belly—like a tightening noose about his throat—

And at that moment the front door buzzer sounded, sharp and imperious. Chun Tai stood rooted, paralyzed by haunted fears, his scalp crawling with icy prickles. Who could it be? Was it a summons for Chun Tai the house-boy—or for "Wing Lee" the murderer?

The buzzer rasped again. *Ai-ye,* he must answer it, or Old Horse Eye would appear, angry at being roused from sleep.

Forcing himself into a mask of calmness, Chun Tai opened the outer door. But then the mask cracked and crumbled, leaving nothing but naked fear. For it was a Chinaman who stood confronting him—a tall, lean Son of Han clad in sombre black.

"You are called Chun Tai?" the slant-eyed stranger demanded briskly. "My name is Fong Yee, and I am come here to—"

But Chun Tai cut off the words of doom by hurling the door shut and clawing down

the spring lock. Turning, he streaked down the hall to his own room. Stripping off his white jacket, he fumbled into his street-coat, flung the treasureladen Kwan Yin into a battered straw suitcase, and raced on toward the penthouse terrace.

Chun Tai realized he had but one chance of saving himself from the Dragon vengeance—flight! Instant flight! If he could get across to the terrace of the twin penthouse "B", untenanted at the moment, he could escape by the elevator on the other side of the building.

Chun Tai stared at the fifty feet of vertical emptiness that separated the two terraces. The only way across was a brownstone ledge about a foot wide that ran along the sheer wall.

Crawling over the stone railing, Chun Tai started gingerly along the ledge, his face to the wall, his outspread arms pressed tightly against the smooth stones, the suitcase dangling from his right hand.

But before he was halfway across, the awkwardly held suitcase began to feel as though it were loaded with paving stones. Chun Tai's wrist and fingers ached from holding it level, but he could not lower his burdened arm without risking his balance.

Chun Tai cursed through gritted teeth as a wrenching cramp seized the muscles of his arm. He felt the precious case slipping from his grasp—falling—and made a frantic lunge to recover it. Then he was falling, too, clutching at empty air, and his sharp cry became a long, shrill scream.

IT WAS Police Sergeant Simmons who noticed the fateful white flower, still lying on Chun Tai's bed. The Sergeant, notebook in hand, was making up a preliminary report on Chun Tai's strange death.

"What's this?" Simmons asked. "Looks like a gardenia."

Mrs. Kempton and the Major glanced at the white flower. "It is a gardenia," the Major replied. "A bit wilted. Must be the one I wore last night. Mrs. Kempton and I were at a party—"

"Yes, that must be it," Mrs. Kempton confirmed. "It must have dropped out of your lapel while Chun was getting the suit ready for pressing this morning."

"Well, no clue in that!" Simmons said, tossing the flower aside.

The Sergeant studied his notebook. "Funny kind of case, Mrs. Kempton. Here's this other Chink, Fong Yee—standing outside in the hall. He claims he never saw Chun Tai before, and knows nothing about all this except that Chun slammed the door in his face. Well, Fong's story sounds pretty fishy, but then you come along and vouch for him—"

"But I'm sure he's telling the truth!" Mrs. Kempton declared. "Fong Yee has been with the Carters for years and years. And he called here today at my special invitation. You see, we had dinner at the Carters' recently, and Mrs. Carter was praising Fong as a model houseboy, and I was praising Chun Tai—and I thought how nice it would be if they got to know each other, and became friends. So I invited Fong to call here on his next day off, and meet Chun Tai—"


"But your Chun Tai didn't know about that?" Simmons asked.

"I forgot to mention it," Mrs. Kempton admitted. "But I really don't see how a simple little thing like that could lead to such a terrible tragedy. Poor Chun! I was only trying to be kind. I thought he must feel very lonely, working among white people all the time, never meeting any one of his own race."

The Sergeant's smile had a touch of grimness. "Maybe Chun Tai had very good reasons for not wanting to meet anybody of his own race. All that money hidden inside the statue in his suitcase—maybe he came by it honestly, and maybe not. But we'll soon find out—we'll check on it with every Chinatown in the country. And I think we'll find the answer to all this in two words—guilty conscience! That's one of those things that you'll always find works out the same in all languages!"

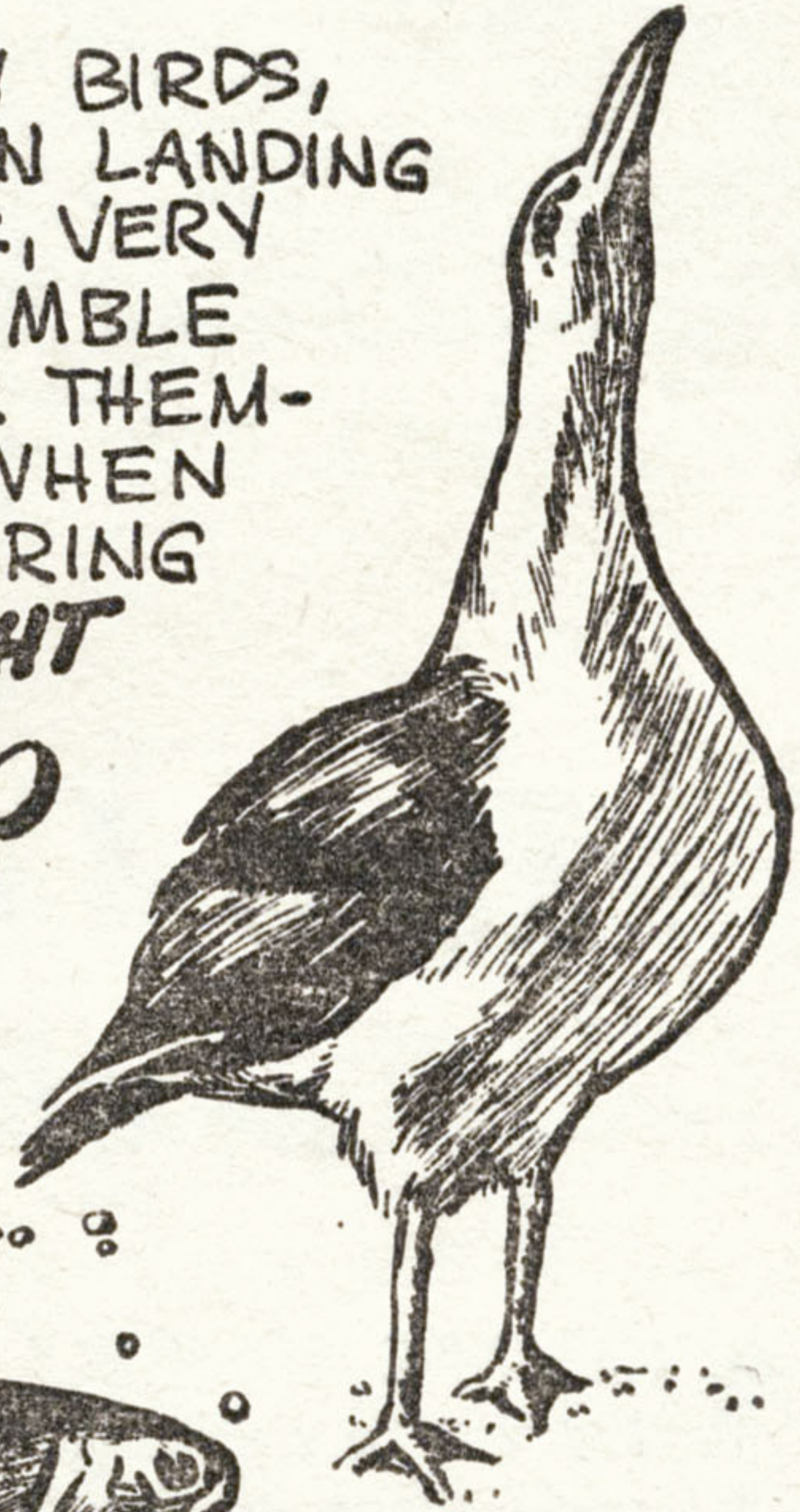
Curiosities ^{By} Weill

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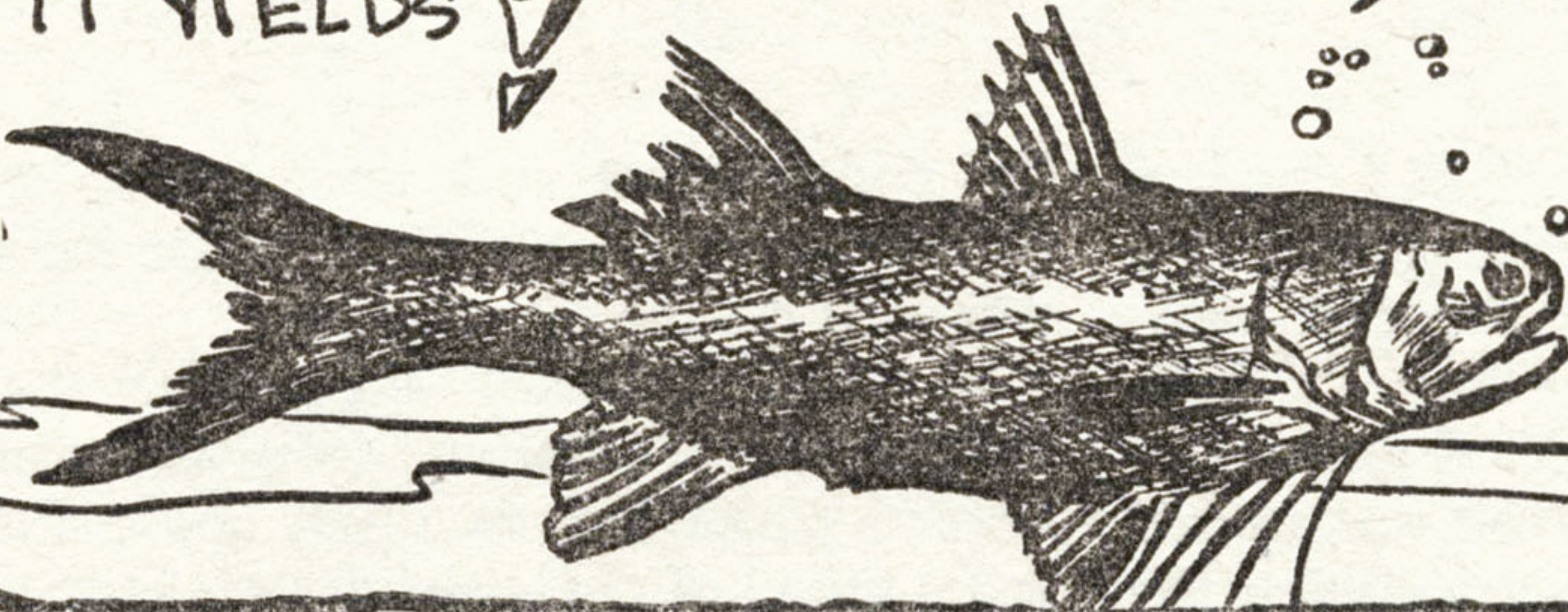


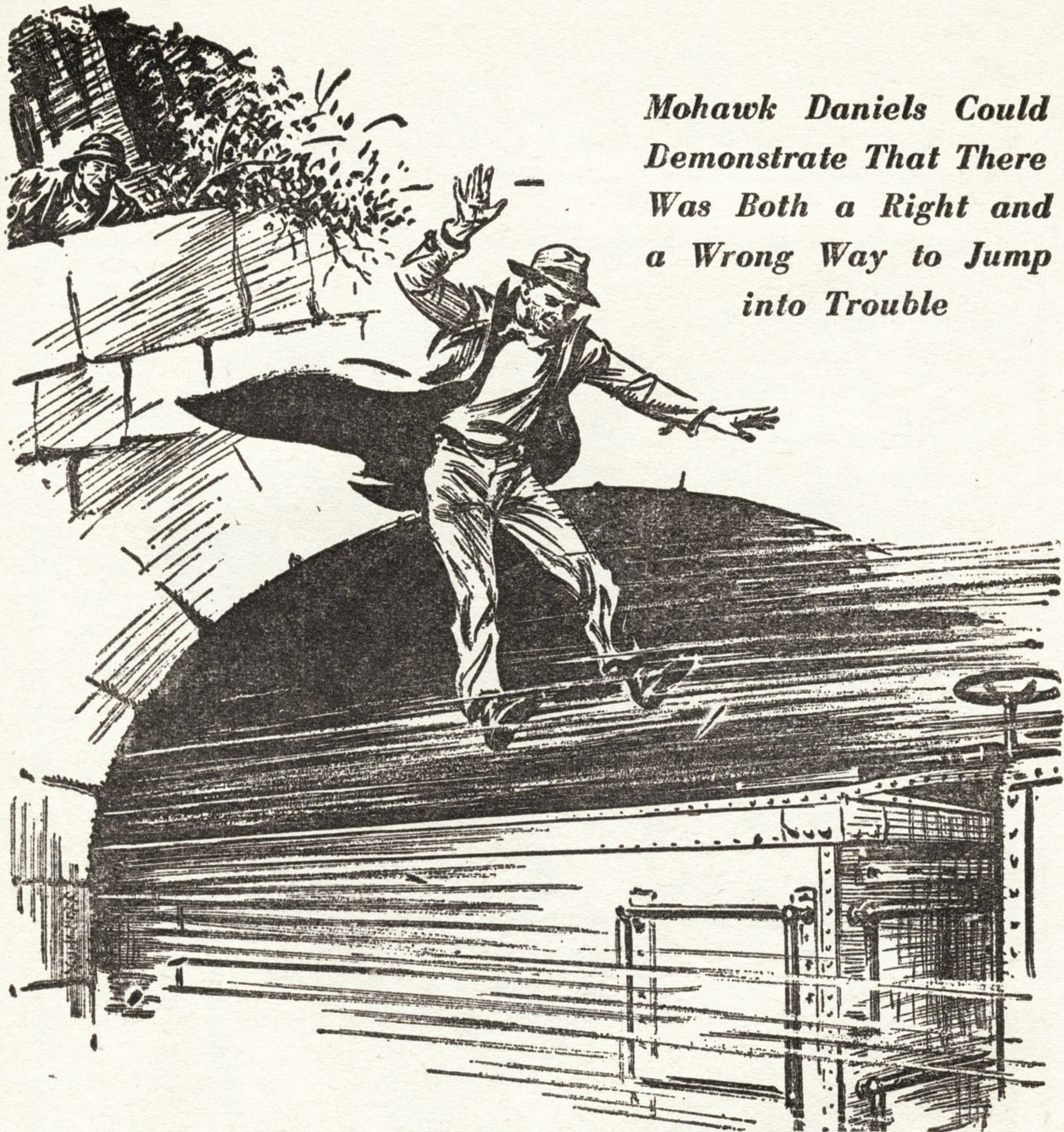
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Mohawk Daniels Could Demonstrate That There Was Both a Right and a Wrong Way to Jump into Trouble

RED OVER YELLOW

By WILLIAM L. ROHDE

MOHAWK DANIELS braked his V-8 to a sliding stop at a wide place in the dirt road, slipped the key from the lock, and hit the ground running.

"C'mon, Harold," he shouted, and hurled his big body across the hollow between the country road and the Atlantic and Northern Railroad's right of way. He had mounted

the embankment and was trotting toward the oncoming freight train before his young side-kick caught up with him.

A two-unit Diesel was pulling the long freight out of Anson yards, and the red-headed youth had to shout above the majestic growl of the motors.

"What's up, Mo. Where we going?"

"Couple of 'bos just boarded her, Harold.

About twenty cars back. Take the other side of the track and we'll pick 'em up for questioning."

"I didn't see anybody get on."

"Must be the Indian in me. I saw them. Hurry up—get across the track before the motors pass."

The younger man obeyed, and a moment later the bright blue Diesel units roared between them. Daniels waved his left hand in a horizontal line, pointing back along the train with his right. The fireman grinned at him, howled a ribald remark that was nearly lost in the thunder of 3,000 mechanical horses, then disappeared to tell the engineer that the railroad detective wanted to look over the train.

Loaded hoppers and gondolas rumbled past Daniels, swaying like marching elephants as they took the ladder track switch and eased toward the A. & N. main line. Daniels knew the layout of Anson yards perfectly; knew that Tommy Reynolds in the cab of westbound BC-3 would take his heavy train out slowly enough for Daniels to catch the caboose if he wanted to.

Empties started to go by, and the railroad detective trotted a few steps beside each one, checking for loose or partly open doors. The fourth car was it—a forty-foot Northern Pacific boxcar with its sliding panels wide ajar. He put his hands on the sill, swung up, and hauled himself into the car. And walked into the last round of a first-class battle!

Harold Pitts, red-headed son of the Pemi-geset Division's superintendent, had reached the car before Daniels. As Mo gained his feet, balancing wide-legged against the roll of the deck, the younger man swung a vicious right to the head of a huge figure in blue denims. The man went down. Harold grabbed him as he tried to rise, wrestled him to the boxcar door, and hurled him out onto the right of way. Another, smaller man in torn khaki pants and gray shirt, jumped after his partner before Harold could reach him.

"Come on," Daniels growled, and followed the men.

"Hold it you," Harold was ahead of Daniels again. "Stand still or I'll paste you some more."

The big man had a wide, slightly stupid

face above the blue overall jacket. He stood uncertainly, but looked willing to fight if he had to. The younger hobo, in the gray shirt, meant business. He muttered to himself as he scrambled up, a rusty track spike in his hand.

Harold laughed, stepped forward, and kicked the weapon out of his grasp before he could strike. He drew back his fist, ready to follow the kick with a right that would finish the man.

Daniels grabbed his arm. "For Pete's sake, Tarzan," he said. "Take it easy."

"Aw, hell," Harold muttered.

Daniels gestured the men away from the rumbling cars. "C'mon over here, boys. I want to talk to you."

He looked up the track, found he could still see the Diesel, and waved an arm over his head. A short beep-beep from the Diesel's horn acknowledged the highball.

The big man looked resentfully at Harold and found his tongue. "You haddin' oughta hit me like that."

"Naw," his partner chimed in. "We wasn't doin' nothin'."

"All right, boys," Daniels spoke soothingly. "Got any papers on you? Something for identification?"

"No." They spoke together.

"That's too bad," Mo said regretfully. "If you could identify yourselves, I might let you go."

The man in the gray shirt stared, mouth ajar. "You mean that?"

"Yea. We're looking for somebody who's been robbing freight from cars. You boys look like you're just traveling."

The small man spoke to his partner. "Let's show him."

"Sure."

They dug in their pockets. The big man had a worn seaman's wallet with several papers to show he was Lionel S. Gellman, of San Diego. The younger man had an army ID pass. He was from Chicago.

"O.K." Daniels returned their papers. "Where you going?"

"West coast." The young man became the spokesman for the pair. "We tried to get jobs in Boston. Shipping. Nothing doing. They say the Pacific ships are moving better."

Daniels nodded. "You can't go west

from here. Hit the road and go around. If I catch you on railroad property again I'll have to run you in."

The big man nodded dumbly and turned to go. His partner started, then turned back with an embarrassed air. "Could you spare —" He swallowed. "Coupla dimes?"

Daniels sighed and reached in his pocket, found a fifty cent piece. The man took it, said thanks with his head hanging, and followed the big man away toward the road.

"For the love of mike!" Harold exclaimed.

Daniels said nothing, waited until the caboose of BC-3 rumbled away, and then walked back to the V-8.

THEY were whirling along the dirt road, following the right of way toward Hessman tunnel, before Harold spoke again. "For the love of mike," he repeated. "Maybe those are the guys we're after."

"No," Daniels said quietly.

"Well—they were trespassing."

"I don't beat a guy up just because he's on railroad property," Daniels answered. "Maybe you've noticed that during the past week."

Harold was silent until they started up the long rise toward the notch in the mountains where the road ended at the railroad tunnel. Then he tried again.

"Seems a funny way to be a railroad dick."

Daniels braked the car to a stop, on a section of road almost overhung by the thick green foliage of elms and maples.

"Look, Harold," he said slowly. "You're a super's son. Your old man don't run my division, but I guess he could have me fired just the same. You're working with me. You take my orders. You got something eating you—we'll get out of the car right here and see who's gonna tell who."

The red head had his door half-open before he paused. "I—I dunno. I'll fight you—." He stopped talking without making sense.

Daniels stared at him. "What's the matter with you? You've got guts. But you wade into everything like a damn young fool. You beat the daylights out of that drunk in Wachets station. You think you're tough?"

"No—I want to learn the business."

Harold was about ten pounds short of Daniels' two hundred. He had the fair skin that goes with red hair, compared to Daniels' almost swarthy complexion and jet-black mane. But he had shoulders and a jaw, and from what Daniels had seen he could handle himself.

"You were a college boxer, weren't you?" Daniels asked.

Harold looked down at his knees. "Yes."

"So you're maybe good. Why show off?"

"I—don't mean to."

Daniels had been on the point of hauling Harold out of the car and showing him what it feels like to be really hit. It was a hard fact that it would take three like Harold, with more experience than he had, to even make Daniels work up a sweat. Daniels wasn't over-confident—he just knew his business. He shrugged—to do it now would be like slugging a little boy who fell over your feet and stood blushing. He snorted, started the motor, and proceeded to drive on.

EAST PORTAL TOWER was a picture of rural contentment when they parked the car near a section men's shanty and walked the few yards along the track to reach it. The warm rays of the sun poured into the deep V of the mountains, and the distant heights with their thick blankets of forest made you want to take the dogs and a bird gun and forget business. The operator was sitting on the landing at the top of the outside stairs.

"Hi, Mo!" He roared cheerfully. "What I need is company. C'mon up."

"Hello, Larry," Mo answered. "This is Harold Pitts."

Larry shook hands and then looked suspiciously at Harold. "You any relation to Superintendent Pitts? You've got his red hair."

Harold stood first on one foot, then on the other. "His son."

The operator got up out of his comfortable chair, eased into the tower, and sat down at the telegraph desk.

Daniels grinned inwardly. "Ring Boston for me, Larry," he requested. "I want to talk to the Chief."

A moment later the Hibernian voice of

Chief Liffy was rattling in Daniels' ear from the headset.

"Hello, Chief," Daniels answered. "I'm at East Portal."

"O.K. See what you can find. A bunch of freight was missing from BC-5 this morning when she reached Chicago. Seals broken."

"From how many cars?"

"One."

"Good stuff?"

"Yea. They picked the LCL from Portland. Damn near cleaned it out."

"Champoux turn up anything around the east end?"

"Not a smell. The job is done up there in the mountains, somewhere."

"O.K., I'll call in tomorrow."

"Wait a minute, Mo. I'm going to put you over to Superintendent Pitts. He wants to talk to you."

Daniels lit a cigaret while he waited for the connection. How nice, he thought. I'm out on a tough missing freight case, they send me an official's son to learn the ropes, and now papa wants to tell me to take good care of baby.

"Hello, Daniels?" The hard rasp of George Pitts voice slapped him in the head. He reached up and held the earphone an inch from his head.

"Hello," Daniels replied.

"You got that boy of mine up there?"

"Yeah."

"How's he doing?"

"All right."

"Hah." The expression should have smashed every repeater in the circuit. George Pitts was a railroader from the days when you shouted from one end of a thirty car train to the other, applied the brakes with your back, and fought every engineer who disputed your command of a train. He sounded like it.

"Try and put some sense and some guts into that milk and water sop. Use your own judgment."

"All right." Daniels waited.

"You hear me?" The question fairly sizzled.

"Yes—sir." Daniels figured that a little oil might help. Pitts never heard it. He had hung up.

Daniels put the earpiece on the 'phone

hook and turned. Harold was standing right behind him, his face crimson!

"I—heard it," he said. "Didn't mean to. Wanted to watch you—"

"That's all right; your Dad is quite a boy."

"You know why he said that?"

LARRY had thudded down the tower stairs after a pitcher of water, and the boy seemed eager to talk before the operator returned.

"No." Daniels squirmed in his chair uncomfortably.

"He hasn't spoken to me for six years. I saw a man crushed in Green River engine house one day. I cried and threw up. All the railroaders were there. Dad was mad."

"That's—all right," Daniels said.

"He said I was red over yellow," the boy hurried on. "He took me home to mother and after that never—"

Larry came up the stairs and the carrot-topped youth stopped talking. Daniels sighed. Problems are much more complex when you're twenty-four. He tried to think back that far—Ten years. He was in the navy then. What would he have done? Why, the same thing. Start trying to prove something until you worked too hard at it, reversed the perspective and became truculent. After that you weren't yellow. Daniels felt less respect for Superintendent Pitts.

The sounders on the shelf chattered like crickets. Daniels heard the consist of BC-3 rattle over the wires, to tell Chicago what was on the way. Larry handed him a cup of cold spring water. It tasted very good.

"Larry," he said, and stood up, "Dominic was supposed to take us through the mountain on a section car. Is he around?"

"He's got permission to come in after BC-3 clears Summit. Be along in twenty minutes or so."

"O.K. Keep an eye on my car, will you?"

"You bet, Mo."

An hour later, seated on the swaying wooden bench of a motorcar, they had passed through Hessman tunnel and reached the operator's cabin at Summit. It was an isolated point in the enveloping, roadless mountains, where helper engines were cut off and sent back, and trains reported by or given orders. They helped Dominic lift the

car off the track, and went into the station.

"Hello." The operator was a wiry youth in white pants and sleeveless shirt. "It's good to see some new faces."

Daniels introduced himself and Harold, substituting "signal inspectors", for "railroad police".

The operator grinned. "I hope they put some new automatic blocks in here. This manual stuff gets me down."

"I hope they do," Daniels told him. "We're going to check the layout for a few days."

They spent the balance of the day rambling along the line, using the motorcar for short runs, and occasionally exploring on foot. They worked west to Blareville, the first station and State road, and checked over PT-1 when she rolled west. They found nothing, and at dusk headed east for the tower at Portal.

Passing Summit again Daniels noticed a horse tethered to the little cabin.

"What's the op do?" he asked Dominic. "Come in on horseback?"

"Yah," the cheerful section foreman told them. "Dat's his sister, bringing supper. She bring him a horse at night. Makes it nice. All the other ops have to ride the trains. Sometimes wait hours."

"Nice deal," Daniels said.

The operator and a good-looking brunette waved to them as they rattled by. Harold whistled.

"A very nice deal," he said. "Maybe I'll become an operator. Look at those lines."

"Don't interest me," Daniels kidded him. "I'm an old man."

"Hah," Dominic snorted. "You good twenty years yet."

THEY spent the night at the hotel in Anson, and in the morning Daniels was out of bed long before Harold. He had coffee and rolls in the diner down the street, and made a few quiet inquiries. When he returned, he woke Harold and ate bacon and eggs with him in the hotel dining room.

At eight-thirty Daniels pointed the V-8's nose south. Harold registered surprise.

"Aren't we going back into the mountain?"

"Yea. But maybe a different way."

Daniels smoked his cigar and drove fast.

"That's good," Harold said cheerfully. "I want to talk to that brunette."

They drove through the tiny hill-town of Babylon, and turned west on a road used so little that green grass grew between the tire tracks. About two miles along it Daniels turned right into a lane that looked like an abandoned lumber road.

"Gee, how do you find your way?" Harold asked.

"I had directions," Daniels answered. "But most important—there are geodetic survey maps of this area in the dash locker. You want to learn to use 'em for everywhere near the railroad."

Harold started to pull out the thick bundle of maps. "Hold it," Daniels said. "I'll go over them with you in a few days. It'll be your next lesson, maybe."

He drew up before a ramshackle house, bare of paint and with a barn that leaned against the heavy poles propped on a side that dipped towards the ground.

"Gee," Harold quipped. "Daniel Boone's place."

"Might have been, at that."

They got out of the car and walked through the long grass covering what could have been the front lawn. Rounding a corner of the building, Daniels stopped and stared.

An acrobat's trampoline had been pulled out of the barn, and flying up out of its springy bed, in graceful, rhythmic turns and somersaults, was the brunette who had waved at them from Summit cabin!

She wore a two-piece bathing suit in a style originated on the French Riviera, and she had exactly the right padding to fill it. Her black hair fluffed her head in picturesque circles as she smoothly did a series of backward flips and then leaped high in the air for a forward one-and-a-half. Without pausing, she went into the back flips again, gaining speed for another forward spin.

"Wow," Harold breathed.

Daniels watched the little old man who scurried around the bed of the trampoline, calling words of praise to the girl and occasionally correcting her. He limped, and spoke with a thick but musical accent.

"That's it," he almost sang. "Beautiful Marte. Beautiful — straighter now — land."

straight—beautiful—elbows in—that's the girl—one and two—and finish."

The girl hit the springs on her stomach, did a single turn in the air as straight as a pencil line, caught the rim-bar of the trampoline when she came down, and somersaulted out of the device onto the ground. She landed with toes out, like a ballet dancer, and her head dipped in a bow to an invisible audience.

THE old man, with his back to Daniels, applauded. When the girl lifted her head—she looked right at them.

"Papa!" she gasped.

Daniels clapped politely to break the ice—and Harold spoiled it by pounding his big hands together and whistling.

"Great!" he roared. "Great!"

The old man whirled like a cat spattered with water.

"Allo!" He spat, rolling his r's. "Who are you?"

"We're railroad signalmen," Daniels replied. "We were told you might rent us some horses. Make our work easier."

The old man shook his head. "Just got two. Girl ride one. Boy the other."

Daniels noticed Harold staring at Marte. The girl had a half-smile on her pretty face, and seemed willing to be looked at. She picked up a cape from the ground and came toward them.

"Hello," she said shyly, and she said it mostly to Harold.

"Hello," the red head answered. "Gee, you do that wonderful. What do you call that thing?"

"A trampoline. It's just a springy net for acrobatics."

"I'd like to try it some day."

"Take off your shoes and go ahead."

"No horses," chimed in the old man.

Daniels thought that Harold would go up and down on the trampoline forever if the bathing suit stayed around.

"If you can't let us have horses," he said, "we'll have to go back."

"Just got two," the old man growled. "Two horses."

Daniels thought, all right, old boy, I can count. He said, "Can't blame you if you can't spare them. I thought you had several."

"They're our only transportation," Marte explained. "My brothers ride to work. Sometimes I bring the horses back, or take them meals. You can't keep horses out all the time, you know."

"Yes," said Daniels. "I know."

Marte had a smile that was worth watching. "If you're going to Babylon," she said, "I'd like to ride in with you."

"Sure," Harold answered dreamily before Daniels could speak. He was still looking at the girl.

"Why don't you take a horse?" Mo asked.

"Without a horse, I can wear a dress; and take my time, then walk back."

Daniels sighed, "By all means wear a dress. We'll wait for you."

The old man snorted and limped away.

Harold and Marte chattered comfortably all the way to Babylon. The red head nearly lined up a date before she left them. Daniels wondered how he'd set the time—by carrier pigeon?

"Gee," Harold exclaimed as they drove toward East Portal, "I forgot to ask her last name!"

"It's Gummish," Daniels told him. "Or better known as one of the Flying Gerald's."

"Professional acrobats?" Harold asked cheerfully.

"Yes, lover," Daniels said drily. "Real professionals. Or were before Papa Gummish broke his leg."

They drove back to the tunnel, contacted Dominic, and spent the balance of the day searching the right of way and watching trains. They accomplished nothing tangible, but Daniels left the motorcar at the West Portal of Hessman tunnel and spent some time climbing around the black hole in the side of the mountain. The single track bore was protected by automatic signals controlled from East Portal tower, a mile away through the mountain, four miles away over it. West Portal was a desolate scar in Nature's domain, alive only when a train roared past or a forest animal came exploring.

"Find anything?" Harold asked when Daniels climbed back on the car for the run through the mountain.

"Don't know," Daniels answered.

But that night Harold began to learn a new aspect of railroad police work. A

hard, dreary, monotonous side that he had never suspected.

Shortly after dinner Daniels told him to bring a coat and sweater from their room and meet him at the car. Daniels arrived with a bag of sandwiches and a thermos bottle, a blanket, and a merry faced man who looked like a retired city cop.

"Meet Art Champoux," Daniels introduced them. "You've heard me speak of him, Harold. He's been on the A. N. force longer than I have."

"Yep," Champoux laughed. "Which proves I have less sense."

The three men rode out along the little-traveled road toward East Portal, but about a mile from the tower Daniels turned into an almost overgrown lumber trail that petered out a mile to the north. He turned the car, locked it, and led the way west.

"Where are we going?" After trudging through the woods for an hour, Harold couldn't hold his curiosity.

"West Portal," Daniels answered. "Over the mountain. Think you can find your way in the dark, Art?"

"Just about. If I get lost, I'll cut back to the railroad and work along it."

More than two hours later, after climbing up and down the mountain over a trail that would have been rough going for a hunter in daylight, they reached the West Portal of Hessman tunnel. Daniels led them to a clump of bushes about thirty feet above the opening in the mountainside.

"Home sweet home." He threw down the blanket. "The radio said no rain. Hope that guy is right this time."

"Whew," Champoux puffed. "I was going back and come in in the morning. Changed my mind. Ill stay right here."

"That's a twenty-four hour pull," Daniels warned.

"It's a tougher pull over that mountain twice in the dark."

Harold stared into the black night. An early moon sent a shimmer along the twin bands of track below them. "Why didn't we just walk through the tunnel from East Portal?" he demanded.

"We don't want anyone to know we're here," Daniels explained patiently. "We'll look over every train that goes by here, until we find something."

Harold wondered what they expected to find, watching the tops of speeding locomotives and cars, but kept his doubts to himself. If they could stand it, he could.

The next four days were certainly no picnic. Daniels and Harold stood watch for twelve hours at night, and Champoux handled the day shift. The off-duty watchers used Daniels' car to commute to the hotel at Anson. Champoux at least could read, in the daytime, but for Daniels and Harold it was a long, boring session. Particularly since Mo decreed no smoking.

On the third day it started to rain. The local Army and Navy Store supplied them with raincoats and ponchos, but they only lessened the misery. On the fourth evening black skies were still spitting cold moisture when Daniels and Harold stumbled over the mountain, to find Champoux huddled in the bushes.

"H-hello." His teeth chattered. "What a hell of a way to make a living."

"We could quit now," Daniels said, "except that no freight has been stolen from trains since we've been here. Mean anything?"

"Sure," the other detective replied. "It means the thieves have gone to California to live on their ill-gotten gains. God bless 'em. Let's follow 'em."

Daniels laughed. "You may be right. But if they tapped another car on this run, we could figure we're in the wrong spot and try something else. As it is—we've got to stick it out."

"You're right." Champoux got up and stretched dolefully. "Didn't see anything. Except the brakeman on XN-3 took a drink out of a pint when he walked back flagging. Made me jealous."

"Glad we don't have to enforce Rule G."

"Yeah. See you in the morning. Pleasant evening."

He left for the long trek to the car, the hotel, and a night's sleep. The two watchers settled themselves on a section of log and draped their ponchos over their heads.

"Foul night," Harold whispered.

"Yes," Daniels answered. The empty blackness called for hushed, graveyard-at-midnight tones.

In about twenty minutes Number Five, a westbound sleeper, roared out of the

tunnel and passed under them, the wet, oily black tops of the cars looking like a giant snake slipping out of its hole. A thin, miserable rain fell steadily, and when Number Five had whipped her lights away across the mountains, they were left with the silence and steady drip-drip of water from the trees.

"Gee," Harold said. "I'd like to be in that dining car on Number Five. A highball—roast beef with baked potato the way they fix it—a smoke—"

"Better have a steak with a special order of Boston baked beans," Daniels advised. "Costs a little more, but it's the best thing on that diner."

"Sold."

"Make it two."

Encouraged by the friendly exchange, Harold risked a direct question. "D' you think we'll find anything up here, Mo? That is . . . I've been wondering what we're looking for?"

Daniels pulled the collar of his raincoat higher on the back of his neck. "You took a long time to ask that, Harold. Shows you're learning to be patient. I don't know just what we're waiting for, but this is the logical place to wait for it. I've got a hunch, and that's about all."

Harold contented himself with the thought that there was a compliment in Daniels' words, if not much information. He reached up and adjusted the poncho above his head, where it stretched across a low bush.

An hour later a pair of helper engines, coupled, drifted down the grade and disappeared into the tunnel towards Anson. They left a friendly aroma of sulphur and steamy smoke that was soon drowned by the rain.

Harold sighed and said, "Those engine crews'll be home in bed in an hour. Nice warm, soft beds."

"No. They'll stop in at Slick's for a nightcap."

"Four Roses and soda, maybe?"

"Close enough. Make it two."

Harold smacked his chilled lips as though he tasted the highball. "How about some real coffee?"

"Well—that we can have. Pour me a cup."

Daniels sipped the hot liquid from the top of the thermos and sorrowfully felt the cigars in his breast pocket. In about nine hours, while they slogged back over the mountain, he could smoke one. He needed the coffee. It would be no joke if he had guessed completely wrong about this set-up—had played a hunch that was too much of a gamble. Oh—not much would be said, but you didn't waste five or six days and three men's time with no results without having some eyebrows go up. The Super would check with Liffy, and the story would go all over the road. It wouldn't help at all toward a promotion.

MO SHIVERED with cold, and shook his big shoulders to encourage circulation.

"Say," Harold whispered. "Am I nuts? I thought I saw something move on top of the tunnel."

The red headed youth's voice rose on the last sentence. Daniels put a cautioning hand on his arm and stared into the darkness. He saw a black blob move on top of the stone framework that encased the west end of Hessman tunnel.

"Quiet," Mo breathed. "Sit tight."

A minute passed. The shape identified itself as *something* solid when it moved back and forth on the stone escarpment. Arms flapped, then, and the sound of rubber slapping rubber came clearly to their ears. It could be a man in a raincoat, swinging his arms against the chill air.

The ground under them vibrated, and Daniels identified the familiar roar of Diesel motors, throbbing deep in the mountain. He looked at the luminous hands of his watch. BC-5 was due. He imagined the figure, balanced on the wet, slick stones above the tunnel mouth, listening also to the approaching motors and tensing for what must follow.

"Mo," Harold tensed as the figure moved to the exact center of the tunnel structure and straightened, seemed to pose. "I get it, but I can't believe it. He's gonna jump onto the train!"

"That's what I think," Daniels answered softly.

"Let's get him."

Harold started to move. Mo grabbed his

arm like an MP halting a drunk. "Sit down," he said. "In this business, we wait until a crime has been committed. Or else you don't stay in the business."

The roar of the Diesels covered their words now, and Harold spoke louder. "But if he makes that train—he'll get away."

"And if we grab him now, we may get nothing. You can't charge a guy with prowling around a mountain at night."

BC-5's motors thundered out of the hole and her pale yellow headlight stabbed at the darkness ahead. Bright steel rails gleamed for an instant, then were erased by the rumbling black ribbon that was the train.

"Look," Harold said. "He's going to jump."

"Yea," Mo said, "and I'm going after him. You can go back through the tunnel and contact Champoux and Liffy. Use your flash. No more need for secrecy."

Harold hesitated. "Don't you think I'd be more use if I went with—with you?"

Daniels said, "Yes," and leaped up, racing the thirty feet to the top of the tunnel. The figure had dropped from sight!

Daniels stood on the edge and looked down. Below him, the slippery black tops of cars rumbled past at about fifteen miles an hour. They were fourteen or fifteen feet away, and he suddenly realized that they weren't all boxcars! If he dropped onto a tank, or flat or hopper—there might not be enough of him left to blot up!

He kept counting. Three—four—five—six. He crouched. Looked down. Cars out of the tunnel like sausages through a grinder. His stomach felt cold and empty. He balanced, watched, and the instant the end of a boxcar came out of the hole he dropped.

It was like landing on a greased roof in the middle of an earthquake with the building caught in an avalanche. Daniels sprawled on top of the car, felt himself whipped backward as the car tried to pick him up with its own motion, and then clawed with his hands, arms and legs. His stomach and crotch received a brutal beating, he began to skid sideways, and then caught a grip on the catwalk that nearly ripped his arms from their sockets. He was aboard the train!

Daniels worked his way forward, sometimes on all fours. His raincoat was ripped down the front, and he discarded it. The

cold rain soaked him to the skin before he had passed three cars. He reached the tankers, and nearly fell between the grinding wheels before he found a handhold and crawled past them.

On the catwalk of the sixth car beyond the tanks Daniels felt something strange under his hands. Hooked in the running boards was a curved piece of steel like a grappling iron, and from it a rope descended over the side of the car. He felt along it, and came to a series of fat, regular knots. It was a crude rope ladder.

Something thudded on the right of way and disappeared with a grating sound. A moment later a whole series of objects thudded out of the car onto the ground. The man was busy.

Daniels took a deep breath, hoped for the best, and went down the rope. His weight straightened it, but for an instant the motion of the car swayed him far out over the racing ground. Then the car rocked the other way, and Daniels swung through the black door like an eight ball into a pocket. He landed with a jolt and an involuntary grunt. For an instant he saw a light near him, then it winked out. He found his feet, reached out, and came to grips with what seemed to be a gorilla with muscles of wire cable!

IN THE pitching, pounding blackness of the boxcar Daniels swung punches at a shape that did not hit back, but threatened to tear his limbs off or break him in two. Arms like cargo hooks circled him, bending him back until he dropped. He used the fall to get both arms inside the other's neck in a try for counter-leverage.

"Urr," the man grunted as Daniels forced his chin up. Just as most of the air was forced out of Daniels' lungs the other released his body grip and grabbed for an arm.

He caught the railroad detective's right wrist in a twisting, punishing grip that topped anything Daniels had ever tackled. It had to be done—Daniels knew he was matched against a man who might well maim him or worse. The railroader cut loose with a barrage of kicks, his number twelves lashing out with the power of a healthy mule. One connected, and the hold on his

arm loosened. He located his target by feel—and whipped in a dropkick that would have scored a field goal in any man's game.

The powerful, talon-like hands left his arm. A body crumpled in the darkness, groaning, but mouthing enough curses with the moans to show there would still be a fight. Daniels jumped back, pulled the penlight from his belt and dug the Smith and Wesson Terrier out of his hip pocket.

He said, "Now stand fast, you."

The small beam of light shone on the seamed, hate-filled features of old man Gummish!

Mo held gun and light in one hand, frisked his man and found nothing. The wiry body made a sudden move, and Daniels cocked his right.

"Watch it," he said. "You're a bearcat in the dark, but one of these will bust your jaw."

The ex-acrobat cursed him.

Above the pounding vibration of the car's deck sounded sharp knocks on the roof. Suddenly a shape came down the rope that swayed outside the open door. The sway of the boxcar sent the figure far out over the ground. Daniels reached out, grabbed the rope, and hauled the man in. It was Harold Pitts.

And in an instant, while Daniels was busy with the newcomer, old man Gummish took a flying dive through the open door and was gone!

"C'mon, kid," Daniels barked. "We gotta get that bird."

He balanced, jumped, tried to land running, and slid on his face in the gravel. Another form floundered on the embankment as he staggered erect. He called, "That you, Harold?"

"Y-yes." The reply was shaky, but in a moment the younger man loomed out of the darkness.

"Good boy. We can't find our man now, but keep your ears open. We'll go forward to Summit."

"Right."

They trotted along the right of way. BC-5's caboose rumbled past them a moment later. Daniels could have flagged the buggy with his light and some luck, but he didn't try. The trainmen wouldn't know that a battle had taken place on their train until

Daniels telegraphed the next division point. If he stopped the train now, it would cost the carrier and shippers time and money. He drew his pay for helping the railroad business, and did his figuring that way. They stumbled along, over rougher ground.

True, it was hardly the time for it, but Daniels decided to plant the seed while the land was fallow. He said: "That was quite a job you did, Harold, following me onto that freight."

"Ah . . . it was rough, but I didn't *do* anything. You did it all."

"The point is . . . you didn't have to make that dangerous drop. That took more guts than standing up to the toughest guy in the world."

Harold jogged for a while in silence, then said reflectively, "I guess you mean that. And you're trying to tell me it was better than punching some big 'bo in the head . . . just to show I'm tough."

"You got it, kid."

"I wish my Dad could hear that."

"Still sore about that red over yellow, eh?"

"Wouldn't you be?"

"No. Because *I'd* know he was wrong—and I'm right."

Harold caught his second wind. "I think you taught me more psychology than the books, Mo."

"No charge. Just don't show off your strength—and remember that you don't have to take any more chances."

"I'll buy that."

Ahead they saw the lights of Summit block station. The red eye of the order board glowed high in the air, with the amber beams from the cabin windows filtering through the damp night below. The oblong little building looked lonesome, like the last outpost in a ghost town.

"Let me go in alone," Daniels said. "Stay out and watch for old man Gummish. He was the guy robbing the car."

He heard Harold gasp with surprise as he left him beside the track and went through the open door of the cabin. A man sat at the telegraph desk, and the young operator they had met on their first trip into the mountains lounged on a caboose cushion. The men looked very much alike, as brothers might. Both had strong, lean bodies.

Daniels slipped the Terrier from his pocket. "Hello, boys. Stand up while I search you."

The man on the cushion stood up slowly. "You better stand right still and think it over," he said. "Dad's behind that door with a shotgun. Just drop your gun, easy like."

Daniels opened his hand and obeyed as something hard and sharp dug into his backbone. I'm a smart guy, all right, he told himself.

He said: "I guess I'm looking at the Flying Gerald, right?"

"That's right," the man holding down the telegraph spot drawled. "Or maybe you oughta say the walking Gummishes. The act's shot. Now what the hell are we gonna do with you?"

The old man's voice grated behind Daniels. "Only one thing t'do. I'll do it."

The brother at the desk objected, but not very hard. "Let's take it easy, Pa. Don't go off half-cocked."

A loud, new voice roared through the room, from the door at old man Gummish's side. "Don't go off at all! Stand fast, old man, or I'll blast yuh!"

Daniels sidestepped, grabbed the muzzle of the shotgun, and wrested it from powerful hands that tightened their grip at the last minute. When he had possession of it, he scooped up his Terrier and dared to take a breath again.

"Come in, Harold," "You three—put your hands up against that wall. Lean on it. Jump!"

The Gummish clan stood with their palms against the wall while Harold frisked them. The youngest brother, the day operator, had a Spanish .32 automatic in his hip pocket.

Daniels sighed, checked the shotgun, and handed it to Harold. "Cover the acrobat bandits," he said, "while I call Boston."

EASTBOUND Number Thirty-Two stopped at Summit at eight o'clock that morning, to let off a spare operator and pick up Daniels, his assistant, and his prisoners. They had coffee and rolls in the diner during the short run to Anson. The younger brother was the only ex-Flying Gerald who would talk. He seemed more disgusted than angry or downhearted.

"Sure," he told Daniels in answer to a question. "Even with a bum leg Dad is a better man than we are on a bar or in the air. He ran the show—did all the difficult drops onto trains. We did the picking up with the horses after he threw the stuff off."

"Shut up," his brother growled.

"Aw, what the hell. We'll all do the same stretch. How about a cigaret?"

Daniels gave him a pack, told him to keep them, then asked, "You knew what cars to work because you could hear the train consists being telegraphed ahead. That right?"

"Sure."

Daniels sighed and shook his head, like a man doing a job but not happy with it. "You should have stuck to telegraphing, boys," he said.

CHIEF LIFFY, Champoux, and a handful of railroad officials met them on the station platform at Anson. Among them Daniels spotted Superintendent Pitts. Since the old rawhider's division didn't figure in the case, it was evident that he had driven down from Carrstown out of curiosity—or to check on a certain red-headed young man.

"Hello, Mo." Liffy shook hands, a wide grin on his heavy-jowled face. "C'mon into the station office and give us the dope. The section gang found the freight that was thrown off. They're bringing it in."

Daniels handed him a sheaf of papers. "It's all written up, Chief," he said. "Had plenty of time, waiting all night for Number Thirty-Two."

Superintendent Pitts had ignored the new arrivals, including his son. Now he spoke abruptly. "Got an extra copy of that?"

"Sure," Daniels said levelly, and gave him one. He handed another to the State Police lieutenant who took charge of the prisoners.

They straggled into the station office. Superintendent Pitts, reading as he walked, said suddenly, "This report says my son was with you all the way."

"That's right." Daniels lit a cigar.

"Hope he kept out of your way."

"He did just as much—and more—work than I did."

"Hmpf—says here you tackled the man in the boxcar."

"Harold made a dangerous jump to fol-

low me. A lot tougher for him, because he doesn't know his way around trains the way I do. And he saved my bacon when they had me mousetrapped in Summit cabin."

"Don't take much to stick up a few men. Then you took over."

Daniels looked full into the hard, leathery, uncompromising face of the official. "You're going too fast," he said softly. "When you read to the end of that report, you'll find that I wouldn't let Harold carry a gun."

Pitts had what it took. He turned stiffly and went out. Daniels watched him through the bay window. He strode across the platform to where Harold stood talking to the State lieutenant, waited until they paused, and then stuck out his hand to his son. The hands went up and down for a long time, and both men started to smile as they talked.

DANIELS said good-bye to Harold in the station, while Liffy and Pitts and the other officials waited outside for the eastbound express.

"I'd just as soon stay," Harold protested. "I'll walk up with you and get your car."

"Wouldn't think of it," Daniels laughed. "You'll be learning another end of the business before long. Ride in with the brass, and get reacquainted with your Dad."

"Seems like I'm leaving you stranded. I'll

take a later train."

"Forget it. You closed your assignment."

"It'll be lonesome driving into Boston alone. I'll ride in with you."

"I'm not going in for a couple of days. Got to tie up the loose ends, you know."

The eastbound roared into the station, cutting off Harold's further arguments. He shook hands, said, "Well—so long—and thanks for—"

"Get going," Daniels slapped him affectionately on the back with one big hand. "I'll be seeing you—Red."

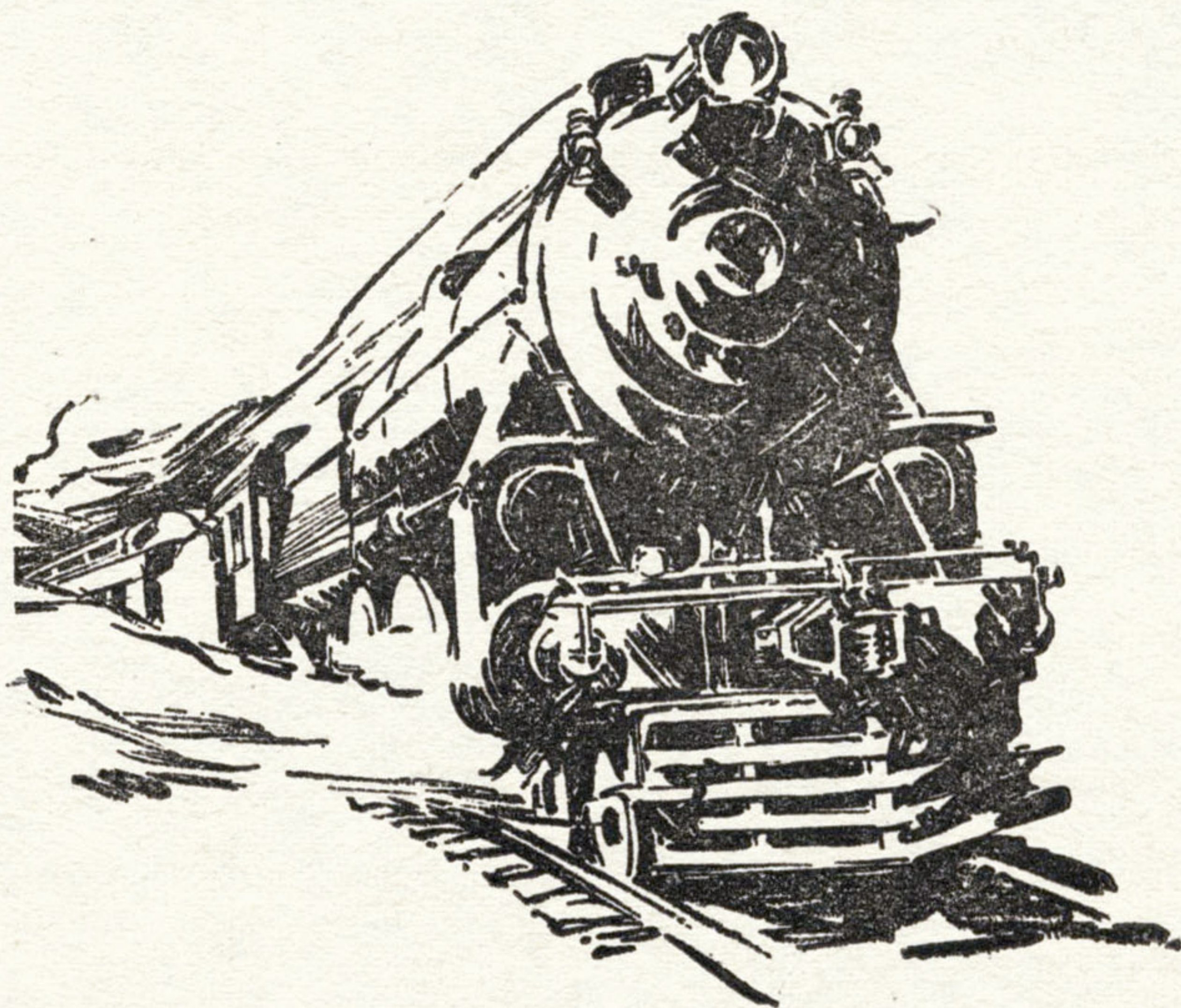
The youth grinned. "All red, thanks to you." He went out and boarded the train.

Daniels yawned and went over to the lunch counter for a cup of coffee. He winked at himself in the polished mirror, and thought that he looked younger than thirty-four, even after a sleepless night.

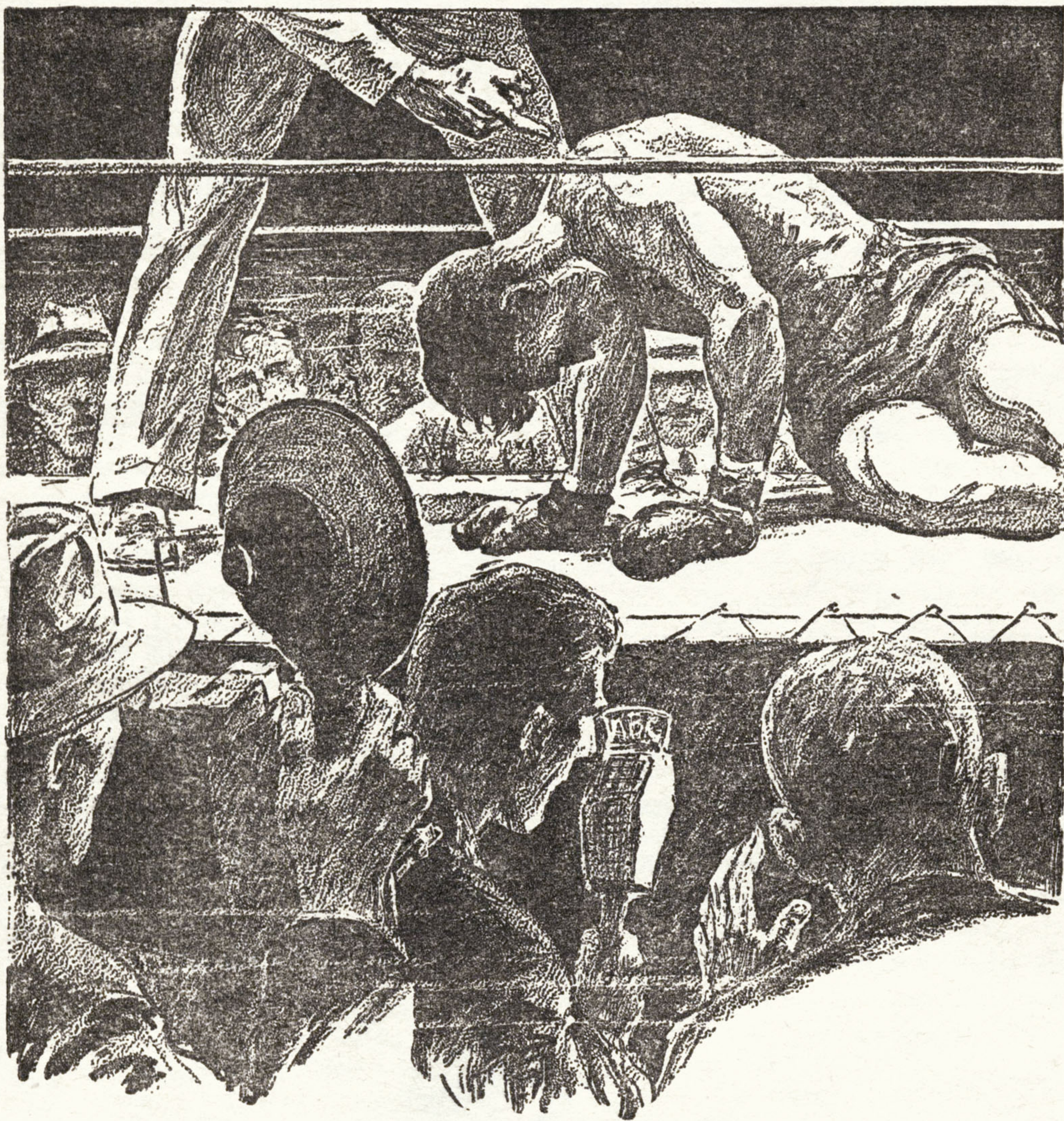
He wondered if Marte Gummish was having her breakfast—and wondering why her father and brothers were not home. She probably was not involved with them—and they'd swear up and down she wasn't, anyway. The law wouldn't bother her.

But somebody had to look the place over, just in case there was a little loot in the barn. The lovely girl would be awfully lonesome up there, too—especially when she heard the news. A good husky shoulder to cry on would be nice for all concerned.

He finished his coffee and went out, whistling, to look for his car.



LEFTY



I

THE wind howled over Kansas. The two human beings curled up in the lee of the railroad embankment. There was a tiny fire. The older man warmed the meat and potatoes in a rusty can. The coffee was already hot and the youth sucked at it. The older man had a scarred, beaten face and eyes which were fierce below shaggy brows. He was very thin beneath the ragged clothing he had piled on his body. His shoes were broken and he wore two

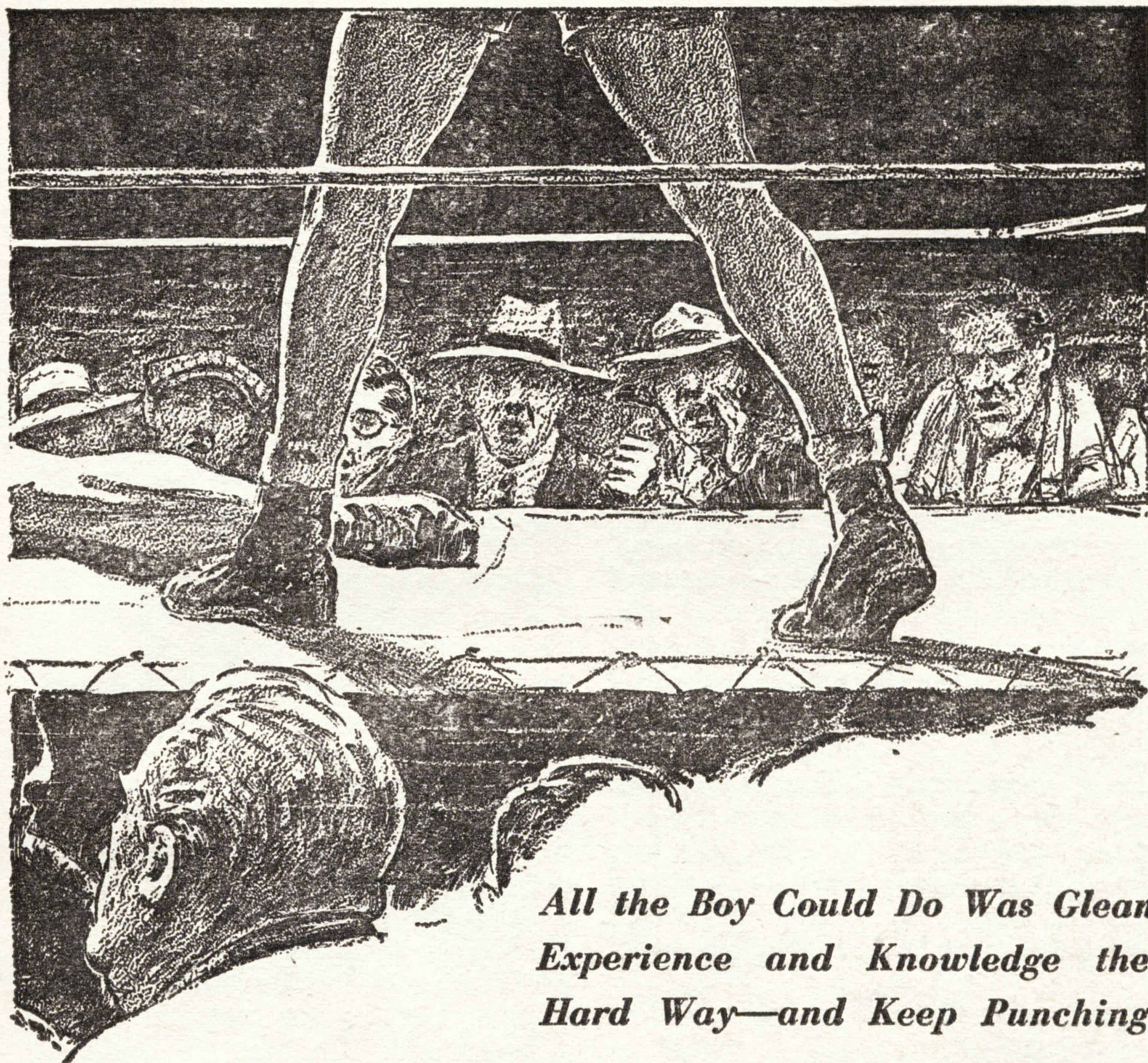
pairs of sox. But when he spoke his voice was steady and clear.

"Talk sometimes helps. Sometimes it does not. You are very young to be on the road."

The kid said, "I ain't much for singin', see?" He had red hair and he handled the tin cup in his left hand. He was also emaciated. His cheeks were sunken, his eyes were lost in the shadows of deep hollows. "You been good to me, Mister."

The man's hand was gnarled, maneuvering the can of stew. "You crushed out of the reformatory, didn't you?"

By WILLIAM R. COX



*All the Boy Could Do Was Glean
Experience and Knowledge the
Hard Way—and Keep Punching*

There was a slight silence. Then the kid said, "How'd you know?"

"They were through here looking for you awhile back. I sent them eastward. The next freight goes west."

The boy said, "Gee, thanks, Mister."

The fire flickered. The mulligan would not get hot. "We have some time. You're safe here now. It's too cold for them to look hard for you. They're human, they feel the wind."

"Human?" The kid snorted. "You're a nice guy, but you don't know much, do yuh?"

"They beat you, did they?"

The kid stroked an eye which showed yellow and purple in the firelight. "Pitzzy did

that. Then blamed me for it. The guards, they gimme the hose. So I scrambled."

The man said, "My name is Baxter. They call me Slim."

"I'm Lefty. Lefty Grogan," said the kid. My name's Aloysius, but nobody calls me Al. Just Lefty."

"You can talk," said the man quietly. "You can't weep, but it's all right to talk."

"Yeah—mebbe." The kid's hands were strong, locking about the cup. The health of youth was still in him. His cheekbones were high and firm and his green eyes glittered with life. "Mebbe it'd be better. You bein' a bum, too. And talkin' like a teacher I had once. Good, like. I got to get some place. I got to start. I got to be somebody and

Pitzzy nor none of 'em is goin' to make me like 'em, see? I got to get out and away."

Baxter said, "That is plain."

"I was always a wrong kid, they say. Lefty, that's me. Always wrong. The orphan asylum, every place. I'm twenty, see? I been kicked around, I kicked some other people. They caught me inna grocery store last time. I was hungry."

"So many are hungry," murmured Baxter. "In a world of plenty."

"So I got this bit in the school. And Pitzzy Magin runs the deal. He's the boss kid, see? So they had this boxin' tournament. So I win. I always win—I'm a boxer." The pride came through. The kid's head went back. "Mebbe that's all I learned, but that I learned good, in the amachours, inna slums. I can take care of myself if I can get away."

Baxter said, "A boxer!" He was very still and the wind did not seem to touch him now. He muttered, "Can it be? Is it possible?" He felt for the bottle in his pocket. He took it out, uncorked it. He did not drink, however.

Lefty Grogan said, "Pitzzy is a crook. He was born a crook. A lotta guys in a can, they ain't crooks, see? But Pitzzy, he's bad. He couldn't stand me winnin'. So he gimme the works. I mean he gimme them! Pitzzy's smart, pretty soon he had everybody hatin' me."

Baxter said, "You weigh about thirty, don't you, Lefty?"

Lefty said, "Yeah—Say, how come you to say 'thirty'? That's fight talk—say!"

Slim Baxter said, "Have some of this. The train'll be through any minute. We're going West, son. West!" It was like a revelation from heaven. He dropped the bottle into the tall weeds. The boy fell ravenously to the food. He had been hiding for two days, starving. Baxter knew; he had been drinking in the vicinity for a week, using the last of his slim funds—almost the last. There was one bill left in its hiding place. A hundred dollar bill. He had meant to get to Los Angeles and die there, leaving the hundred to pay for one of those advertised cheap funerals. A last jest by a man who had made many merry japes in his day.

The freight rumbled, slowing for the grade. Slim Baxter stood up, kicking the fire to death. Lefty stared at him. Then the

kid said, "Hey—you're George Baxter. Gentleman George!"

"I was, Lefty. I was . . . Here it comes. Hold tight. We're going West."

The handrails were icy and slippery but the men who gripped them were inured to cold and pain. Lefty Grogan whispered, "Gentleman George Baxter! They guy that made the champ sing! The guy that shoulda been the champ! What is this? Is this IT?"

II

THEY had bought the clothing in a second hand store, but it was clean and pressed. The two gaunt men walked into the gym and Gentleman George Baxter smiled. A man said, "Georgie. Georgie! Where you been, kid?"

Lefty hung back, watching the boxers working out around the hall. The man came over. He was fat and puffing and he smiled easily, and behind his smile was shrewd appraisal. Baxter said, "Been in the country, hiding out, Sam. Ran out of money, so here I am again."

Sam Hall said, "No! Why, you're thirty-five, George. You been away six, seven years. No, Georgie!"

Lefty started. He stared at his mentor. He had already learned that Baxter was unpredictable, that the older man kept his own counsel. But this was fantastic.

Baxter said, "Oh, meet my cousin, Lefty Baxter."

Lefty blinked. Now he had a new name, too! He shook the moist hand of the promoter.

Baxter said, "You can use him in an opener. He needs a little more experience. I've been working with him."

"You mean you got a boy? You want a fight for him, not you."

"Both of us," said Baxter carelessly.

"But you're not in shape. You won't go over forty."

"Get me a welter," said George Baxter. "I need a fast grand, Sam. You know what I can do to anyone you've got out here. Get me Sylvester, that Mexican boy."

Sam Hall said, "Georgie, Sylvester can hit! He's young and he moves good and he slaps it in there. Look, Georgie, you done me a lot of favors when you were on top.

Lemme do you one. I'll use the boy, but leave you out of it."

"If the doctor won't pass me, I'm out," said Baxter carelessly. "Wasn't I always smart, Sam? I know what I'm doing. Bring on your medico, give me two weeks to train—and loan me a hundred, will you? I'm broke."

Hall's hand went to his pocket. He breathed, "Not for any other pug inna world. Not a dime. But you, Georgie, can't refuse you."

"And fix it up for us to train here," said Baxter casually. "I'm anxious to get started in the business again."

"But I thought you were through? I thought you said it was too crooked, too lousy—? Georgie, you got me!" The stout man shook his head.

But in a few moments they were in the locker room. Lefty sat on a bench and surveyed the older man. Baxter was sweating now that they were alone, and his slender hands trembled. They got out the shorts and stuff they had bought with their last dollar. Baxter carefully folded the hundred he had just borrowed and put it in his shoe. He closed the locker door.

Lefty said, "You been on the booze. You been weak and drunk. Two weeks ain't enough. This you shouldn't oughta do, George."

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it," said George Baxter without rancor, but with firmness. "Come on inside and show me if you can put up your hands."

Lefty said, "Well, sure, Georgie. Only—"

"Don't call me 'Georgie'," snapped Baxter. "And don't argue."

The found a quiet corner of the gym. The gloves felt good on Lefty's hands. He danced a little, warming up. He was too thin. He was too tall for a lightweight. He should be a middle, a rangy middleweight. He put up his hands, shadow-boxing, stepping in and out in the time-honored ritual of the game.

Baxter was tapping the light bag. It rattled and bounced under skilful hands. After a moment he said, "All right. Come at me."

Lefty hesitated. He was already filled out a little after several meals; he was young. Skinny, yes, but he had a little beef on

him. Beneath the sweatshirt Baxter's ribs, he knew, were plain to behold.

While he poised, Baxter slid forward. His left hand licked out with incredible speed. It slapped against Lefty's nose, jolting back his head, drawing blood which ran slowly into the corner of his mouth.

The green eyes blazed. Lefty hoisted both hands. He shot out the left, drew it back, then threw a short inside right. Baxter, bent on giving a lesson, coming in, caught it in the ribs. He sagged. His mouth fell open. His eyes glazed.

Lefty grabbed him, holding him erect. He said quickly, "Hell, I'm sorry, Georgie. I didn't mean—"

"Don't call me 'Georgie', I told you," gasped Baxter. "You wouldn't be worth a damn—if you hadn't—reacted." He shoved himself away and stood erect. With great care he pulled himself together. He said, "All right, Lefty. Come on. Box."

They boxed for five minutes. Then Baxter, a bit green around the gills, said, "All right. You'll do. For now, that is. You've got plenty to learn, but you'll do. I wasn't wrong—" He seemed to be talking to himself now, "I wasn't wrong in the firelight, by the railroad. I saw it—it's there." He said aloud, "Go on, kid. Take a full workout. I'll have to run a little, take it easy. But two weeks—I'll be all right."

LEFTY was not so sure. For the next two weeks he stayed as close to Baxter as he could—and still he was not certain.

The newspapers gave Baxter a break. "Gentleman George is going to show his wares again. The old master, the boxing dude, is going to fight Angel Sylvester on Friday next in an attempt to prove that the present generation of pugilists has deserted the fundamentals of the game for slugging and is heading for trouble. Baxter, far from punch drunk, fought them all in his day. Never lucky enough to get a championship bout, he defeated three world's champions in non-title bouts. Always a leveller, always fighting against the bad elements of the business, Baxter retired after a certain New York promoter double-crossed him and has been idle for six years. Now he is trying a come-back and more power to his clever elbows.

"Baxter has a young cousin who will trade blows with Maxie Jackson in a curtain raiser. This will be interesting to watch—a Baxter pupil making his debut. Lefty Baxter, they call the kid and he looks smooth and clever in training"

WHEN they went to the fight arena on that Friday night Lefty still was wondering.

He was on before the crowd came in. The referee was not so bored as usual, due entirely to the presence of George Baxter in ring center, listening attentively to the instructions, bowing courteously as they ended, leading Lefty to his corner, snatching the robe from his shoulders, whispering, "This boy looks like a slugger. Tincan, kid. Move around a bit at first."

Lefty nodded. He was not nervous. He was strung high, but he had always been like that. Inside him he felt all right. He broke down the glove padding on his thighs, dancing, waiting for the bell. He felt pretty good. It was a start—he was making his start for a new life.

Maxie Jackson was a hooker and a rusher. He had been in there before, plenty of times, by the face on him, Lefty thought. The bell brought Maxie out with both fists flying and Lefty walked around him. Lefty's jab pecked away. He saw the boy swing and flounder and the jab went singing in. George had done something for him in the short two weeks, showing him how to make the jab sting by using wrist in it.

George had worked awful hard. He was the slickest boxer Lefty had ever seen. He was a stern, unbending taskmaster and he was willing to sweat as much as Lefty.

Privately, Lefty thought he could hit harder than George. Now he saw Maxie swinging to find him as he moved and he was tempted. He flattened his feet, shot the right to the jaw.

A wild swing caught him and almost toppled him. The green flashed in his eyes like always. He lowered his boom. He stood and racked up solid punches with both hands. He felt Maxie give and started after him. The bell rang.

He went back to his corner. There was a lump over his right eye. Baxter said sharply, "Just what you shouldn't have done! You

can pick this boy's eyes out. Stay away from him!"

"I can get him out of there," said Lefty flatly.

Baxter took a deep breath. "Are you going to obey orders? What does it mean to knock him out? You can learn from him. Box!"

The second round was like the first, Lefty boxing, Maxie floundering, catching them, trying to land a hard one. Lefty moved in and out, stabbing the jab to the head. Maxie began to bleed. Near the end of the canto Lefty threw a hook and Maxie tried to get close and nail the body.

Lefty jerked his right hand across his chest. He tagged Maxie right on the button. Maxie grabbed at him. Lefty hit him with a solid left hook, then a right again.

Maxie fell down. The bell rang.

"Always punching, always tough," stormed Baxter. But he was glancing across the ring at the prelim boy. They were working over Maxie, but they were not working very hard. They simply did not care, the hired handlers. Georgie said compassionately, "All right, kid. Get him out of there."

Lefty sauntered out at the bell. He feinted with his left. He whipped a right hand to the jaw. Maxie went to his knees. Lefty looked at the referee, but that worthy was counting in phlegmatic manner. Maxie was up at nine . . .

A little pale now, Lefty went in. He took a lot of time, measuring Maxie. He drove all he had into the right hand punch.

Maxie fell down. At "nine" he was up. Lefty's lips were compressed in a thin line. His heart pounded. He hated himself for going in, yet he knew he must. Certain things a fighter had to do—he knew it without being told, knew it instinctively, from his hard early training. He dealt out another right, a crisp, straight one.

Maxie fell over backwards. The referee looked hard at him, then nodded, pointing a long arm at Lefty, waving him to his corner. Maxie was through. They came out and dragged him in, heels rasping the canvas. There were not many people present to see this preliminary.

In the dressing room George Baxter said, "That's the bad end of it. At the bottom,

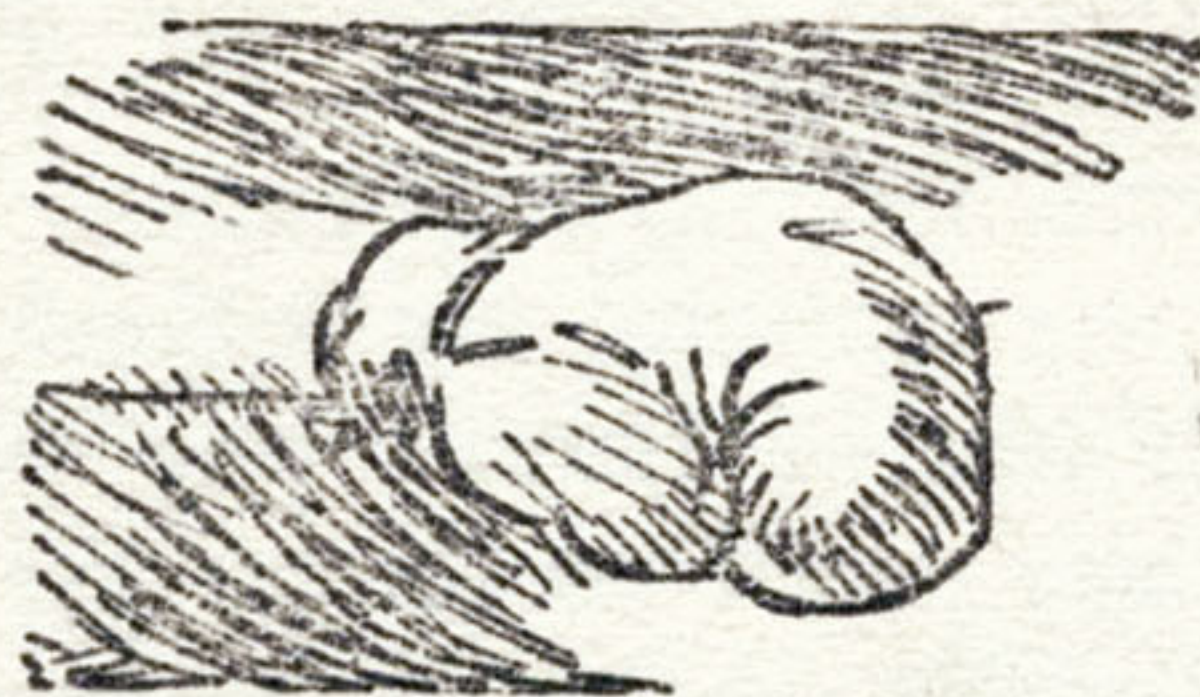
where they don't train them right. And the other part is at the top where the racketeers move in. Lefty—this will be a long row to hoe. A rough deal, all the way. But you're tough. That's what inspired me to come back to it, to try and do something about it. We're going up, Lefty, the hard way, the clean way."

Lefty said, "I know what you mean."

"I saw that you didn't want to hit him. But you did. That's what it takes, Lefty." George Baxter sounded old and weary.

Lefty stared at him. "You hadn't oughta be fightin' this mug. I hear this is a pretty dirty boy, this Angel Sylvester. You hadn't oughta be doin' it, Georgie—"

But Baxter had stretched out on a table, not even deigning to correct him for using the hated diminutive. Lefty went into the shower. He turned on the water and thought hard about everything, about the amazing coincidence which had thrown him with Gentleman George Baxter, about the sudden rush into the middle of the fight business, about the mysterious ways of his friend. He thought about his own life, so gray and hopeless until now.



He thought about Pitzy, the bully, the slick crook who lived only to get out of the reformatory and start being a big time crook. That was one man he feared. He admitted it, now. Pitzy was smarter in an evil way. Pitzy could always get the best of him.

What if Pitzy got out and found him? What then? What could Pitzy do? Could George Baxter confound him?

George was smarter, Lefty thought loyally, smarter than anyone. George would cope with Pitzy, when the time came.

And the time would come, because Pitzy Magin was a good hater and he hated Lefty Grogan. Lefty shivered, towelling himself. He climbed into his clothing before he saw that George Baxter was asleep on the table, asleep while he waited to box a good fighter twelve years his junior!

III

IT WAS different when they returned to the ring. The large auditorium was full. Men were yelling and some women were yelling too as Gentleman George Baxter walked down the aisle, head high, his face composed and calm. The place was full of noise and smoke and commotion. Sam Hall was at ringside, waving, smoking a big cigar, happy at the packed house, at the turnout which had appeared for his old friend Baxter.

Angel Sylvester was already in the ring. Lefty looked curiously at this young American of Spanish descent. He was a lean welterweight and also rather tall, as tall as Lefty. His muscles were wrapped closely to his limbs, his skin was dark and tough. He had piercing black eyes and black hair and in his manner there was an arrogance and confidence which Lefty instinctively recognized and which brought fear to his heart, fear for George Baxter.

Yet George moved more calmly than anyone, even than Sylvester, whose ebon eyes fixed themselves scornfully on the worn features of the once-great boxer and remained there. There was a man named Hitchy to handle the patchwork of the corner and there was Lefty, but George was in charge and everyone could see it.

Sylvester said, "Too bad, old-timer," as they touched gloves.

George bowed his head with courtesy and Lefty whisked off the new, cheap robe they had bought. George stood holding the ropes, looking out, sniffing the air of the fight arena. He suddenly smiled, and his face looked younger, brighter. Then the bell clanged.

Lefty clutched the apron edge. He leaned forward, sweating. George was gliding around, not very fast, just shuffling. And Angel Sylvester was stalking him. Sylvester had his left hand curled, his right cocked against his chest, his dark eyes were half-closed, his mouth wreathed in a slight sneer. They circled—

Then George was in leading with his left. He put it on the eye. He drew it back and snapped it to the nose, moving, always moving. He was grace and artistry wrapped in an old bundle, showing them, the know-

ing ones, showing them how it should be done.

He was a picture, a beautiful picture. Sylvester went off balance, scowling. The left hand trip-hammered him to the ropes as George danced behind it, shoulders squared, head erect, beating the red glove to the dark face, knocking Sylvester always off balance, so that he resembled a novice of the ring.

Down in Sylvester's corner the dark-faced lean man named Steel jerked his face around fearfully and stared at an occupant of the ringside aisle seat in back of him. Lefty caught a glimpse of a huge figure, overflowing the seat. The fat man shrugged and waved a plump hand and Steel cupped his hands, keening in a shrill voice, "Wait 'im out, Angel! He ain't got anything. Wait 'im out!"

The bell rang. Baxter wheeled, tapping Sylvester's shoulder in lordly fashion, mincing to his corner. Lefty said, "Gee. I never saw anything like it, George. You were great in there."

George's teeth showed between half-parted lips; then the lips closed in a tight line. He was staring across the ring, past Sylvester, down at ringside. The fat man was plainly in view. He was smirking. He had a cupid's bow mouth, very red. His eyes were close-set and piggish. He had quite a lot of amazing, corn-colored hair. His tent-like clothing was of expensive material and on his hands he wore three large diamonds.

Baxter said, "Moon Dragoon!" His face twisted. "The dirtiest force in the boxing business. What's he doing here? New York's his home—his kennel!"

Lefty said, "So that's who it is. Steel was signalling him."

"That's it, then," muttered Baxter. "He's never forgotten the day I clipped him on his third chin."

Lefty said, "He can't do you anything, George. Just keep boxin' this Sylvester—"

It was the second round, then. Baxter rubbed his gloves along the legs of his trunks, head down, eye cocked at Sylvester. The Coast boy came in fast, both hands working. Sylvester had style of his own. His defense was a swift offense and he was swift. Baxter slid left, then shifted right.

Baxter's left went out, then his right. He got them both to the head. Sylvester stumbled. George had an opening, but courteously stepped back, drawing applause from the crowd.

Sylvester, red-faced, rushed. Baxter tinned, showing a left which threatened, drawing it back, making Sylvester miss. The two men came together and Baxter easily tied up his younger stronger opponent.

It was a thrill, and it was a lesson to Lefty. He never took his eyes from George. The superb maneuvering of the slim legs, the pure boxing skill of the quick hands were a sight to behold. All through the second round Sylvester swung and missed and George rattled sharp blows off his opponent's head.

Between rounds the fat man at ringside spoke to a thick-bodied, tall, ugly man at his side, smirking, sneering, waving his bejewelled butcher's hands. Lefty patted George's shoulder, rubbing him gently with oil. Baxter said nothing after he recognized his old enemy from New York.

They were using a lot of water on Sylvester, spilling it around his corner. The bell rang for the third round.

Baxter went out, erect, serious, left hand high. Sylvester failed to rush. His dark face set and determined, he began matching left hands with the maestro. He missed, but he kept himself out of harm's way with this method. Baxter could no longer get to him so often. Sylvester was quick, he was graceful, he was young.

Baxter ripper over a left hook, swayed and came in with a right. Sylvester fell inside and roughed him into Sylvester's own corner. Baxter ducked and dodged, seeking a way out. The referee was slow getting over.

Baxter's foot slipped in the water strewn about the corner. As he went floundering Sylvester stepped in. A right fist drilled against George's unprotected jaw, a good, solid blow delivered when George could not get up his hands.

Lefty bellowed a protest. He almost climbed into the ring, controlled himself only with great effort. Something made him stare over at the fat man, Moon Dragoon.

Dragoon was leaning forward. His hands were on his fat knees. His face leered, like an evil lunar disc shining on murder.

Sylvester was deliberately dealing out punishment. Right and left cut at Baxter's head. They were cruel blows, but without crushing impact. They drove Baxter across the ring. Half-conscious, George was rolling with the blows. He was bleeding from the mouth. His left eye was cut. Sylvester plodded after him, shooting out straight lefts, connecting now where he had been missing before. He knocked George into the ropes and Lefty's stomach tied itself into a knot. The knockout would come now.

The knockout did not come. Sylvester stepped away and then Lefty saw the harsh lines of Sylvester's mouth, the meanness in his eye. Sylvester gave George time to recover a bit, then pounced again. Like a cat with a mouse, Lefty groaned.

The bell found George reeling, blinded, bleeding. The referee came over and said, "Lemme see those cuts."

Hitchy was working on them with patient hands. The referee said, "They ain't too deep."

George Baxter said nothing. His eyes were sunken far back into deep hollows. He looked like the man Lefty had met in the lee of the railroad embankment in Kansas that day.

Lefty whispered, "Take one, George. Take one and go out."

The gaunt face waggled right, then left. The bell sounded. Baxter got up. His knees shook. His hands were slow and heavy. He was too old, Lefty moaned to himself, the rubber was gone from him. He couldn't come back between rounds.

Sylvester was in charge, now. He did the leading. George, staggering just a little, set himself and swung to the body. He landed a hard right. Sylvester snarled and chopped three short blows to the head. George weaved and rolled, but the punches cut his skin. He went close and Sylvester thrust him contemptuously away with young strength and poured leather at his face. The blood ran and smeared and became a red mask.

Sam Hall was pale. He got out of his chair and bustled, looking for a member of the Commission. The referee was uncertain. Sylvester stalked his victim. Baxter was moving with grace, but the motor which made his skill perform was run down. The

one dirty punch, after he had slipped, had unhinged something within him. Lefty knew.

It was pure torture watching it. Lefty started up the steps twice, then dared not enter the ring. Baxter would hate him for ending it that way, he knew. He crouched there, and with some surprise heard his own voice screaming protest at what was taking place in the ring.

Sylvester knew a lot of things. He drew cutting glove laces across George's already-cut face. He stepped on George's foot and elbowed him. He butted George over the eye and a new freshet of blood spurted. The referee stepped in and warned Sylvester.

Baxter shoved the official aside. He led with a left and threw a terrific over-hand right hand.

The crowd stood and howled with glee. The punch caught Sylvester over the right eye. The blood came at once and Baxter, plodding in with gargoyle-red features set in granite, pounded another sodden punch to the same spot. Sylvester, slightly flustered, partially blinded, could not get away from the blazing, courageous attack.

The bell came too soon. Baxter dropped his arms. They fell like lead to his sides. He had to be practically led by Lefty to his corner.

He was muttering, "Hit him—hit him. Can't see him. Gotta keep punchin' in there." It was not George's natural voice, not his real philosophy. Lefty wept as Hitchy cleansed the cuts, applied the stinging collodion.

THE fourth round began. Lefty's fingers ached from holding onto the ring apron. He moved his feet, his head, his shoulders, suffering with every blow Baxter took. Sylvester, recovered, wore a patch over his eye and was tearing in to finish it now. They were taking no further chances on George landing on that eye.

George kept going down. Then he kept getting up. Then he fell over backwards and his throat convulsed. His head struck the canvas with a horrid thump.

Lefty shrieked, "NO—NO." And went through the ropes. The referee tried to stop him, but Lefty tossed him across the ring

and into the ropes. Sylvester wheeled, hands up in defense.

But Lefty was holding George in his arms. He was calling, "Get a doctor. He's hurt—I know he's bad hurt!"

He had one glimpse of the avid, evil, gleeful eyes of the blond fat man; he had a look at Sylvester, cold and cruel; at the man Steel, who looked slightly frightened. Then there were cops in the ring and a man with a small bag.

Then they were taking George to the hospital and Lefty was crouched beside him, hanging onto George's taped fist, trying not to bawl. He had never bawled before, not in the reformatory when he was being hazed and beaten, not when he had escaped and was hungry . . . he hadn't wept since he was a little kid. He would have cried now, except he was afraid George might know it, and he didn't want George to be upset.

He hung around for hours, gnawing at his knuckles, waiting, watching the door of the room where the doctors worked on Baxter. The reporters asked him questions and he said stonily, "It was one of those things. George got the worst of the deal. You seen it."

One man said sympathetically, "I saw Sylvester take advantage of a slip. I saw George let him off on the same thing, and then Sylvester— Ah, what do you expect out of pugs? They're all dirty. George Baxter was the only one of his kind."

"You're right, Mister," said Lefty grimly.

"Oh, I didn't mean that you were—"

Lefty said, "You're right! I'll never be like George. No dirty son like Sylvester'll ever do it to me."

The reporter looked at him. He said slowly, "I expect not." There was something in Lefty's eyes that the man recognized.

IV

THEY said, "A long rest. He's a veteran, so of course he'll be cared for. Yes, you can see him now—but not for long."

Lefty went in. George was sitting in a chair, wrapped in a light blanket. His face was so thin that Lefty was scared. He put his hand on George's knee and said, "Howzit, pal?"

George said, "Hello, kid—" He rubbed one emaciated hand over his cropped head. He looked different, old, strangely gone.

Lefty said, "I got the semi-final this week. For Hall. Some chump. I'm fine, George."

"Yeah. I worried some—when I could think. I'm not thinking straight yet, kid." He made an effort, then relapsed into his seeming indifference. He said, "Look out for Moon Dragoon. Watch him. He's my nemesis." He smiled a little. "I'm sort of detached, Lefty. I—I know I ought to snap out of it. I will, some day—maybe." He closed his eyes and the nurse made a sign and Lefty had to go out.

He went to the doctor. He said, "How long?"

"It's a case we cannot be sure about," said the doctor. "He has a lesion—but not a tumor, of course, so there is a chance. I wouldn't count on any particular time, Baxter. He's a fine man and we'll take care of him. But it's been two months now—"

Lefty said, "If he needs anything—"

He went down and started to walk. The snow came to Los Angeles that year and slush was underfoot. He walked in it, unaware. He had fought every week and knocked out every opponent in a fury of attack which had moved him to the semi-finals in record-breaking time. Sam was having trouble finding opponents of his caliber now. He was moving in a sort of daze colored by his worry over George Baxter.

The sinister Moon Dragoon had not appeared. Angel Sylvester had rested, nursing the cut over his eye. Lefty had not seen either of them—fortunately perhaps in his present state of mind. He knew George Baxter was very ill, that he might never recover.

He had a little money. Five hundred had taken care of George's hospital bill and now the veterans had taken over. He had his own money and the other five hundred. He had it in traveler's checks. He was thinking now, walking in the sunshine and slush.

He came to and took a bus and went downtown. He went into Sam Hall's office next to the training gym. Hitchy was there. Hitchy had stuck with him, a wizened, quiet little man, a veteran of the business, a former featherweight contender gone to

seed. He had the protective coloration and modesty of a mouse and he did not look unlike a meek mouse, but he was a fine corner man.

Lefty said, "You get anyone for me?"

"A colored boy named Green," said Hall. "He's been around. How is George?"

Lefty said, "No good. When can I fight Sylvester?"

"You're a year away from Sylvester," said Hall flatly.

"I only want a slug at him," said Lefty. "Can't you build me up—fix it? Just a slug at him."

Hall said kindly, "You're going at it wrong. Wait and get him when you're experienced, on top. You'll get there."

"It's too slow," said Lefty. "I want him quick."

Hall shook his head. "I heard a rumor. I heard Moon Dragoon secretly owns a piece of Sylvester. I heard Dragoon is taking him East for a clean-up and that Sylvester can't make the welter limit. They're after Poker Weller, the middle champ. You'll never get Sylvester here. I don't want any Moon Dragoon fighters. He is a promoter. He shouldn't own fighters."

LEFTY flared, "Then I'll go East."

Sam Hall said patiently, "Beat Green first. Fight the men I choose for you. I'm your friend and George's friend. Take it easy, Lefty and we'll have you up there. Beat Bolero and a few good ones out here and grow a little. You're too thin. You're a welter—but you'll be a middle if you go along right."

The ire died in Lefty. George Baxter had taught him many things; one of them was to recognize good advice from a friend. He looked at Hitchy and saw that the little man agreed with Hall. He said dully, "Okay. I'll do it your way. George wanted me to go to school nights—sometime."

"You can get in a prep school near here," said Hall. "You pay a fee and they cram you good, I hear."

"I ain't got no credits," said Lefty painfully. "I—uh—never went to school much." He had almost said that they didn't give credits in the reform school or orphanage classes.

"They don't care," said Hall. "This

school is for guys like you that want to learn."

Lefty said, "Okay—okay." They were making things easy for him and he didn't want things easy right now. He kept seeing George Baxter, listless, skeleton-like, plucking at the blanket which covered him, all the life and keenness gone from his eyes. It made Lefty want to tear into things, rip the world apart.

He tore into Green that Friday night. He had copied some of George's tricks, of course. He had the habit of ducking and then straightening up, then throwing a straight left followed by a deceptive, short right to the jaw.

Green, a bullet-headed veteran, sampled this effect, then ran away. He was a spindly-legged, broad-shouldered veteran. His own left had a way of connecting and propping off his adversaries. He shot in a low right and Lefty sampled bile on his tonsils.

Lefty sat down conscious that he had not had a good first round. Hitchy said only, "He's a hitter. Look out."

Lefty nodded. He was more careful in the second. He found that Green's timing was good and began to count it out in his mind. Green was fighting on a pattern—come in, hit, get away, make Lefty lead, come in again. It had rhythm and it was good. This was the semi-finals class much better than Lefty had encountered before.

He danced a little, like George. He feinted. Green started his little act.

Lefty faded left, then came sharply back to the center. He thrust a straight left into the middle of Green's rhythmic trick. He tore in behind that with short right and a hooking left. He felt Green's right in his belly, but he had expected that and had his muscles tight. He struck upward, a clubbing blow at the base of the jaw.

He walked away, watching Green fall. His face was hard, his eyes bright. The referee counted and Lefty leaned on the ropes. The reporter who had spoken to him the night George got beaten looked up and made a goose-egg with thumb and forefinger. Lefty nodded, unsmiling.

Green did not get up. The crowd, always loving a hitter, had taken Lefty to its collective heart. He got a big ovation.

He went to the dressing room. His purse

was considerably more than it had been and Hall admitted he was a drawing card. Still, he was restless. George didn't care whether Lefty visited him; George was in some world where he didn't care about anything, much.

THE next time Lefty saw him, in the huge veterans' hospital, George came to life for a moment. He said, "I saw in the paper that you beat Green. Lefty, you'll have to move out. Travel a little. You'll have to go East. I—I can't make it."

"I'll be all right," said Lefty. "I want to keep on in this school. They're learnin' me to talk better."

George said absently, "Teaching you, not 'learning'. Lefty, watch out for Moon Dragoon. He's dirty. He feeds off punch-drunk fighters. He mis-matches for fun, to see men get hurt. He tried to dope me once, years ago. I found it out and nearly killed him. I was young then—he's hounded me ever since. I gave up and left the business because of Moon Dragoon and his kind. Always remember that they destroy the game, that it can be a great game—" He made a weak motion with his white hands. He was losing interest again. Lefty went away.

It was a busy time, there in Los Angeles. Lefty fought at all the clubs. He stayed in training by fighting. He went to school faithfully and showed good aptitude for his lessons. The weeks sped by—and then there were no further opponents in the semifinals and he fought Steve Bolero for Sam Hall.

That was his first main go. Bolero was a national figure, a sturdy welterweight grown a bit too heavy for the class. The bout was at catch-weights—and Lefty hit 145 pounds, astounding himself. He was going to be a middleweight in a matter of months. He was living regularly and eating plenty of steaks.

He had seen Bolero fight and he knew there was no easy way of figuring out the fancy, hard-hitting boy. Lefty just went in there prepared to meet any given situation—he hoped. He sat impatiently in his corner and listened to the other introductions. The announcer bawled, "Also here tonight is the native challenger for the middleweight

title, a boy you all know, who is leaving tomorrow for the East—Angel Sylvester!"

The dark man, natty in California sports clothing, was coming across the ring to shake hands with Lefty. The hatred boiling within him, Lefty arose. He put his hands behind him. Sylvester stared, then recognition came to him. "So you're the hot punk, the Baxter boy. Well, how's George?" He sneered.

"Get out of here. Get out, before I take you right now," Lefty growled.

Sylvester said, "That'd be the day, punk. So-long. I ain't got time for you guys. I'm on my way!" He swung through the ropes, a handsome, sleek young athlete.

Hitchy said, "Gee, I thought you was gonna kill him!"

"Some day" muttered Lefty. "Some day—"

When the bell rang it was still in him. The feeling almost choked him, the remembrance of the cruel beating of George Baxter, instigated by Moon Dragoon, carried out by Sylvester. He chased out of his corner as though the devil was after him.

He did not feel out the other man. He crouched and began punching. Thinking of Sylvester, he beat upon Bolero. The other man's eyes rolled as his body received the impact of a furious two-fisted barrage of hate-driven blows. He backed away.

Left's right curled. The overhand punch he had been using against such as Green exploded against Bolero's jaw. Bolero did a neat back roll, then stuck upside down against the canvas.

It was one of the quickest knockouts in Los Angeles ring history. Eighteen seconds was all the time the two men spent at the contest. Eight seconds for Lefty to punch—ten seconds for Bolero to be counted out.

Later that night Sam Hall said, "I got a wire from New York. They'll put you on against Porter in two weeks at St. Nick's if you want it."

It was as simple as that. Lefty said slowly, "I guess I ought to fight welters while I can. I'll have to take middles soon."

"You ought to go," said Sam. "I could make money with you here. But the way you feel about things, you have to go."

"George said I would," Lefty nodded. He glanced at Hitchy, who was trying to look

happy and not succeeding. Lefty said, "You're going, too, don't you worry. You and Sam—you're the kind of guys that make fight business worth while. If they were all like you, the game would be decent."

V

NEW YORK was an assault upon all his senses. Then it was a small area bounded by Jacob's Beach, Stillman's and the side street hotel in the Fifties west of Broadway where he shared a room with Hitchy. The latter had known New York not wisely but too well and his experience made things a little easier.

Lefty missed George Baxter, even the shell which sat in the veterans' hospital staring out at nothing. But he knew enough to keep training for Slim Porter, to watch the other men in the famed gym, to pick up tricks day by day, to keep his ears open and his mouth closed.

The promoter asked him about his manager. He said, "George Baxter is my manager and he's sick. I'm on my own."

That seemed good enough. He went out to St. Nick's and Hitchy got him ready and there was a good crowd because the newspapers had played up his quick kayo of Bolero who was known in New York.

They booed him when he came in, which was a shock. The Los Angeles crowds had always cheered him. He blinked his surprise and Hitchy said, "Porter's home town here."

That seemed all right. Lefty looked at the rangy Porter and listened to instructions in a strange, clipped, nasal accent and knew he was a stranger in a far place. He went back to his corner, and yanked on the ropes and the house lights went down and then it wasn't strange any more. It was another white-lighted ring, another man to meet, but it was fight business. Never before had he realized how much of a boxer he had become; now it was brought home to him, the familiar odor of tobacco smoke, resin and sweat, the feel of the padded ring beneath his feet, the sight of a man stalking him with red gloves held before him. What had George said? "Anguish and arnica"—but it was more than that.

He evaded a left lead. Porter was a

stand-up fighter who moved in with short steps, punching, crowding, a cutie with a wallop. Lefty sampled a few of them. Then he threw his hook.

He had developed his hook lately, because he was a natural left-hander boxing from an orthodox stance and the port-side fist carried a lot of authority. He planted it on Porter's head. The punch was high, but it shook the reedy welterweight. Lefty shortened it and dropped it to the body.

Porter eyed him, moving around. Some people made a commotion entering ring-side seats. This was the semi-final to a heavy bout. Porter boxed and fiddled, keeping Lefty away, circling, trying to estimate the danger from the raw westerner who copped eighteen second knockouts from good boys like Bolero.

Lefty did not hurry things. He straightened out the left, danced in Baxter style, stabbed Porter three times without a return. The round ended as Porter fought back in a last second flurry.

Lefty sat on his stool as the lights went up. Across the way, near the ring, was the group which had just entered. He saw the huge, unwieldy figure of Moon Dragoon first. Then he saw Angel Sylvester, dark, laughing, showing white teeth, pointing at Lefty.

Hitchy said, "They're scoutin' you, huh?"

"My name's Baxter," said Lefty shortly.

"And the fat guy hates all Baxters," agreed Hitchy. The whistle sent the little man down. The bell rang.

Lips compressed over his mouthpiece, eyes blazing, Lefty sprang like a lion to ring center. His first punch caught an unprepared Porter on the jaw. The second crashed to the body. The third came curling over and dropped on Porter's chin.

Porter dropped with a sickening thud. Lefty never looked at him. He fixed his gaze upon Moon Dragoon and Angel Sylvester. He could not detect their expressions in the semi-darkness, but he could see that they sat quite still, staring. He chuckled, leaning on the ropes, feeling the heat of the arc lights, listening to the fight mob call his name, not booing now, yelling for him, the new big hitter, the sensation from the West.

George had not meant for him to become

a slugger he knew. It was strange the way he had battered Bolero, then Porter. George had meant for him to rate himself along, taking no chances, pursuing the art of stand-up boxing.

But George had been interrupted before he could teach all this to Lefty Grogan—now Lefty Baxter. All the boy could do now was glean experience and knowledge the hard way—and keep punching. If that was good enough—fine! He meant to make it good enough.

The referee stopped counting, and lifted Lefty's arm. He mitted the crowd, did a small jig of victory for them, still staring down at Dragoon and his party. There were two big men beside Sylvester in adjacent chairs. They had the look of thugs—graduates of the reformatory, perhaps. Lefty sneered at them.

HE FOUGHT three times at St. Nick's, the last two in main events. He won every bout by a knockout.

Then he was in the Garden, underneath the main. He beat two good men, welters.

Then he could no longer make the limit of 145 pounds. He called the sports writers and told them. He announced that he was ready to meet any middleweight in the country and ended, "I would particularly like to meet Angel Sylvester, who is knocking over all those tankers in the sticks."

Hitchy had put him onto that. The little man knew all the bageroo boys in the business. Hitchy's past had been clouded somewhat with similar excursions into the water—and one diver gets to know another. Sylvester was beating the bushes with fixed fights for Moon Dragoon—although the man Steel was still on the books as his nominal manager.

Poker Weller, the champion, seized upon Lefty's challenge. His camp issued a statement saying that newcomer Lefty Baxter was, like his cousin, a modest, straightforward character, and his defy of Sylvester proved it. Who had Sylvester ever beaten, they asked. Let him fight Lefty Baxter.

What they meant was that they wanted to hold onto the title awhile longer and Lefty was giving them a chance to do this. Poker was getting too old and they knew

it. If Lefty could knock over this upstart who, they well knew, was backed by Moon Dragoon, so much longer would elapse during which time they could capitalize on the title.

It made no difference to Lefty. He just ached to fight Sylvester. It had nothing to do with his career, with becoming champion. He did not think about gaining the title. He thought about George Baxter and what Sylvester had deliberately done to him. He thought about Moon Dragoon, who would be betting on Sylvester. He thought about knocking Sylvester into Dragoon's nonexistent lap.

It never occurred to him to doubt he could beat this boxer who had years of experience on him and was several inches taller and pounds heavier. He just wanted to meet Sylvester. The news from George was neither good nor bad—there wasn't any because George did not write. He wanted to get Sylvester and punish him and get the news to George. Maybe it would help, maybe it would snap George out of his lethargy.

HE TRIED every angle he knew to force the issue and there were sports writers who detested Moon Dragoon, and who soon took up the cudgels on Lefty's side. Still, Lefty was amazed when Sylvester returned from hollow victories in the hinterlands and Steel proclaimed that they would like nothing better than to meet Lefty!

The Garden jumped at the match. The newspapers heralded it in sports page headlines. The drums began to beat with sudden clamor. The middle champion would have to meet the winner—the bout immediately assumed great proportions.

And then powerful influences were brought to bear and it seemed Angel Sylvester would not fight for the Garden. He would only fight over in Jersey for the Sports Palace A. A. They had the ball park sewed up and it would be outdoors and make more money that way. If Lefty Baxter had any sense he would sign at once and no nonsense.

Hitchy said, "Moon Dragoon. He's the Sports Palace."

Lefty said, "What the hell do I care?"

Hitchy said, "You shouldn't do it, Lefty."

"I'm doing it," said Lefty. "I'll fight him in a cellar."

"In a cellar, okay. But not for Moon Dragoon."

"I'm signing," said Lefty stubbornly. "He won't meet me any other place."

So he signed. He went into training in Jersey, at an outdoor camp. Hitchy went along, seeming smaller and more self-effacing than ever—but Hitchy, unknown to Lefty, tasted his food, slept outside his door every night, watched everyone who came near Lefty with narrow suspicion.

The training went all right. Lefty had big boys, good targets, and he had Slim Porter and a couple of boxers for sparring partners. He plunged into it with everything he had. Whatever happened to him in his fistic career, this was the fight which would mean the most. He knew he was rushing himself too fast, he knew the dangers which lay in meeting the cruel, hard-punching older fighter. But he was making this one for something much more than himself. He was making it for George Baxter—and the good of the fight game. He wanted to repay Sylvester—and he wanted to run Dragoon into a hole and hurt him as much as possible. He hoped Dragoon bet his shirt on Sylvester. He meant to blast the bigger man out of the ring.

They came in the dead of night. The two big men brushed Hitchy away from Lefty's door and burst it open. The cottage was right in the camp, but no one stirred.

Moon Dragoon puffed a little from the effort of walking across the road. Lefty came up with his fists clenched, but one of the men idly swung a blackjack and Lefty faced them, naked save for shorts, standing alongside the bed, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He said, "I don't scare very easy fat boy."

"You don't eh?" The blond hair was coarse and thick. The pink face was evil beyond imagination now in its triumph. "George Baxter's cousin don't scare, eh? Ha!"

"Why didn't you come alone? You'd have caught another beating," said Lefty. "Like the one George gave you."

The red lips twisted. "Come in, Pitzzy and see your pal."

Lefty's heart stopped beating for a

moment. Pitzzy Magin lounged into the room. The hulking, loutish reform school bully was clad in hideously loud, new raiment. He was smoking a cigar. He leered at Lefty and said, "Baxter, huh? Big shot, huh? They'll love this back at the reform school, Lefty Grogan."

"Maybe they will" smirked Dragoon. "Maybe they won't. You see, Grogan? They haven't caught on yet. We're taking care of Pitzzy. He won't squeal. Not if you play ball."

"Of course you'll play ball. Won't you, Lefty?" sneered Pitzzy.

"You'll have to take a beating. To make it look good. No amateurish dives," mocked Dragoon. "You'll have to stand up to it. And you'll have to lose. By a knockout, in the sixth. Only six rounds. Just a few scars and a little blood."

"They'd sure beat you worse back in the can," Pitzzy told him. "You can't crush outa there and not ketch it when they getcha."

Dragoon said, "Oh, he'll play ball. All these rats are alike. Big time when they're on top—small time when they're caught. Well, so-long—Grogan! Be seeing you!" He strolled out.

Pitzzy said, "Yeah—be seein' you. I might need a buck from you. For an old school pal, huh, Grogan?"

The two big thugs went last. Lefty stepped into the hall and picked up little Hitchy and washed his bruises and put him to bed. His mind was going around like a squirrel in a cage. His heart was beating now—beating far too swiftly.

VI

AT THE weighing-in, the doctor said sharply to Lefty, "You're in good enough shape—but do you feel all right? Your color is bad."

Lefty said, "I'm fine." He was conscious of the glaring eyes of Moon Dragoon. "A little nervous, perhaps."

The lack of sleep showed on him, he supposed. He had spent too many hours thinking of the drab walls, the brutal guards, the terrible nights, the poor food of the reformatory.

The doctor grunted. Sylvester looked fine,

sleek as a cat, tanned as a nut. Lefty followed Hitchy out of the building and into a taxicab. They drove to a place Hitchy had found, a quiet hotel on the outskirts of Newark.

Hitchy said, "You gotta try to sleep. You gotta. This ain't good, Lefty."

"You were right. I shouldn't have made the fight. I shoulda stood in bed," said Lefty "I've been dumb all the way through."

He saw it easily enough now. Sylvester had campaigned in Kansas, Pitzzy had recognized a news photo—it was simple to figure it all out.

Lefty had rushed into a fight with a more experienced man before he was ready—and to top it off Dragoon took no chances and put the fight in the bag. Smart Dragoon—stupid Lefty.

The forces of evil; they were at the bottom where nobody cared what became of poor Maxie. They were at the top where Dragoon flourished. George had been right, always right.

Somehow he worried through the hours. Hitchy got a taxi again and they drove out to the ball park. They went under the stands and into the dressing room and locked the door. Hitchy said, "I seen those two big mugs on the way in. They was watchin' us."

"Yeah. I saw them." A knock came on the door and he flinched, but Hitchy would not let anyone in. Lefty undressed and watched the little man wrap his bandages. He said, "We were supposed to clean up, to keep it straight and show them right people could get to the top. That was what George wanted."

Hitchy said, "I been all through it, Lefty. Watcha goin' to do in there, kid?"

Lefty said, "I wish I knew what to do." The remembrance of the reformatory swept over him, nauseating him.

Hitchy said, "There's some angles—" He seemed to be listening for something.

Lefty said, "How much time we got? I want to get it over!"

"There's a lotta things to consider-like," Hitchy said.

Another rap came on the door and Hitchy said, "Whozit?"

"Let nobody in," said Lefty fiercely. "Nobody!"

A voice said, "You'd better let me in."

Hitchy exhaled vigorously, "Ahhh!" He rushed to the door and flung it open.

Sam Hall bustled into the room. Lefty was on his feet, staring, bandaged hands outstretched.

Behind Sam came a gaunt man in loose-fitting clothing, a man with hospital pallor upon him, but with clear, straight-seeing eyes.

"G e o r g i e !" Lefty almost wailed "Georgie!" You . . . you're all right, Georgie!"

Sam Hall fussed, "If Hitchy hadn't wrote me about it and I hadn't been out to see George—Now what is this?"

George said, "I'll take over, Sam. You just back us. I'll handle it." His voice was crisp and sharp. "Let me see those bandages. H'mmm—very good Now this Sylvester—you shouldn't be fighting him, of course. Too soon. But since you're in it—"

Lefty stammered, "They're going to send me back to the school."

"They're going to try," corrected George. "You didn't think they would stop trying just because you lost, did you?"

Lefty said, "They—okay, George. Whatever you say." He was trembling.

George said, "Start shadow boxing! Warm up!" He turned and spoke quietly with Sam Hall. Lefty could not hear what he said. Lefty moved about, trying to work up a sweat. The glands would not function. Outside a man called, and he knew the time had come. He was still shivering when they put the robe around him and started him out through the dugout and across the baseball field to where the ring was pitched.

HE HEARD the crowd yell for Sylvester, then his own name went around as he clambered clumsily into the area of white arcs. He caught a glimpse of Moon Dragoon with his two huskies muttering in the fat man's ear, of Pitzzy Magin, mouth slack, staring at George Baxter. Then the usual dignitaries were being introduced and Poker Weller's battered face grinned at him and Tunney was nodding to him and Jack Dempsey was getting a huge ovation. Then George was talking to him and he was trying to understand, ". . . tried to get here quicker but we were delayed. You've got to make your own fight against Sylvester. You know

his style, his dirty tricks. You'll have to take a lot. I didn't want you to take yet what you'll have to take tonight."

Lefty said, "I know, I was wrong."

"Never mind that. Go in there and fight him. Ill be watching. How is your left?"

"It's been pretty good."

"All right. Don't show an elbow, kid. I'll be watching." George's face went soft. "You've been a good kid. Sam told me. I guess it was a minor miracle that I snapped out of it when Sam came. The doctors were happy about it, anyway."

And if he got beaten, Lefty thought, George would maybe go back into that half-world. He was terribly thin and worn and pale. If he saw his protegee getting knocked to pieces—!

The referee was calling him out. The man Steel glared at George. There was a squawk about a manager's license, which George produced from his hip pocket like a magician taking a rabbit from a hat. Then Steel protested against the grease Hitchy had smeared on Lefty's brows and cheeks. The referee wiped it off. There was no doubt who had hired the referee, Lefty thought. Sylvester's dirty tricks would not draw disqualification tonight.

The instructions were over. George paused before he went through the ropes. He said, "Kid, you got up here, somehow. Now let's show them we're on the level."

Lefty said, "I'll do my best, George."

He was too taut, he knew. He could not sweat. He heard the bell as though in a daze. He automatically came to taw, hands up, going through the motions. He saw the dark, hated face of Sylvester and threw a left into it.

Sylvester rode with the blow and countered with a right to the body. Lefty moved, a bit sluggish, then dropped over another long left. Sylvester slipped it and put his own jab to Lefty's face, then slammed a vicious right to the ribs. Lefty sat down on the floor. He had never been hit so hard.

The crowd was up, yipping at prospect of a quick, brutal finish. Lefty rolled over, one hand to his side, looking for George. He saw the pallid face, the burning eyes, the thin hand showing him eight fingers. He got up, reeling.

Sylvester was on him. Sharp, slashing

blows drove him around the ring. The black eyes were relentless, the red fists poked and prodded, seeking hurtful places. His nose bled, his eye opened for the first time in his career and blood flowed. Lefty ducked and ran and jabbed and ran some more.

The bell was a welcome relief. He pounded to his corner, head down. Hitchy was quick with the patchwork. George said in his ear, "You're not moving right, you're not in there. Are you going to let him kill you? Can't you move around, kid? Let's see what you've got—and what he's got."

The bell sent him to action. He coasted along, sticking out the left. Sylvester was very good, very strong, coming at him. There would be no real attempt at a knock-out until the sixth, Lefty knew. Dragoon had bet a lot of money on that sixth round. But meantime Sylvester was to have fun, cut him up.

Lefty dodged a left swing. Sylvester was taking it easy now, looking for an opening. His defense was very good. Lefty swung about, trying to solve it. He pried in with a long, straight one. He put a little snap into it and Sylvester's head went back.

The dark boxer scowled and flew to the attack. He was quick and his punches hurt. Lefty went close and Sylvester rubbed the laces over his cut eye and the blood ran again. Lefty fought loose and Sylvester back-handed him on the break, nearly dropping him.

Lefty did not even look to the referee. He was aware of sweat suddenly standing out on his chest, his arms, his thighs. It mingled with the blood on his face and ran down off his square jaw. His green eyes showed the hidden flame within him.

The bell ended the second round.

Lefty sat down. George said, "You reached him once. Try it again. He's further along than you by a year. But you reached him."

Lefty grunted, "I'm sweatin'—"

He started the third at a bit faster pace. Sylvester missed a left, missed a right, tried to clinch. Lefty danced back and fought him off with the jab. Sylvester moved in a circle, attacking but not with force, trying to reopen the cut. Lefty ducked and weaved and then moved. He chopped a right to the body and poured in his first left hook.

It took Sylvester by surprise. It knocked him into the ropes. Again the crowd came up. Sylvester came off firing both hands. Lefty got home a right to the body. Sylvester winced and dogged it to get back his wind. Lefty trotted forward and threw another left hook to the head. Sylvester staggered, recovered, put his thumb in Lefty's bad eye.

The pain was terrific, but Lefty held his ground. He moved in close. He wrestled Sylvester to the ropes, held him with his right hand and poured three punishing lefts to the belly. Sylvester tried to get away, pounding the top of Lefty's bobbing head. The referee leaped on Lefty's back and hauled him off. The round ended.

George said, "It's a hard road, kid, like I said. Keep after him." George looked desperate. The referee came over to inspect Lefty's cut eye and George said to him in a low voice, "You dirty crumb, you ought to be arrested."

The referee said in the same low accents, "Gee, George it's Dragoon. You want me to get killed?"

"Maybe you will," snapped George. "Keep it up."

The man said, "Okay, George." He walked away looking worried.

Lefty said, "The hell with him." The hatred he had felt for Sylvester was returning in full force, over the top of his troubles. He remembered the night Sylvester had given it to George.

He went out for the fourth with loaded fists.

VII

HE COULD see Dragoon and his little mob plainly now. He could see them past the shoulders of Sylvester. It was the fifth round and Sylvester was leaning on him, trying to bull him. The muscles trained in the hard schools did not give. Lefty thrust the dark fighter away from him. There was blood on Sylvester now, too.

Lefty laughed at him. The cut was open above his eye and the grimace was red and distorted, but he was laughing. He hit Sylvester in the body with another of his short, killing, natural left hooks.

Sylvester was trying them all now, stepping on his foot, using his elbows, the back

and heel of his fist. Lefty ducked and rolled and suddenly came out of his crouch. Sylvester backed away.

Lefty shuffled in, quick and graceful. He looked a bit like George then, sighting along the left, the straight one. He copped Sylvester's eye and snapped home two. The dark man reeled and ran. Lefty went to him. He was punishing his man now. He was taking it, for Sylvester was still strong, still swinging. But the pain and gore did not matter. He was getting to his man.

The bell made him resentful. He ran to his corner. George was ready with the sponge, Hitchy had the collodion. George said, "I never saw a more savage fight. He's a good animal. He's trying to weather it, hoping you'll dive in the next round. He'll come all out at you from the bell. Let him waste his ammunition."

There was color in George's face now. Hitchy's eyes were blazing as he worked with deft fingers. Lefty inhaled fresh air and gripped the ropes with outspread, brawny arms. Dragoon had his fat hands on his fat knees and was leaning his yellow crop of wiry hair forward. Dragoon had bet his shirt on this round coming up. Pitzzy Magin still had not fully closed his mouth.

The referee looked anxiously at George. The whistle blew. George said, "This is it, kid. Keep it clean and fight it out."

The bell, and Sylvester was coming out like a hurricane going some place to destroy things. Both fists were churning. He was bent at the waist, his surly face confident, his punches winging.

Lefty slipped, ducked, parried, tied Sylvester up. The dark skinned fighter whispered, "This is where you bow out, chump."

Lefty said, "Inna pig's—neck!"

Sylvester glared, facing him. Sylvester led with a right, tried to thumb Lefty with the other glove. Lefty ducked and swung inside. His right fist connected with Sylvester's ribs. His left ranged upward, seeking the head.

Sylvester fell back, mouth agape. Lefty stepped in, then out, jabbing. He cut Sylvester's cheek with his left. He raked Sylvester's mouth with his right. He dropped a cross inside and thumped Sylvester's middle.

Dragoon was almost off his chair. The two thugs moved restlessly. Pitzzy Magin goggled.

George called, "Up and at him now!"

Lefty was watching his man. He was feinting left, then right. Sylvester was covered up, waiting for a chance to fight back. Lefty slid in, offering his head, jerking it back. Sylvester led with a left.

Lefty's counter was lightning quick. It licked against Sylvester's jaw. It started him careening sideways. Lefty went along the same course, facing his adversary; his hands poised before him. Sylvester tried to run.

Lefty was right there. His left hooked into the body again. Sylvester doubled over both gloves. Lefty brought up another left. It crushed Sylvester's nose flat against his face. He threw out both arms, staggering.

Relentless, Lefty pursued. He could see George, that other time, undaunted, almost senseless, receiving a ruthless beating from this man. He evaded a weak swing, got his head on Sylvester's chest. He punched to the body, one-two, one-two, one-two. The blows made a drumming sound. Everyone in the ball park was standing, howling. Everyone but Dragoon, who sat, crouched on the edge of his seat, his face fairly maniacal with rage.

Lefty saw the whites of Sylvester's eyes. He quickly threw up a high, hard left. The referee lingered, half in the way. Lefty shoved him aside.

Sylvester rolled off the ropes. Lefty met him, cocking his right. He feinted with the left and Sylvester moved to avoid the relentless hook which had devastated him. The right came up, short and inside, Lefty's own copyrighted punch. It sang through the night air and plopped with a dull, sodden sound against Sylvester's jaw.

The dark fighter fell forward, on hands and knees. The referee motioned to Lefty to go to a neutral corner, then turned, starting the count at "one" failing to pick it up from the timekeeper.

Sam Hall stood up at ringside. A tall man stood beside him. The tall man commanded, "Count that fighter out!"

It must be a Commissioner, Lefty thought. The referee stammered to "nine," hesitated. Sylvester tried to get up. He fell flat on his face, his nose, broken and bleeding, against the canvas. The referee said heavily, "Ten—and out."

Lefty stepped forward. He stared down at

Sylvester and for the first time in his life had no pity for a defeated foe.

THEN the crowd was leaping and acclaiming a new contender, a boy marked for championship heights. The police came and Lefty shuddered at sight of the uniforms, but they only wanted to escort him from the ring to the dressing room through the howling, adulating mob. George was wrapping the robe around him and George's face was serene, and Hitchy was wild with joy.

They were in the dressing room at last, with the reporters gone to make the last editions. They were waiting. Hitchy was in a far corner, packing the bags, hunched a little. George sat on the rubbing table, swinging his legs. Lefty knotted his tie and said, "I guess I'm not scared any more. I guess if they take me back I'll be able to do my bit and come out all right. It was worse worryin' about it than it is now."

The door slammed open. The two big thugs came in. Then Moon Dragoon made his entrance. Then Pitzy slunk in.

George said, "We've been waiting for you, Dragoon."

The fat man snarled, "The cops'll be here in a minute. But first I got somethin' I want done." He motioned to the two big men. "G'wan. Work 'em over. Pitzy! Get in there with that mace. Slam the three of them a few times."

The big men had drawn their blackjacks. Lefty swung with sudden explosive-ness. He hit the nearest one and knocked him clear across the room. He raced past him and hit Moon Dragoon on the nose.

Dragoon howled and sat down. George had not moved. He said quietly, "That's not necessary, Lefty. It's all taken care of."

Lefty said, "It may not be necessary, but it's fun." He kicked Dragoon in the ribs.

"Lefty!" said George.

"It's something to remember in the reformatory," Lefty said.

He was conscious then that the big men were not moving about their appointed tasks. He stared at them; at Pitzy, who was frozen with fright.

Then he saw Hitchy. From the bag Hitchy had taken two large revolvers. He was holding them as though he had handled guns before. He was not aiming at anyone in

particular, but neither of the hoodlums was making any moves.

George called, "Sam, where are you?"

"Coming," puffed Sam Hall, bustling into the room. He stared at Dragoon and said, "Well, had an accident?"

The tall man from the Commission was behind Sam. Next came two plain clothes detectives.

Dragoon yowled, "I been attacked. This young murderer who is callin' himself Lefty Baxter ain't named Baxter at all. He is Aloysius Grogan, wanted—"

The Commissioner said, "You might be interested to know we have just lifted your license to promote anything here, Dragoon. We have been looking for this excuse for years. And that you are under arrest for attempting to coerce Lefty Baxter into throwing the fight tonight to your man, Sylvester. Officer, that is Magin over there, I believe you want him."

Handcuffs clicked on Magin. Dragoon essayed to rise, lost his balance and sat down heavily again. His eyes were popping. His wild yellow hair stood on end.

Sam Hall said, "Those two bruisers will take some sort of a rap, of course. That's a pretty good clean-up, Commissioner. Glad I could be of service. The fight game can be cleaned up so long as there are men of prompt action like you around."

The Commissioner said, "Baxter, you were a credit to the game tonight. It was a brave, a brilliant fight."

"His name's Grogan" bellowed Dragoon. "He's an escaped—"

"We know all about that," snapped the Commissioner. "Are you ready, gentlemen? Let us remove these carrion from the ball park before they contaminate the very earth."

Dragoon was still yowling when they shoved him out. Lefty stared at George,

at Sam. Hitchy put away the two guns and grinned. "First time I ever had a license to handle 'em," he murmured.

Lefty said, "They—they don't want me? I don't go back to the school?"

"We stopped in Kansas," said George gently. "Sam knows a lot of people around the country. He saw the Governor. They are investigating that place right now. Also, they don't want to persecute a young man who is making good, going to school to advance himself, and who was convicted of stealing food in the first place. People aren't all that bad, Lefty. Not if they know the facts."

Lefty said, "Then I'm free—free?"

"You can resume your own name any time," smiled George.

Lefty faced the older man. He said, "I'm havin' it changed legally to Baxter just as soon as I can. If you don't mind."

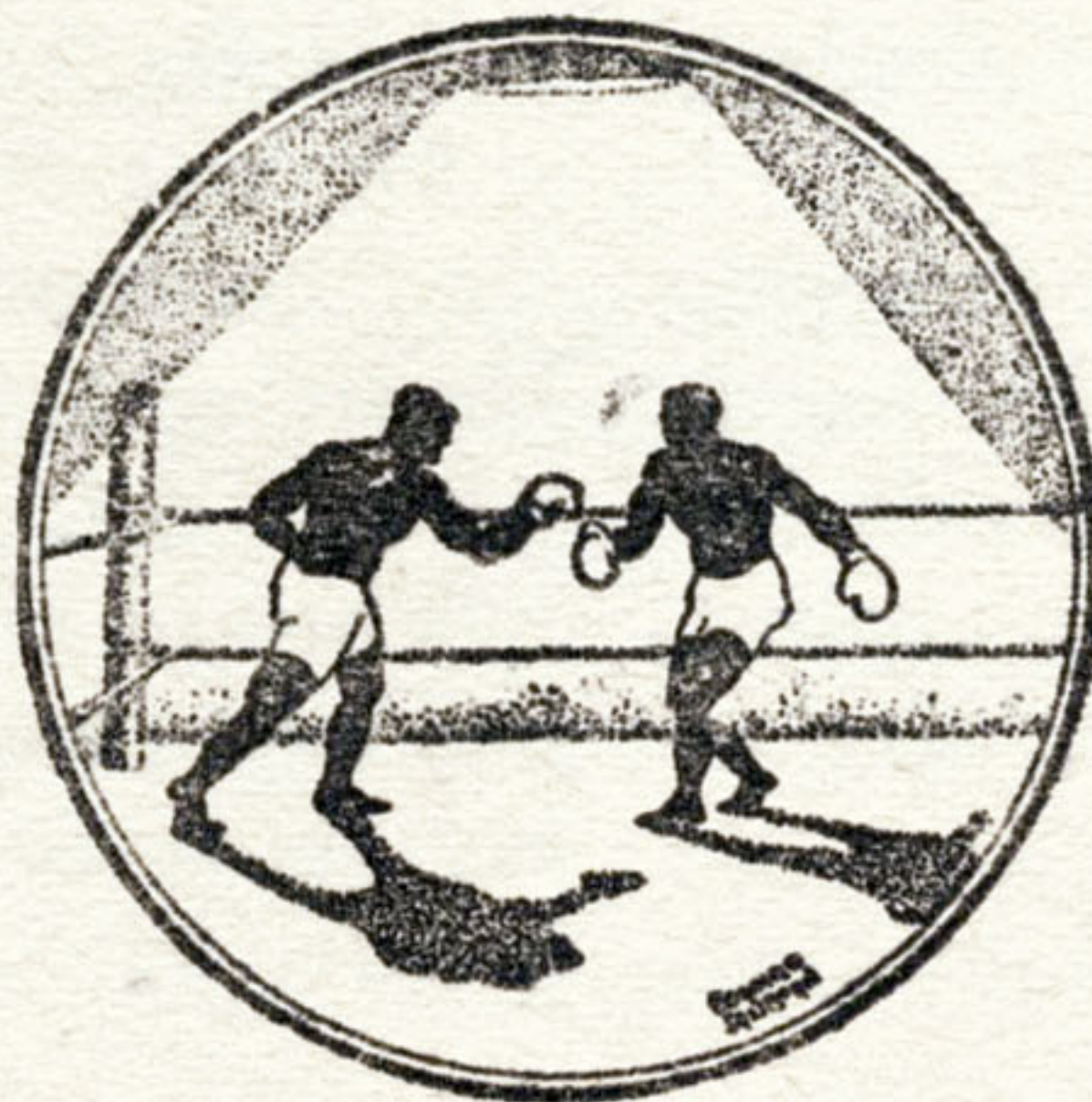
George said softly, "Mind? I'd be very proud, Lefty."

"Gettin' to the top the right way—that was your way, George. I couldn't have done any of it without you."

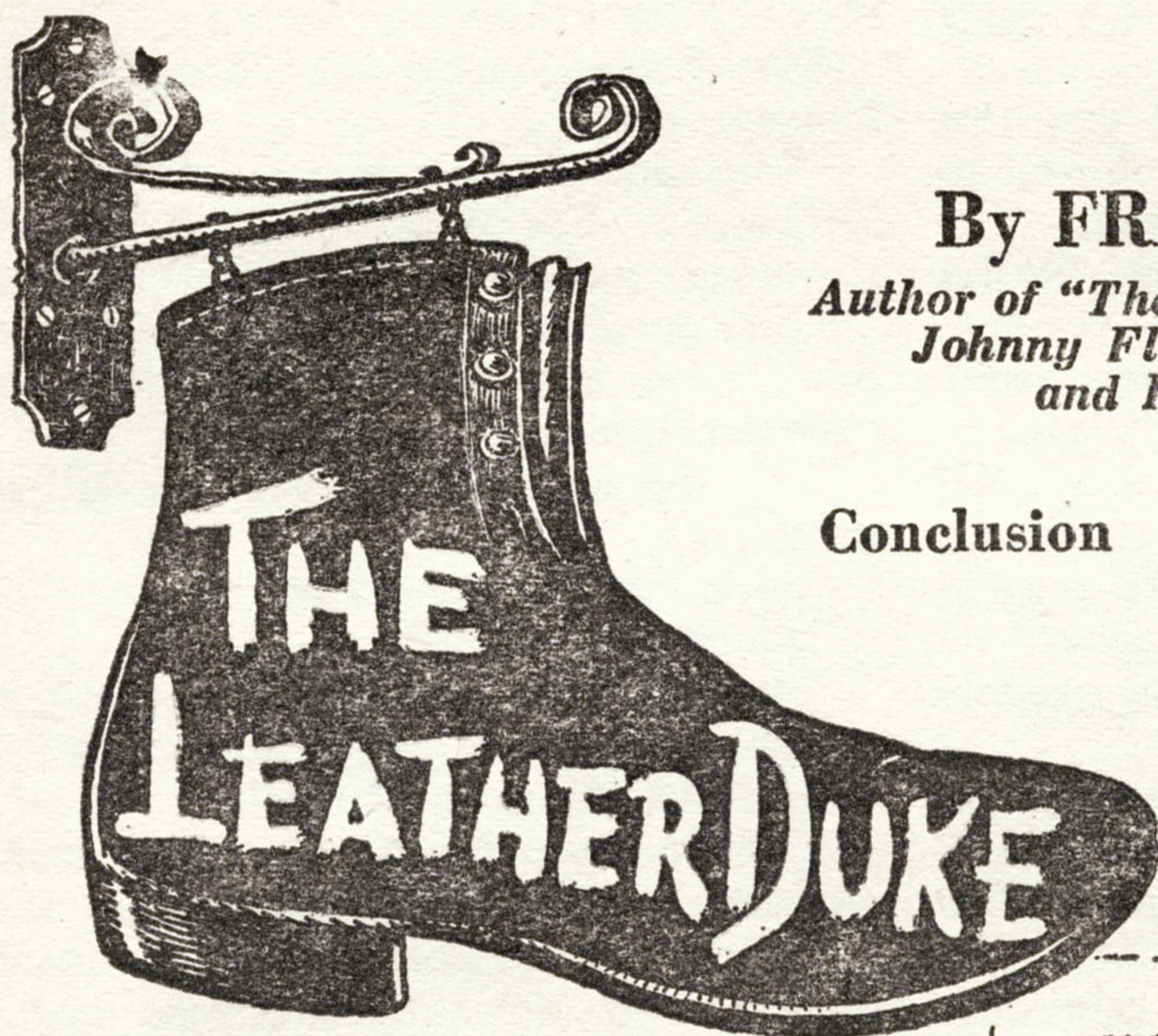
George made a deprecatory gesture. "We take in about thirty thousand dollars tonight. I suggest we all have some fun. Why—I haven't had a real celebration in many years!"

Sam Hall said, "I know just the place. Moon Dragoon owned a piece of it yesterday. But he bet the mortgage on it—and like a durn fool I happened to cover him! Imagine me, a Californian, with a New York night spot on my hands!"

They went out, laughing. Lefty held onto George's thin arm. It would take sunshine and exercise and rest to restore fully the health of his friend. He meant to spend money and time on it. He had come out of the darkness and this man had led him. He was, he knew, the luckiest of young men.



“. . . and So What's Wrong With Johnny Fletcher," Said Johnny, "Is That When He Has Money, He Won't Work."



By **FRANK GRUBER**
*Author of "The Jungle Shawl" and other
Johnny Fletcher Mystery Books
and Radio Adventures*

Conclusion



XVII

THE CAB rolled up Michigan, got onto Lake Shore Drive and a few minutes later seemed to be lost in the winding drives of Lincoln Park, but the driver executed a series of complicated turns and

suddenly swung into Armitage. A few minutes later he pulled up in front of a dingy three-story apartment house.

He got out and opened the door for Johnny and Sam. "Fella been followin' us ever since we left the club," he said.

"Nothing serious," said Johnny. "Just a private eye."

The cabby looked at the apartment house. "Wife trying to get evidence, eh?"

"Wait'll you see the evidence I've got." Johnny took a ten-dollar bill from his pocket. "This is your big night. We're going to make the rounds of some hot spots."

"Swell," said the driver. "I know a couple of dillies if you run out of places."

Johnny and Sam entered the foyer of the apartment house and found the mail boxes. A white card under one read: *Miller-Ballard, 3-C.*

They climbed the stairs to the third floor and found Apartment 3C. Johnny leaned against the door buzzer and the door was opened in a matter of three seconds by a girl with natural auburn hair and the smoothest complexion Johnny had seen in four years. The girl was fairly tall and weighed about eighty pounds less than the two hundred mark that Sam had complained about. Johnny shot a quick look at Sam, saw that his mouth was gaping.

"Miss Ballard," said Johnny. "May I introduce your date, my friend, Sam Cragg?"

"Right name," said the girl, "wrong date."

"I'm Johnny Fletcher. Let's talk it over."

Nancy Miller appeared behind the red-headed girl. "Johnny!" she cried. She was wearing a long evening dress that must have cost her four or five weekly paychecks.

"Your date," said Miss Ballard. "Excuse me." She backed into the apartment and Johnny and Sam followed. Sam's eyes never once left the redheaded girl.

Nancy Miller looked at Sam Cragg, then at Johnny. Her head tilted to one side. Johnny grinned.

"You did say you had a girl-friend for Sam, didn't you?"

"No," said Nancy, coolly. "I didn't."

"You mean I forgot to tell you that Sam and I always double-date girls?"

"You didn't mention it. And if you had, I'd have told you that I never double-date."

Johnny nodded toward Nancy's roommate. "I don't think Sam would mind."

Miss Ballard heard that. "Sorry, chum. I've got a date.

"With your regular boy-friend?"

"Yes."

Johnny made a deprecating gesture. "What's one date more or less with a steady? Sam's new, he's different. And he's the strongest man in the world."

"Oh, the strong man Nancy was telling about."

"She's told you about him? And me?"

"About you, plenty!"

"Shut up, Jane!" snapped Nancy Miller.

"Go ahead, Janie," urged Johnny. "I like to hear nice things about me."

"Johnny," said Nancy. "I let you make this date against my better judgment. I've got a very dull novel here, from the rental library, but I think I'd just as soon read it as go out with you."

"Now," said Johnny, appeasingly. "I've got a cab waiting downstairs. I'm all set to show you a few very warm spots."

"Like the Bucket of Blood, perhaps?"

"They've got a dance tonight."

"They have one every Friday night."

Nancy went to a closet and got out a coat. "What about him?" she asked, nodding to Sam.

"Gordon's been feeling his oats a little too much lately," Jane Ballard suddenly said. "I think I'll stand him up tonight. Do him good!"

"Atta girl!" cried Johnny.

"Oh, boy!" chortled Sam.

"Jane," said Nancy Miller, "if you don't mind—"

"Oh, I don't mind," exclaimed Jane Ballard. "I'll come along for the laughs."

There was a glint in Nancy's blue eyes, but she turned away and got her purse. When she came back the glint was gone. "All right, Fletcher and Cragg, bring on your laughs."

"The first one's waiting downstairs," said Johnny, "a private detective in a black Chevrolet. He's been shadowing me all day."

"If you think I'm going out with a detective following me, you're crazy," Nancy flared.

"What's the difference?" asked Johnny.

"I want him to follow me. Saves me the trouble of following him."

Nancy stared at Johnny a moment, then she exhaled softly. "Where do you come in on all this, Johnny?"

"I'm an innocent bystander, that's all."

"Innocent bystanders sometimes get hurt."

"Who's going to hurt me? Freddie Wendland? or—Elliott Towner?"

Nancy whirled away, walked to a wall mirror and put new lips on her mouth. Jane Ballard, in the meantime, got her purse and coat.

Nancy put away her lipstick. "All right, let's go."

THEY left the apartment and crossed the sidewalk to the waiting taxicab. Johnny didn't even bother to look for Begley, the private detective. He was parked nearby, no question of that. They all climbed into the cab.

"Somebody's got to sit on somebody's lap," Johnny said, plumping down and pulling Nancy onto his knees. She was stiff and resistant for a moment, but then leaned back against him. Sam shot a disappointed look at Johnny as he took the seat on the far side. Jane seated herself between Johnny and Sam.

The cabby swiveled his head. "Where to?"

"The Bucket of Blood," said Johnny.

"What's that?"

Nancy exclaimed. "Another of your jokes."

"Uh-uh, the name intrigues me. I'd like to see the place."

"I've got on my new dress," Nancy said, angrily. "I thought you mentioned we were going—"

"Maybe later on. Lets take a look at the Bucket of Blood, first."

"Mister," said the cabby, patiently. "I know a Bucket of Blood down on Wentworth, near 22nd. There's another out on Kedzie Boulevard."

"The one we want is on Clybourn Avenue. The Clybourn Hall, it's called."

"Oh, *that* place!"

The driver meshed gears and the cab shot away. It roared up Armitage to Halsted, turned left and a few minutes later,

diagonalled into Clybourn. The brakes squealed and the car came to a stop.

The group got out of the taxi. The building before which they had stopped was an ancient three-story brick affair. The first floor housed a tavern. A wide door and a stairway led up to the second floor. A banner over the doorway announced: *Clybourn Turn Verein Dance. \$1.00 Admission. Ladies Free.*

"Ladies, free," Johnny exclaimed. "That's a break."

"Ladies don't come here," snapped Nancy.

"Nancy, darling," said Jane Ballard sweetly, "your claws are showing."

"Thank you, dear, for telling me," retorted Nancy. "When we get home tonight, I'll file them down."

"Mustn't fight, girls," chided Johnny. "We came here for fun." He caught Nancy's elbow and started up the long flight of stairs.

Music pelted them as they climbed. It wasn't good, but it was loud and that was what the patrons of the Clybourn Hall seemed to want. Although it was still early, there were already three or four hundred people in the large hall and twenty-five or thirty were crowded at the head of the stairs, either debating whether to go in or wishing they could go in if they had the admission.

Two middle-aged men stood in the doorway. White bands on their arms had the word: "Committee" printed on in blue letters.

Johnny gave one of the men two dollars and received four tickets that were promptly taken up by the other committeeman. They entered the dance hall and the first person Johnny saw was Karl Kessler, dancing with a plump flaxen-haired woman of about forty.

Kessler's eyes widened in astonishment. He stopped dancing, said something to the woman and she walked off. Kessler came over.

"Surprised seeing you two here," he said, addressing Johnny and Sam. Then he nodded to Nancy. "Hello, Nancy."

"Hello, Karl," Nancy said, "meet my room-mate, Jane Ballard."

"Pleasetameetcha," said Karl. He turned back to Johnny. "Didn't expect you at a German-Hungarian dance."

"Oh, is that what this is?"

"It's the Clybourn Turn Verein—athletic club, you know. This is their gymnasium week days."

"You're a member of the club?"

Kessler grimaced. "Me? I get enough exercise at the factory."

The music stopped and the dancers left the floor, but Johnny's group remained in a little huddle. Sam nudged Johnny and when he caught his eye, nodded to someone at the right of the floor.

Carmella Vitali, surrounded by several dark complected young men and a couple of Italian girls was watching Johnny with a fierce scowl on his features.

"Oh-oh, the Black Hand's landed!"

Karl Kessler looked off. "Yah," he snorted. "Them punks come up here sometimes. Get drunk, pick fights with decent people. That Carmella's the worst one of the bunch."

"Might as well be at the factory," cut in Nancy Miller. "Who else is here we know?"

Kessler shrugged. "Three-four people. After all, there's six hundred people at the factory and most of them live on the north side. You're bound to meet some of them around here."

"I had a different idea," Nancy said, meaningly.

"In time, Taffy," Johnny said, jovially. "Say, d'you mind? I've got to make an important phone call."

"Oh, go right ahead," said Nancy. "There're only about fifty stags here and I'll make out all right."

"You always make out all right, huh, Nancy?" asked Kessler, winking jovially. "If I was three-four years younger, I make play for you myself."

"Keep the wolves away from her, Karl," said Johnny. "I'll be back in time for the next dance."

He had already spotted a sign, TELEPHONE, and headed in that direction, but when he got to the sign he saw an arrow underneath pointing into an adjoining room, a bar-room. Johnny went in and found customers lined up four deep at a short bar. There was a phone booth at the side of the bar, fortunately empty, and Johnny entered.

He closed the door, drowning out most of the noise from the bar, and dropped a

nickel into the slot. He dialed the night number of the Wiggins Detective Agency.

Wiggins' wheezing voice came on: "Wiggins talking."

"Johnny Fletcher calling. I thought you were going to pull off Begley,"

"Why, I couldn't do that, Mr. Fletcher," replied Wiggins. "The customer paid for a job and I've got to—"

"He paid until when?" Johnny cut in.

"Well, midnight."

"All right," snapped Johnny, "I'm glad you're conscientious, anyway. Now, what have you got for me so far?"

"Quite a lot. Al Piper was married, three children. Owned his own home, rather nice place on West Grace Street, worth around \$15,000 to \$18,000. No trouble with his wife, as far as my operator could find out. Mrs. Piper has taken it badly. She insists he had no enemies."

"He had one enemy," Johnny interrupted. "The person who killed him."

"You're so right, Mr. Fletcher," wheezed Wiggins. "And as far as that goes, a wife never knows what her husband does away from home. Mrs. Piper thought her husband the soul of propriety, but my operator got an entirely different picture of Piper, away from home. He was a boozier, a fighting boozier. Picked quarrels with strangers. There was a place on Lincoln, near Fullerton he had a fight with a man only last week."

"Get the man's name?"

"No. He was a stranger in the tavern. Piper they knew. The bartender thought Piper knew the man, though. Said they sat at a table for a long time, talking and bickering, then suddenly Piper hit the other man in the face with a whiskey bottle. The other man knocked Piper down, kicked him in the stomach, than ran out before anyone could stop him."

"Get anything on Carmella Vitali?"

"He's got a police record. Quite a record. Twenty-eight years old and has been arrested nine times, the first time when he was only thirteen years old. Did six months in the parental school, but hasn't served any time since. Probation two different periods."

"What's he been arrested for mostly?"

"Hoodlumism, vagrancy. Assault and

battery, five times. Got fined three times."

"Small stuff," said Johnny.

"Oh, don't underestimate him, Fletcher. One of those assault charges was pretty serious. The victim pulled through, but if somebody important hadn't put in a good word for him he'd have gone up for quite a spell."

"Who was it put in the plea for him?"

"Alderman Jensen, of the 22nd Ward. The man whose skull Carmella fractured refused to sign a complaint. Jensen got to him."

"Who was it?"

"Man named Havetler."

"Don't know him—Mmm, what about Towner?"

Wiggins was quiet for a moment. Then his voice came on, again apologetically, it seemed to Johnny. "That's a tough one, Mr. Fletcher. My man's still down at the *Star* newspaper morgue. He's telephoned in a couple of times, but he hasn't given me one thing about Mr. Towner, that everyone in Chicago doesn't already know."

"I told you I don't know a thing about him. You and the whole city may know Towner, but I don't. What's the dope on him?"

"He's a very rich man. His father started the business in 1884, first a tannery, then another, then the leather factory. Forty-nine per cent of the Algar Shoe Company, 51 per cent of the Transo Shoe Company, stuff like that. When he died, he left a net estate of around eleven million dollars."

"When was that?"

"Oh, quite awhile ago. Nineteen thirty."

"Harry Towner got the entire estate?"

"All except a few small bequests. But Harry Towner's done all right on his own, don't worry about that. They say he's worth thirty millions today."

"In other words, he's lousy with money? But what about his personal life?"

"Married twice. Once to a showgirl when he was twenty. Father got it annulled. Married Harriet Algar of the Algar Shoe outfit, in nineteen eleven. Two children, a son Elliott and a daughter, Linda."

"Extra-curricular?"

"Huh? Oh, I see what you mean. Discreet, very discreet, if any. Newspapers wouldn't print such things, not about a man

worth thirty million. Towner's a big man in this city, a big man."

"All right," said Johnny, "he's big. And I'm paying you big money. I'll call you again in an hour. I hope you've got more for me than you've given me now."

"My operators are still at it, but it's getting late."

"Keep them at it," snapped Johnny and hung up.

He opened the door of the phone booth and almost collided with Carmella Vitali, who moved up from the bar.

"Hi, pal," Carmella said, baring strong, white teeth. "Shooting any pool lately?"

"Not much," replied Johnny. He looked past Carmella at a pair of sleek, swarthy young men in pin-stripe suits who could have passed for twins. Both were chewing gum and grinning as they watched Johnny and Carmella. "Not in the mood tonight, Carmella. I've got a girl here—"

"Sure, I saw you come in. Nice girl, ain't she?"

"Yes."

"Good taste. Same as mine."

"What?"

"My girl. She broke a date with me tonight."

"Nancy Miller?"

"Yep. Kinda surprised you brought her up here. Nancy likes nice places. Good food. Champagne cocktails."

"We only dropped in for a few minutes."

"Nancy's idea?"

"Mine."

"Mmm, thought it mighta been hers. Grand kid, but likes to rub it in. Just a little bit, you know. I quit my job and she breaks a date. You know, keep a fella in line. Girls like fellas with steady jobs."

"Oh, you're so right, Carmella. Well, I guess I'd better not keep her waiting any longer."

Johnny tried to step past Carmella, but the two sleek, swarthy men somehow moved up beside Carmella and blocked Johnny. Carmella grinned toothily.

"What's the hurry, pal? Nancy's dancing now with the old strawboss."

"Kessler?"

"Yeah, sure, the bird who kept riding me at the factory. Old enough to be her father. Harmless. There's a little matter, I kinda

hate to bring up. A buck you owe me. From last night."

"You put soap in that chalk."

"Naw, it was already in. We keep that piece for wise guys who come around, making bets."

"It isn't the money," said Johnny, "it's the principle."

"Sure, sure, what's that you said? You're so right. It ain't the principle, it's the money. So shell out, huh?"

Johnny looked longingly past the three men to the door leading into the dance hall. It was a long way. With the music playing again, a shout might not even be heard in the other room.

He sighed heavily. "Suppose I gave you the dollar, what then?"

"One thing at a time. The buck first."

Johnny shrugged and reached into his pocket. He drew out his packet of money, searched for and found a dollar bill. He creased it lengthwise and returned the rest of his money to his pocket.

"Here," he said. He held out the folded bill and as Carmella reached for it, Johnny let it fall from his fingers. Carmella grabbed automatically downwards and Johnny straightened him up with a terrific uppercut. In fact, Carmella's body didn't stop when it was straightened up. It went over backwards, crashing to the floor with a dull thud.

The two sleek, swarthy men stopped chewing their gum and stared at Johnny in blank amazement. Johnny circled around then, stepped over the unconscious Carmella and walked into the dance hall.

XVIII

IN THE main room, he pushed through the fringe of onlookers and got to the edge of the dance floor. He caught sight of Sam dancing painfully with Jane Ballard and moved in and out among the dancers to them.

"Sam, do me a favor. Keep an eye on the barroom. Carmella's in there."

"If he's looking for trouble, Johnny—"

"He looked—and he found it. But he may wake up and want some more. Janie—"

Jane Ballard stepped out of Sam's arms, smiled tantalizingly and moved into

Johnny's arms. Sam frowned a little, then shrugged and headed in the direction of the bar.

"I've been waiting for this, Johnny Fletcher," said Jane.

"So've I. Where's Nancy?"

"Dancing with the old boy. Never mind Nancy for a while. Pay attention to me. I want to find out if you're as smart as they say."

"They?"

"Oh, Nancy's been talking about you, last night and again tonight, before you came."

"You said, they."

Jane nodded over Johnny's shoulder. "Uncle Karl was up at the apartment last night."

"Uncle Karl? Kessler's Nancy's uncle?"

"Didn't you know?"

"No." Johnny was silent for a moment. "They were talking about me?"

"And how! But then isn't everybody at the factory? You start work one day as a laborer and the next you're practically running the place. I suppose that's an exaggeration, but you were given some kind of promotion, weren't you?"

"I guess you could call it that."

"At a big salary increase?"

Johnny chuckled. "Now, don't tell me that's all you're interested in—how much money I make?"

"Frankly, Johnny, I'm quite interested in what you're earning. If you think I'm going to marry a man earning thirty-six dollars a week and do the laundry in the kitchen sink, you've got a good think coming to you. I'll marry for love, sure, but I'm only going to fall in love with A: a man who's got plenty of money or, B: a man who's *making* money. Big gobs of it."

"I made five hundred bucks today, Janie."

"Now," said Jane, "the conversation is getting interesting. So what're we doing here at this dump?"

"A dance with Nancy and we're off—to spend money."

The music stopped and Johnny searched the floor for Nancy and Karl Kessler. He saw them across the room and, with Jane clinging to his arm, crossed to them. Nancy watched them approach, quite aware of Jane's clinging arm.

"Quite a long phone call you made," Nancy said coolly.

"I got delayed," replied Johnny. "Your b.f. Carmella wanted to talk to me. About you."

"He's a liar," snapped Nancy. "Whatever he said about me—"

"He didn't say much. He had kind of an accident. Hurt his mouth, I guess, so he had to stop talking."

"You had a fight with him?"

"You can't call one punch a fight. Oh-oh, he's with us again."

Nancy's eyes quickly followed Johnny's in the direction of the barroom. Carmella and his two friends were emerging. Carmella was walking stiffly. Sam Cragg emerged from a clump of dancers and confronted Carmella. Johnny, across the room, saw Carmella talking volubly for a moment then skirt Sam and head for the door. Sam stood undecided for a moment, then shrugged and turned toward the dance floor.

Johnny disengaged himself from Janie's grip and took Nancy's elbow. The music struck up again and he moved away with Nancy onto the dance floor.

"At last," said Johnny, "alone."

"Except for five hundred people," retorted Nancy. "I saw Janie giving you the business. She's the biggest gold-digger in Chicago. I'm going to have it out with her tonight, when we get home. Either she moves or I."

"Well," said Johnny cheerfully, "this is the first time in quite a while that I've had two girls fighting over me."

"I'm not fighting over you. The dame just can't resist making passes at a man."

"Or men at her."

Nancy sniffed. "Even Carmella. He came up to the apartment exactly twice and she made a play for him. She thinks I don't know they were out together Wednesday." She stopped. "Did you make a date with her?"

"I'm partial to taffy-colored hair."

She drew back from him and looked into his face. Johnny grinned. The annoyance that had been in Nancy's face the past half hour suddenly faded. "I still don't like double-dates," she said.

"Okay," said Johnny, "we'll try it alone tomorrow night."

"That," said Nancy, "is a date!"

They made a half circuit of the dance floor, Nancy dancing close to Johnny. Then she searched his face again.

"Who'd you telephone?"

"Oh, just the detective agency."

He felt her body stiffen under his hand. "What?"

"The detective agency that's having me shadowed. I hired them to shadow the man who's shadowing me."

"You *know* who's having you shadowed?"

"Of course. Fellow named Wendland."

"Linda Towner's fiance?" exclaimed Nancy.

He nodded. "Know him?"

"He's come into the office a few times—with Linda. He—he's looked me over."

"He stopped with looking?"

"Well, he went a little further a couple of weeks ago. Asked me what I did with my evenings. I wasn't having any of that. If he couldn't come right out and ask for a date, I wasn't going to help him along. I told him I went to church every evening. Then Linda came out of her father's office and that was that."

"Reason Number 184 why I don't like Freddie Wendland," Johnny said. "Mmm, you didn't tell me that Karl Kessler was your uncle."

"You didn't ask me. It's no secret. Everybody at the plant knows it. He got me my job. He's the only family I've got. My mother died when I was four years old and Uncle Karl raised me. But why should Wendland be shadowing you?"

"That's why I'm having *him* shadowed; I'm trying to find out why. I never saw the man before yesterday."

"Johnny," said Nancy, "I don't understand you at all. You started to work at the factory yesterday, as a laborer. Today you're up to your neck in a murder mystery, with people shadowing you and all sorts of things happening to you."

"That's what a fellow gets when he doesn't mind his own business," said Johnny wryly.

"Why don't you—mind your own business?"

"Can't. It's a disease with me." He shuddered. "Now, you take your uncle and Hal Johnson, the foreman, at the plant. *They*

mind their own business and they've been working thirty-nine years in one plant."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. For them. But I'm made different, I guess. A week in one place and I can't stand it any more."

"You've been two days at the Towner Leather Company. Does that mean you'll be leaving in another five days?"

"I'm going to let you in on a secret," said Johnny. "This job is the first one I've had since I was a boy. Oh, I work, pretty hard sometimes, too. But I work for myself. I'm a book salesman, the greatest book salesman in the world."

"Then why aren't you selling books now?" cried Nancy.

"Because I had a little bad luck. Rather, somebody else had bad luck. The publisher who supplies me with books was locked out by the sheriff. He couldn't send me any books."

"Can't you get them elsewhere?"

"If I had money to pay for them, yes."

"But you said you were the greatest book salesman in the world. If you're that good, why don't you have enough money to pay for the books?"

"That," said Johnny, "is what's wrong with Johnny Fletcher. When he's got money he won't work. Oh, I've tried it. One year I worked hard. I made more money than the president of the United States. And I wound up at the end of the year with what I started. Nothing. You see, there are people in this country who run night clubs, horse races and crap games. They always find the Johnny Fetters."

The music stopped and Johnny released Nancy. "For example, there are night clubs in Chicago. And Johnny Fetters in Chicago, with a couple of hundred dollar bills in his pocket. So—let's go!"

Sam Cragg spied Johnny and came forward. "Johnny," he said, "that Carmella fellow and his friends have left the dance. But they are waiting downstairs."

"How many friends?"

"Two."

"Suckers," said Johnny.

Janie Ballard came strolling up with Karl Kessler.

"Got enough slumming?" she asked.

"I've got one more phone call to make,"

said Johnny, "then I'm ready to leave. Don't start dancing; it'll only take me a minute."

He smiled at Nancy, nodded to Sam and headed for the barroom.

In the phone booth, he dialed the Wiggins Detective Agency. "Wiggins," began the detective, but Johnny cut him off.

"Where's Wendland tonight?"

"Wendland, I don't believe I—"

"Cut it out!" snapped Johnny. "I want to know where he is right now. Your man's shadowing me for him, and Wendland's calling in and asking for reports."

"But, Mr. Fletcher," protested Wiggins. "I never told you—"

"Where's Wendland?" snarled Johnny.

"At the Chez Hogan," Wiggins replied quickly. "He phoned in only a few moments ago."

"What did you tell him?"

"Only that you were at a dance hall on Clybourn Avenue."

"All right," Johnny said curtly, "I'm going to the Chez Hogan myself. But first there are a couple of points I want to clear up. This first marriage of Harry Towner's—the one his father had annulled. What was the date on that?"

"I have it right here. Just a moment. Ah yes, October 16, 1921, that's the annulment."

"And when did he remarry?"

"Mmm, let's see. January 1922, but I don't see—"

"Never mind. Just one thing more, something that's stuck in my mind since you told me about it. You said Al Piper owned his own home and that it was worth \$15,000 to \$18,000—"

"Approximately. My operator's estimate."

"More or less is good enough. How the devil could he buy his own home—one costing that much, on his thirty-six or thirty-eight dollars weekly pay?"

"Why, thought you knew about that, Mr. Fletcher. Piper had a sideline—he took bets for Marco Maxwell, the bookie. He got five percent, hot or cold."

Johnny groaned. "Why doesn't somebody tell me these things!"

"The police knew it yesterday. I thought you'd heard by now."

"I didn't. Is there anything else I ought to know?"

"About Al Piper? Only that that's what Piper and that Italian boy, what's his name, Carmella, had their quarrel about. Carmella started taking horse bets and Piper got sore about it."

"Oh, fine," said Johnny. "Now you tell me. Is there any other important little trifle that I ought to know and don't?"

"About who?"

"About anyone connected with the Piper murder."

"Who's connected with it?"

"Anyone who worked at the Towner factory."

"You only paid me to investigate—"

"Oh, hell," broke in Johnny, "forget it. I'll call you later." He slammed the receiver on the hook and left the booth and the bar-room.

SAM and the girls were waiting for him at the exit. Nancy regarded Johnny suspiciously as he came up but made no comment.

They started down the stairs. Halfway down Johnny said:

"This Carmella lad learns the hard way."

Carmella stood at the bottom of the stairs with his two pin-striped suited friends. Sam drew a deep breath. "This is my department, Johnny." He stepped ahead of Johnny.

"Hiya, fellas," he greeted Carmella and his friends as he hurried down the stairs.

"Hello, Ape," retorted Carmella, stepping back. The movement formed a V: Carmella at the point, his two friends, one on either side of the corridor, making the prongs of the V.

Sam grinned hugely and stepped into the V. The two sleek men promptly closed in, each gripping one of Sam's arms with both hands. Sam chuckled. "You fellas kiddin'?"

"See if this is kidding," snarled Carmella, swinging a vicious blow at Sam. The fist would have hit Sam in the face except that he suddenly ducked his head and took the blow on his skull. Carmella cried out in pain and danced back, shaking his bruised hand. Then Sam, with a sharp, sudden movement brought both of his arms out in front of his body. The two pugs were jerked forward. Sam pulled his arms free of their

grips, snaked one arm about each dark head and cracked the two together. Both men cried out in agony and Sam pushed them away. One went down to his knees and gripped his head in both of his hands. The other man reeled against the wall, ricocheted from it and fell to the floor on his face.

Johnny, coming down with the girls, took their arms. "Watch your step, girls."

Sam followed Carmella who was backing away from him. "I got a little present for you too, greaseball," Sam said.

"Don't!" cried Nancy Miller. "Don't hit him."

Sam, surprised by this appeal, half turned. And then Carmella reached to his hip pocket and brought out a leather-covered blackjack. He sprang forward, the blackjack high over his head. Johnny, seeing Sam's peril cried out in alarm.

"Sam—duck!"

Sam whirled back to Carmella, but was too late. The blackjack struck him on the head, just over his forehead. It made a dull, sickening thud.

Sam grunted in pain and staggered back. Carmella raised his hand again. Sam ducked, groped out for Carmella and caught him by the shirt front. But that didn't stop the Italian. His blackjack came down again and Sam fell to his knees. He carried a piece of Carmella's shirt front with him.

Johnny, blocked by Sam, tried hurdling his friend. He caught his foot on Sam, plunged headlong against Carmella and sent him staggering back. He clawed at Carmella's leg, tried to upset him and then—then lightning struck his head and shot through his entire body. It was followed by utter blackness.

XIX

THE bouncing of the car on rough pavement sent streaks of pain darting through Johnny's body. He groaned once or twice, flailed with his hands, then an especially nasty bump caused him to cry out.

"Cut it out!" he gasped. He sat up. A foot was planted into his face and pushed him back to the carpeted floorboard.

"Shuddup!" snarled a harsh voice.

With a rush full consciousness returned

to Johnny. He was lying almost doubled upon the floor between the rear and front seat of a limousine. Two men sat on the rear seat, their feet carelessly deposited on him.

"Get your foot out of my stomach," Johnny complained.

It was the wrong thing to say. A heel ground into his stomach and another foot kicked him in the side. "You'll talk big right to the end," a voice sneered; the voice of Carmella Vitali.

Johnny was silent a moment as the full gravity of his predicament penetrated his aching brain. Then he asked quietly: "Where's Sam Cragg?"

"In the hospital, for all we care," said Carmella nastily. "We didn't figure it necessary to bring him along."

Johnny groaned inwardly. The last he had seen of Sam he was on his knees after having taken two vicious blows with the blackjack. Johnny himself had taken only one blow and passed out. Yes, Sam probably was in the hospital. And Johnny—

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Guess," said a strange voice.

"Out in the country," Johnny hazarded.

"Smart boy," said Carmella. "You ain't even lookin' and you figured that out."

"We haven't passed any street lights," retorted Johnny. "And we're on a paved road, bumpy, but we haven't made any stops and haven't crossed any street-car tracks. That's the country."

"And you're right, Fletcher, dead right, although you'll probably be more dead than right in a few minutes. In fact, I think this is as good a spot as any. Luigi!"

"Yeah, Carmella," replied the voice of the man in the front seat.

"Pull up."

Brakes squealed and the car came to a bumping stop. Feet stepped on Johnny, kicked him and the right car door was opened. Carmella got out of the car.

"All right, Fletcher."

Johnny turned and on all fours crawled out of the car. Carmella helped him the last part by grabbing his coat collar and yanking on him. Johnny spilled to the gravelly road shoulder. A foot kicked him and he got heavily to his feet. By that time the other two men had got out of the car and all

three faced Johnny. Johnny's head ached terribly, his body was a mass of bruises and aches, but the peril of his position brought him erect and alert.

"Now, wait a minute, Carmella," he said quickly. "Let's talk this over. I've got some money—"

"You *had* some money," said Carmella. "You haven't got a nickel."

"I can get some more."

"Not in Chicago you can't. Because when we get through with you, you won't be going back to Chicago. You been stickin' your nose into things that ain't none of your business. You been botherin' *me*; and when someone bothers me—"

Carmella didn't finish the sentence. He swung with his fist at Johnny's face. Johnny rolled with the punch and received only a glancing blow, but he promptly fell to his knees and from there to his face.

"Get up," snarled Carmella. "I hardly hit you." He put the toe of a foot into Johnny's side and turned him over on his face. One of the two sleek, swarthy men stooped, caught Johnny's coat front in a fist and yanked him up to his knees. Johnny let his body remain limp.

A fist smashed into his face. Johnny suppressed a groan, but jerked himself free of the fist and fell on his back. He rolled over, covering his head as best he could with his arms.

They lifted him again, but Johnny remained limp, even under the savage blows that were rained on him. They finally let him fall, kicked him several times, then believing him unconscious they climbed into the car. The motor was started, the car went ahead a short distance, then was turned and began coming back. Headlights picked out Johnny on the left shoulder of the road. It took his entire will power to remain motionless as the car swerved toward him. But at the last moment the driver jerked the wheel to the right and the car roared past.

JOHNNY waited until the motor was a faint drumming. Then he gathered himself slowly together and struggled to his knees. He remained in that position a long time before he finally got to his feet. He looked around then and saw that he was on a road lined with trees that came close to

the pavement. The moon was almost full and lighted up the road nicely, but Johnny saw no sign of habitation. Wait—ahead and to the right was a glow in the sky. That could be a town.

Johnny started walking. He went a hundred yards and suddenly became aware that a car was approaching from the rear. Quickly he stepped off the pavement to the road shoulder, scrambled through a shallow ditch and took refuge in the trees beyond.

The headlight swooped down, became a car that roared past. When the tail-lights had disappeared Johnny emerged from the woods.

He walked for a half mile and came to a crossroad, a paved road somewhat wider than the one on which he had been traveling. Lights flickered in the distance. Johnny turned into the road.

He went at least a mile before he came to a street light; another was a hundred yards beyond. Ten minutes walking brought him to a road sign: *Hillcrest City Limits*.

Hillcrest! The name struck a chord in Johnny's brain. Of course—this was the home of Harry Towner. Johnny started swiftly into the town. He passed a closed gas station, a few houses, then a store or two and two more closed gas stations. But there were cars on the street now and in another block he saw the bright lights of an all-night gas station.

AN ATTENDANT was hosing down the driveway. Behind him, in the lighted station, was a small clock. One-fifteen A.M. The attendant watched Johnny approach.

"I'm looking for Harry Towner's place," Johnny said. "Do you know where he lives?"

The man looked at Johnny suspiciously. "You kidding?"

"No, I'm not. I had an accident back a ways and I know I look like hell, but I've got to get to Towner's place."

"This time of the night?"

"This time of the night."

The man shrugged. "Right through town, three miles, turn right a mile, then left about a half. Big stone wall, big iron gate with an arch over it. Name: *Five Knolls* on the arch. That's the place."

"Almost five miles!" exclaimed Johnny. "I can't walk that far."

"Probably wouldn't do you any good if you did," said the gas station attendant.

"Have you got a phone here I can use?"

"Pay phone inside."

Johnny went through his pockets. Carmella had told the truth. He had been stripped of every bill and coin in his pockets, in fact every scrap of paper. Even his handkerchief had been taken from him.

"I haven't got a nickel," said Johnny. "I wonder if you'd—"

"No," said the attendant. "I'm a working man. I can't afford to give money to bums."

"I'm not a bum," said Johnny. "I was held up and robbed."

"I was held up myself, last week," retorted the attendant. "And believe me, the bonding company gave me a workout. Seemed to think I tapped the till."

"A nickel," said Johnny. "It won't break you. I want to phone Harry Towner. He'll send a car out after me—"

"Yah!" jeered the attendant. "He'll send a car out at one-thirty in the morning; he will in a pig's ear. This is my home town and I know plenty about Harry Towner. He buys his gas from a truck; keeps a couple of tanks on the place. Saves a nickel a gallon that way."

"I work for Towner," Johnny persisted. "His leather factory in Chicago. He offered me the job of sales manager only yesterday."

"Sales manager, huh? You ain't doin' such a good sellin' job right now. You can't even talk me out of a nickel. You know what I think? Your face is full of blood and your clothes is all torn; I think you got thrown off a freight train."

"The hell with you!" snarled Johnny and started to walk off. He went twenty feet and then the man called out, "Hey, come back, here's your nickel."

Johnny turned and walked back. He took the nickel the man held out, started for the filling station. The attendant quickly followed him.

"If you're on the level, call Hillcrest 1234; that's the local cab company. Ride out to Towner's and get him to pay for the cab."

JOHNNY took the receiver off the hook, hesitated, then dropped the nickel into the slot.

Five minutes later, a yellow taxicab pulled into the filling station and Johnny got in. He waved to the gas station attendant and leaned back against the leather cushions. "Five Knolls," he told the driver. "Harry Towner's place."

The man turned completely around in his seat. "This time a' night—the way you look?"

"I had a car accident," Johnny said.

The driver hesitated, then muttered something to himself and turned away. The cab roared out of the gas station. It rolled through a village, headed for the country road beyond and a few minutes later drove up to an ornamental iron gate. Worked into the archway overhead were the words: *Five Knolls*.

The driver got out, came around and opened the cab door for Johnny. "Two seventy-five," he said.

"Pretty steep for five miles," Johnny objected.

"Night rates—and I got to go back."

Johnny pointed to the gates. "Ring the bell, will you?"

"Why?"

"Well, if you must know, I haven't got any money with me."

The cabby stepped to the front door, opened it and reaching in brought out a big wrench. "All right," he said, "I'll get no money out of it, but I'll get satisfaction. You'n me are taking a ride to the jailhouse."

Johnny stepped around the cabby and moved backwards to the big iron gate. He found the bell at the side of it and pressed long and hard.

"Give me five minutes," he said to the cabby, who had followed him with the wrench, held poised for striking. "If I don't get the money for you, I'll go with you quietly."

He pressed the bell again. There was a cottage just inside the gate and after a moment, a light went on in it. Johnny pressed the bell a third time. A door opened, framing a man in undershirt and trousers. "Who is it?" he called.

"I want to see Mr. Harry Towner," Johnny called back.

"What's the name?"

"Fletcher."

THE man in the cottage doorway shook his head. "Mr. Towner didn't tell me about any Fletcher calling in the middle of the night."

"He didn't expect me to call."

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to wait until morning."

"If you make me wait until morning," Johnny said grimly, "I can assure you you'll lose your job. This is a matter of life and death. Phone the house and tell Mr. Towner that Johnny Fletcher is here with important information about the murder at the plant."

"The murder!" exclaimed the gatekeeper.

"You heard me."

The man hesitated, then leaving the door open, went back into his cottage. Johnny could see him cross to a wall phone, take down the receiver and wait a moment. Then he pressed a button. He waited for a long moment, spoke into the phone, waited and spoke again. Then he hung up and came out of the cottage.

He waddled up to the gate, shot back a bolt and pulled the gate open a foot or so. "Mr. Towner says to come up, but it better be good. That's what he said."

"It'll be good," said Johnny. "Now give this taxi driver five dollars."

"What for?" cried the gatekeeper.

"Look at me," said Johnny sternly. "I was waylaid and robbed on my way out here. I haven't got a nickel in my pocket. Give the man the five dollars; you'll get it back from Mr. Towner in the morning. He turned to the cabby. "Okay?"

The man lowered his wrench. "Okay, chum. . . . Want me to wait?"

"No," said Johnny, "I'll be spending the night here."

He nodded, stepped through the aperture in the gate and started up a winding drive to the huge shadow of the house, a hundred yards or more it seemed to be from the gate.

A light was on in an upper room and as Johnny approached lights went on downstairs. When he got to the door it was already opened and a servant in a bathrobe greeted him.

"Mr. Fletcher? Mr. Towner is in the library."

Johnny entered and the butler led him through a wide hall to a room at the rear—an immense room with thousands of books on the shelves, most of them in leather bindings, most of them as new as the day they had been bound.

Harry Towner was pacing before a massive teakwood desk, a cold cigar champed in his mouth. He stopped when Johnny entered the room.

"What happened to you?" he cried when he noted Johnny's physical appearance.

"I was taken for a ride," said Johnny, "and left for dead."

Towner's eyes widened in shock. "Who did it?"

"A man named Carmella Vitali."

"That Italian the police questioned?"

"Yes."

Towner whirled to his desk, scooped up a phone.

"No," said Johnny quickly. "Don't call the police. I want him to think I'm dead and tomorrow I'll nail him. Good."

"At least, let me call a doctor. You look like hell, Fletcher."

"I haven't got any broken bones," said Johnny. "I look worse than I feel." That was a lie. "But I'd like to take a hot shower—and get some sleep."

"Cedric!" roared Towner. The butler in the bathrobe popped into the library. "Show Mr. Fletcher to a room. Run a hot bath for him and do whatever else you can."

"Thanks," said Johnny wryly. He followed the butler out of the room, climbed the stairs and proceeded down a wide carpeted hall.

The butler opened a door, switched on lights and Johnny entered a bedroom about half as large as the Northwestern Depot. The bathroom was as big as the average two-room apartment and had a square tub in which you could execute naval maneuvers. Johnny peeled off his clothes while the butler ran hot water into the tub.

"I can handle the rest," Johnny said. "Thanks."

"Very well, sir," said the butler. "Should you want medication or, ah, bandages, you'll find them in the medicine cabinet."

Johnny soaked himself in the tub for

fifteen minutes, then got out, dried himself and, naked, crawled into the huge bed. He didn't bother turning out the lights.

XX

JOHNNY was awake, feeling his bruises, when there was a knock on the bedroom door. "Yes?" he called.

The door opened and Elliott Towner came into the room. "We're driving into town in a half hour," he said, coming forward. "Dad wanted me to find out if you're in condition to go in with us."

"I will be, after I eat some breakfast," exclaimed Johnny. He threw back the covers and leaped out of bed, wincing as bruised muscles protested.

Elliott looked at Johnny's torn, soiled suit lying on the floor beside the bed. "You could wear a suit of mine. We're about the same size."

"Now," cried Johnny, "that's decent of you."

Elliott left the room and Johnny went into the bathroom. When he came out, a suit and a clean shirt were lying on the bed. Johnny put them on and left the room.

He descended to the main floor and a maid directed him to the breakfast room, where the entire Towner clan, the Leather Duke, Linda and Elliott were all seated at a table, eating breakfast.

"Feel all right?" Harry Towner asked.

Johnny nodded. "Fine. Good morning, Miss Towner."

"I've just been hearing about your latest, Johnny," said Linda, "and I think you're a liar. You don't look fine and you aren't fine. In fact, you look like something the cat dragged in."

Johnny grinned wryly, saw a phone on the sideboard and crossed to it. "Operator," he said into the mouthpiece. "I want the Lakeside Athletic Club in Chicago." He covered up the mouthpiece. "Excuse me, but I'm worried about my friend, Sam Cragg. We got separated last night."

An operator said in his ear: "Lakeside Athletic Club."

"Suite 512," Johnny said, "Mr. Cragg."

Thirty seconds passed and then the voice said: "I'm sorry, Mr. Cragg does not answer."

"Try 514, the adjoining room."

"I've rung both, sir. Do you wish to leave a message?"

Johnny hung up. "Something happened to Sam."

"That's the man who lifts two hundred pound barrels," said the Leather Duke. "What could happen to him?"

"I don't know, but the last time I saw him he was down on his knees and a man was hitting him with a blackjack."

The entire Towner family stared at Johnny. He drew a deep breath. "Your switchboard operator was watching, Mr. Towner. Nancy Miller—" Johnny's eyes shifted quickly to Elliott Towner.

Elliott's mouth was open wide enough to swallow a duck egg.

"Fletcher," said the Leather Duke. "Sit down and have your breakfast. Then we'll ride into town and clear up this whole mess. I think a few people at the factory are going to find themselves without jobs."

"Oh, I say," protested Elliott. "You can't just fire people like that." He looked hard at Johnny. "On someone's unsubstantiated accusation."

"Accusation?" asked Johnny. "I didn't accuse anyone."

"You just said, at least you intimated, that this girl, what's her name—Nancy Milton?—was involved."

"The name is Miller," Johnny said, "M-i-l-l-e-r, the same as the girl called you at the club night before last."

"What?" cried Elliott Towner.

"The girl who told you she knew who killed Al Piper."

ELLIOTT TOWNER kicked back his chair, sprang to his feet. His face was a picture of utter consternation. Harry Towner banged his fist on the breakfast table.

"What's this, Elliott?"

"He's a liar," Elliott cried, hoarsely. "I—I don't know what he's talking about."

"Nancy Miller," said Johnny, "she telephoned you eight times at the Lakeside Athletic Club in one evening. You were there, but wouldn't take the calls. Then she tried to break into the club and go up to your room. They stopped her in the lobby. She phoned again after that and—well, the

operator made a mistake and put her through."

Elliott's face went from consternation to abject horror, or terror.

"Fletcher," he began thickly. "I—I've had about all I can take from you—"

"Elliott," the Leather Duke said sternly, "I want a direct answer—just a yes or no. Did this girl telephone you at the club?"

Elliott took a step away from the table, but reeled and had to reach out to the chair to support himself.

"Answer me!" snapped Harry Towner.

"Y-yes."

LINDA TOWNER suddenly interrupted. "Just a minute, Dad." She turned to Elliott. "You're in love with Nancy, aren't you?"

"No!" exclaimed Elliott.

"But you've taken her out?" Linda paused a moment, waiting for a denial and when it did not come, went on: "She's—blackmailing you, isn't she?"

With a tremendous effort Elliott pulled himself together. He gave Johnny a bitter glance and started from the room. Harry Towner pushed his chair away from the table. "Elliott," he roared, "I want the truth of this."

"I'm sorry, Dad," said Elliott, doggedly, "I can't tell you." He continued on out of the room.

Harry Towner glared at the empty doorway, then whirled and glowered at Johnny. "Do you know the truth?"

"No," said Johnny. "Not all of it."

"But Elliott's really involved with that girl?"

"To a certain extent, yes."

"You made several rather exact statements—eight phone calls in one evening. How did you get that information?"

"By using some of your money, Mr. Towner, and sticking my nose into other people's business."

"At that you're very good," snapped Towner. "Yesterday you had a mouse on your cheekbone, today your own mother wouldn't recognize you. I'm curious as to how you'll look tomorrow."

"No worse," said Johnny, "because I'm going to wind this up today." He added drily, "I've got to, because I can't take an-

other beating. I want to make just one more phone call—"

"While you're making it, I'll get ready." Harry Towner left the breakfast room and Johnny stepped again to the phone.

He gave the operator the number of the Wiggins Detective Agency, then looked over the phone at Linda Towner who had not left the room.

Wiggins came on the wire. "Wiggins Detective Agency," he wheezed.

"I thought you had a man shadowing me last night?" Johnny snarled. "You bragged that he was the best shadower in the detective business—"

"Mr. Fletcher!" cried Wiggins. "How are you?"

"Lousy!"

"I was afraid of that, Mr. Fletcher. Uh, Begley went to telephone the police when those hoodlums assaulted you last night. When he came back you were, ah, gone. So he, ah, shadowed your friend, Sam Cragg."

"What happened to Sam?"

"Why, ah, nothing. He was knocked out for a few minutes, but someone threw some water on him and he got up."

"But he didn't go home last night. I just telephoned the club and he wasn't there."

"No, he wouldn't be. You see he, ah, spent the night at an apartment on, ah, Armitage—"

"What?" cried Johnny. Then he suddenly chuckled. "I'll be damned."

Wiggins proceeded: "As a matter of fact, he just left a half hour ago. He's now in the factory of the Towner Leather Company and my man's outside."

"Okay," said Johnny. "I'll be there myself inside of an hour."

"Very good. But, Mr. ah, Fletcher, I have some information for you—"

"About who?"

"The man with the Italian name, Carmella."

"I hope it's good," Johnny said, grimly.

"Oh, it's quite good. I mean bad. It seems that he wore a tan work shirt the day before yesterday, when the, ah, tragedy occurred at the leather factory. Well, my man found that shirt in the bottom of a garbage can behind Carmella's place of residence. It contains bloodstains—"

"Human blood?" cried Johnny.

"As far as we could tell. As a matter of fact, the shirt's in my office right now. I have some interesting information about the dead man. His salary was approximately \$38.50 a week, yet he banked an average of one hundred dollars a week, for the past six years. I think that is very significant, Mr. Fletcher, inasmuch as there are approximately six hundred employees at the leather factory and certainly not more than five per cent would wager on horses."

"Guess again," said Johnny. "Fifty per cent would be nearer the truth. What else?"

"I have a rather complete thumbnail biography of Mr. Towner."

"Give it to me—at least the salient features."

"This is highly libelous, as a matter of fact, it was never printed in the papers, for that very reason. My man got it from the custodian of the *Star* morgue, an old man, who was a reporter on the *Star* in his younger days. It, ah, pertains to the late Mrs. Towner."

"Number 1 or 2?"

"Oh, two. The first was never really referred to as Mrs. Towner. In fact, as far as the public press is concerned, there has always been only one Mrs. Towner."

"All right, get to the point, man."

"I will. As I said, this is highly libelous and at this late date would be almost impossible to verify."

"Get to the point, Wiggins!"

"I'm trying to tell you, Fletcher. Shortly after the marriage, Mrs. Towner went away. To Europe. Her child was born there, young Elliott."

"Well?"

"That's it, Mr. Fletcher. She was gone a year and when she brought the child back, well, he seemed rather, shall we say, large for his age?"

Johnny looked over the phone again, at Linda Towner, who was sitting at the breakfast table, moodily poking at a half grapefruit, with a fork. He nodded thoughtfully.

"Thank you, Wiggins. I—I'm just leaving for the plant now—with Mr. Towner."

Wiggins' wheeze almost blasted Johnny's eardrum. "You mean you're telephoning from *his* house?"

"Yes, goodbye."

He started to put down the receiver, then

raised it back to his ear. Wiggins' click came over the phone, then another. Someone in the Towner residence had been listening in on an extension phone.

Johnny put down the receiver and headed for the door. Linda Towner pushed back her chair. "I'm going to the office with you."

"It's all right with me, Linda," Johnny said, quietly. "If you'll tell me why Freddie Wendland had me shadowed all day yesterday—"

"Freddie?"

"The detective who followed us to lunch and back—Wendland was paying for him."

"That's ridiculous!" cried Linda. "There's no earthly reason why Freddie should—"

"Jealousy?" suggested Johnny. Linda stared at him. "You went to the Chez Hogan with him last night."

"Yes, but—" Linda looked suspiciously at him. "How did you know?"

"The detective I was just talking to on the phone, that's the one Wendland hired. Well, I paid him more money than Wendland did."

"So you've been spying on Freddie!"

"In a small way."

Harry Towner appeared in the doorway. "If you're ready, Fletcher."

"I'm ready."

"I'll just get my coat," exclaimed Linda. "Take me only a second."

She ran past her father. Towner looked after her. Johnny said, "She wants to go into town with us."

"I'd rather she didn't."

"I'd just as soon she did," Johnny said. "Fred Wendland's mixed in this business."

"That tired old college boy?" Towner snorted. "If he ever becomes my son-in-law, I'll send him down to manage my Nashville Tennessee tannery. I don't think I could stand him around here."

He started out of the room. Johnny followed. Before they reached the front door, Linda came running up, carrying a tweed coat.

A big limousine was standing in the driveway before the house. A uniformed chauffeur stood by the tonneau door.

"Elliott leave?" Harry Towner asked.

"A moment ago," the chauffeur said. "He took the yellow convertible."

Towner grunted. "Fine thing to break

down the morale of the hands. Come to work in a Cadillac, an hour and a half late."

He stepped into the Lincoln Continental.

XXI

IT was shortly after nine-thirty when Harry Towner, his daughter Linda and Johnny entered the offices of the Towner Leather Company.

Nancy Miller was at the switchboard, her face somewhat pale and strained even under heavier than normal makeup. Harry Towner, in the lead, gave her a curt nod. Linda, coming next, smiled sweetly. "Good morning, Nancy."

Johnny said, "Hi, Taffy, you're looking like a million."

Nancy only stared at Johnny.

Johnny went to the elevator, which was waiting at the first floor and rode up to the fifth floor. He stepped out and began strolling leisurely through the flat counter department, the gluing department and the moulding machines until he reached the counter sorting department.

Hal Johnson was leaning against his high desk, his back to the sorters and looking gloomily down the line of moulding machines.

His eyes flickered over Johnny's battered features. "Got a good one this time," he commented.

"A beauty," admitted Johnny.

"Johnny!" boomed the voice of Sam Cragg. He came pelting down the aisle. Johnny moved to meet him. Sam skidded to a halt and stared at Johnny.

"Carmella worked you over, Johnny! I'll kill 'im."

"I may let you do just that, Sam." Johnny sized up Sam. "You don't look any the worse."

"Me? Heck, that wasn't nothing. I hadda kind of lump on the old noggin, but Janie—" He suddenly coughed and looked past Johnny at Johnson.

"I know all about it, Sam," said Johnny grinning. "You spent the night at the girls' apartment."

"Yeah, Johnny, but don't get no wrong ideas. Janie wanted me to come up and put some cold compacts on the bean, then, well, I, uh, she thought I'd better stay there in

case I needed more treatments. I—I slept on the couch.”

“Sure, Sam, it’s all right.”

“Only I couldn’t sleep much on accounta worrying about you, Johnny.”

“I spent the night out at the Duke’s house.”

Hal Johnson heard that. “You spent the night at the Towner estate? Thirty-nine years I’ve worked for him and I’ve never even seen the layout. Forty-eight hours ago you hadn’t even met Harry Towner.”

“Well,” said Johnny, “the food’s lousy at the Towner house. I mean, they didn’t even give me any breakfast.” He grinned feebly. “Being a pal of the Duke’s has some drawbacks—about seventy-five, I’d say. All over my body. I think two of my ribs are cracked.” He nodded down the department. “I see Elliott’s on the job, this morning.”

“Came in ten minutes ago,” said Johnson.

Johnny’s eyes fell upon Cliff Goff, the horseplayer. “Just a minute,” he said to Sam and Johnson. He strode away from them, to Goff.

The horse-player was sorting counters. He was looking at them, but he wasn’t seeing them. His mind was miles away, riding with Arcaro at Pimlico, or Skoronski at Arlington, or Longden at Santa Anita.

Johnny tapped him on the shoulder. Goff exclaimed, shook his head and looked at Johnny.

“I want to put two bucks on a horse,” Johnny said, “who’ll I give the bet to?”

“Oh, Al,” said Goff, automatically, then grimaced. “Al’s dead.”

“He owe you any money?”

“No, I owed him. Fourteen dollars.”

“Thanks,” said Johnny and walked back to Johnson and Sam.

“Al Piper was the factory bookie,” Johnny said to the foreman.

“Who says so?” Johnson demanded.

“I said so,” retorted Johnny.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Not officially, no, but no employee could take horse bets around here for more than two days without the foreman knowing about it.”

“I don’t know anything about it,” Johnson persisted. “But I don’t see why it should make any great difference. You can’t keep people from betting on horses. They’d sneak

out and make bets, or an outside bookie’d be sneaking in all the time. Somebody on the inside books a few quarters or half dollars, what difference does it make?”

“None to me,” said Johnny. “Personally, I’ve sent a few bookies’ sons to Harvard and a few daughters to Vassar and Smith.”

“You’re going to snitch to Towner?”

“Tell me just one thing—and this I *can* and *will* prove—was Al Piper cutting you in for a percentage, for the privilege of taking bets?”

“No,” said Johnson bluntly.

“But he was paying *someone*?”

Hal Johnson did not answer that. Johnny shook his head. “You know that Carmella was trying to muscle in on the business?”

“The hell with Carmella,” snarled Johnson. “And the hell with you, Fletcher.” He started to turn away, but whirled back. “And you,” stabbing a thick forefinger at Sam Cragg—“If you’re working here, get back to your bench, or go down and draw your pay.”

“I’m fired?” Sam asked, eagerly.

“Either I’m foreman here,” Johnson said, doggedly, “or I’m not. You’re fired.”

“Great!” exulted Sam.

Johnson looked at Johnny. “Is he fired?”

“You’re the foreman, Hal,” Johnny said quietly.

“All right, then he isn’t fired.”

“No!” howled Sam. “You can’t go back on it. You said I was fired—”

“Ah,” said Johnson in disgust and walked off.

Sam appealed to Johnny. “Let me be fired, Johnny. I feel silly sitting at a bench like this, squeezing them little hunks of leather. It ain’t no kind of a job for a grown man.”

Instead of replying Johnny stepped to Johnson’s desk and picked up the phone. “Hi, Taffy,” he said into the mouthpiece. “This is Johnny—”

“I’m sorry, Johnny,” Nancy exclaimed. “I couldn’t say anything with Mr. Towner present, but I—I’m terribly sorry about last night. What—what happened?”

“Nothing much,” said Johnny. “I only got beaten within an inch of my life. That I’m not dead isn’t your boy-friend’s fault.”

“Don’t say that, Johnny. Carmella isn’t my boy-friend. He never has been.”

"How about Elliott Towner?"

There was silence on the phone for a full second. Then Nancy said, "I don't know what you're talking about, Johnny."

"A bellboy at the Lakeside Athletic Club," Johnny said—"night before last—"

This time there were two full seconds of silence before Nancy said, "You knew that—last night?"

"I knew. Wait, Nancy, it won't do you any good to try to leave the building. There's someone outside."

"I have no intentions of leaving the building," Nancy Miller said, steadily. "I'm merely going to get back to my work."

"Get me the police department," Johnny said. "Homicide Squad—Lieutenant Lindstrom."

"Lieutenant Lindstrom is in Mr. Towner's office right now."

"Get him for me."

A moment later Lindstrom's voice snapped: "Lindstrom talking."

"Fletcher up in the counter department. Get Carmella Vitali at once."

"Who's this?" exclaimed Lindstrom. "Commissioner Fletcher?"

"Johnny Fletcher, not Commissioner Fletcher."

"Oh, is that so? Well, let me tell you something, Fletcher. I don't take orders—"

"That isn't an order," cut in Johnny, "but if you don't pick up Carmella Vitali, you'd better not read the newspapers this evening. And you'd better start looking over the vacation folders, because you'll be going on a good long suspension."

Johnny slammed down the receiver, then picked it up again. "Don't bother calling Carmella, Taffy."

"Why you—" began Nancy Miller. Johnny hung up.

SAM CRAGG came forward. "What'd you wanna have the cops pick up Carmella for, Johnny? I thought you'd let me have that pleasure. I wasn't really gonna kill him. Only half-way."

"You may still get your chance." Johnny looked toward the rows of barrels behind the counter department. "Sam, I want you to go back to the spot where Al Piper was found."

Sam shuddered. "Aw, Johnny," he pro-

tested. "It's dark back there. I get the shivers when I even look."

"This'll just be for a minute."

"What'd you want me to do?"

"Just stand there and call me—but not too loud. About like this: 'Say, Johnny.'"

Sam hesitated, then shaking his head went tested. "It's dark back there. I get the distance, but when Sam cut into the aisle between the barrels Johnny continued down the line to Elliott Towner's bench.

Elliott watched him approach, his face dark and smoldering.

"Hiya, Elly," Johnny said, as he came up.

"Keep away from me, Fletcher," Elliott snarled. "I'm in no mood for your—"

Behind the barrels, Sam Cragg called, "Hey, Johnny . . . !"

And then there was a tremendous crash!

Johnny gasped and started running from a standing start. He reached the aisle leading to the rear of the barrels, hurtled down it and skidded into a left turn.

In several swift bounds he reached the death aisle. Sam Cragg was climbing over a heap of wreckage in the aisle, wood and several thousand counters scattered on the floor.

"Gee, Johnny!" he cried. "Somebody gave this pile of barrels a shove from the other side. Almost hit me with them."

"I should have warned you, Sam," Johnny said, through clenched teeth.

"You knew somebody was gonna do it?"

"No, I didn't know, but I should have suspected it. Here—" He leaned over the wreckage, gave Sam his hand and helped him clear. When they reached the aisle, several spectators were looking in. Hal Johnson, Karl Kessler, Elliott Towner and two or three counter sorters.

"Somboid just tried to kill Sam," Johnny said grimly. "They fixed up a pile of barrels so they could be pushed over easily."

"You've been inviting it, Fletcher," snapped the foreman. "You hang around here much longer and somebody else will be killed."

"No," said Johnny. "I've had enough. I'm going to spill what I know—now. Down in Harry Towner's office. I think you ought to hear it, Hal. And you, Karl." He nodded to Elliott. "And you, Elliott."

"I'm not interested," Elliott Towner said.

"You'd better be. Come on, all of you."

"He giving the orders now, Hal?" Karl Kessler asked, quietly.

"I'm giving the orders," cried Johnson. "And that's one of them. Downstairs to The Duke's—I mean, Mr. Towner's office."

XXII

THE men from the counter department filed from the elevator into the office: Hal Johnson, the foreman, Karl Kessler, the assistant foreman, Elliott Towner, son of the factory owner, then Sam Cragg and last, Johnny Fletcher. In that formation they headed for Hal Johnson's private office.

Johnny paused at the switchboard. "The showdown, Taffy. Better join us."

"No," said Nancy Miller stubbornly.

Elliott Towner stepped out of the single file formation. "Let her alone," he said ominously.

"You're the boss' son," said Johnny, shrugging. He continued on after the others. But at the door of Towner's office he looked back. Nancy Miller was getting up from her switchboard desk. And as Johnny waited, she came forward.

Harry Towner watched the entry of his visitors. In the office already were his daughter Linda and her fiance, Freddie Wendland.

"What's this?" The Leather Duke asked. "A shop grievance committee?"

"The last act," Johnny said, "the finale, in which you will learn everything—well, almost everything. Remember what I said to you yesterday when I took on this job?"

"No," said Towner, "but Wendland's just been telling me some things about you."

"Phooey on Freddie," said Johnny flippantly. "Mr. Wendland will sit in the corner and keep his mouth shut while his inferiors carry on."

Wendland cried out and started forward, but The Leather Duke waved his hand and Wendland swerved and went to a far corner of the room and seated himself.

Johnny looked around the circle of faces. "Well," he said, "does anyone want to make a confession and save us all time?"

No one in the room said a word.

Johnny nodded. "I thought not. You're still hoping against hope that I'm nothing

but a loud-mouthed fool." He drew a deep breath. "Mr. Towner, since everyone here is a member of the great big Towner leather family, you won't mind, I'm sure, if I wash a little dirty family linen."

"Go ahead, wash," said Harry Towner grimly, "but you'd better wash it clean, because I'll probably throw you out of this office on your ear when you get through."

"It's about your first marriage, Mr. Towner," said Johnny.

"Dad's only been married once," Elliott Towner cut in.

"Twice," Johnny corrected. "Of course, I guess he doesn't count the first one because it was annulled after only a few days. He married beneath his station, you know, a chorus girl or someone like that. A gold-digging chorus girl, with rather low morals. Did you say something, Karl?"

"I said you were a liar," Kessler said clearly. "A dirty, no-good, stinking liar. Elsie was—"

"Your sister?" Johnny asked quickly.

"What's that?" cried Harry Towner.

Johnny's eyes slitted. "You didn't know?"

"Of course not. Her name was Elsie King."

"Her professional name. Before she went on the stage, it was Elsie Kessler."

Towner looked at Kessler in bewilderment. "But, Karl, you never breathed a word—"

"And lose my job?" Kessler asked bitterly. "Your father paid Elsie off. Five hundred dollars he gave her, for the child."

"Child!" Towner cried hoarsely. "What child?"

"Your daughter."

"Nancy Miller," Johnny said quietly.

Harry Towner looked at Johnny, then stared for a moment at Karl Kessler. Then he suddenly strode across the room to where Nancy was standing stiffly just inside the door. He peered into her face for a long time. Then he slowly shook his head. "No," he said, "I don't believe it."

"And neither do I," Johnny said.

"I have birth certificate to prove it," said Karl Kessler. "Also hospital records."

"I've seen them, Dad," suddenly said Elliott Towner.

"You?" cried The Leather Duke.

"I've known about it for months. I—I

asked Nancy to marry me, then Karl, well Karl told me I couldn't, because she was my half sister."

"They really sold you that bill of goods, Elliott?" Johnny asked.

"I've seen the documents."

"You've seen some pieces of paper. And some old newspaper clippings about the first marriage and annulment. The newspaper clippings were real." Johnny paused. "And you were in love with Nancy." He laughed shortly. "Funny, how a man in love with a girl will believe every word she tells him. How much has it cost you, so far?"

Elliott Towner winced. His father saw it and came toward him. "Elliott, have you been giving money to these people?" He waited for his son to answer and when he didn't, he gripped his arm. "Answer me!"

"Yes," Elliott finally admitted miserably. "They—I mean, he," indicating Karl, "said he'd been quiet long enough. He was going to—tell the newspapers the whole story."

"But there isn't any story, son," exclaimed Harry Towner. "It's true I was married to a girl named Elsie King and that the marriage was annulled. My father—your grandfather—proved to me that she—"

"That's a lie!" cried Karl Kessler.

"All right," said Harry Towner, "lets say then that I was drunk when I married her. And *that's* true. I woke up in Lake Geneva one morning and discovered that I had a wife."

"And six months later, you married another woman who had to go to Europe to have her baby because—"

"*That,*" said Harry Towner coolly, "is a lie!" He regarded Kessler steadily. "How long have you worked for this company?"

"Thirty-nine years, eight months and eleven days. A lifetime and now, in my old age, I am fired!"

"You're not fired," said Johnny, "you're just taking a leave of absence. Until they take you down to Joliet for the execution."

All eyes in the room were on Johnny. He looked steadily at Nancy Miller, then at Karl Kessler. "You let Al Piper have the bookie concession; for a weekly consideration, of course. *You* knew that, Hal, didn't you?"

Hal Johnson said nothing.

Johnny continued. "And then Carmella

began going out with your niece, Karl, and *he* began taking bets. Al complained but you wouldn't do anything about it. Then Al, who knew quite a lot about you already, did a little nosing around—during his last binge. He found out about Elliott and Nancy—and the little blackmail job you were pulling. He came back to work two days ago and nailed you with it."

Lieutenant Lindstrom of Homicide appeared suddenly in the doorway. He pulled someone along from behind, someone who turned out to be a handcuffed Carmella Vitali.

"Ah," said Johnny. "I was just telling how Karl Kessler here cut Al Piper's throat."

Nancy Miller screamed.

"I'm sorry, Taffy," said Johnny softly. "He's your uncle, all right, but then—but then, Elliott *isn't* your half brother. Maybe that'll make up."

"I had nothin' to do with it," suddenly yelped Carmella. "I seen him come out of the aisle with the bloody knife."

"You fool!" roared Karl Kessler. He suddenly reached under his apron and brought out an eight-inch leather knife, a knife as sharp as a razor and with a point like a needle. He lunged for Johnny. "I'll take you!" he mouthed.

Sam took two quick strides forward. He came up beside Karl Kessler and hit him with his fist, in the back of the head. Karl Kessler plummeted clear across the room, his head striking the far wall. He dropped to the floor and remained still. And while all eyes were on him, Sam Cragg wheeled and slapped Carmella Vitali with his open palm. It was one of the hardest blows Sam had ever struck, and it was a cowardly blow, too, since Carmella was handcuffed and could not defend himself. But cowardly or not, the result was the same. Carmella Vitali went into the same slumberland as Karl Kessler.

SOME ten minutes later, Harry Towner's office contained only Harry Towner, Johnny and Sam, and Linda.

"Thirty-nine years, eight months and eleven days," said Harry Towner. "The man never had any other job in his whole life."

"And he was getting forty-five a week," Johnny said. "And getting old."

"Don't rub it in, Fletcher," said Harry Towner. "As a matter of fact, Elliott's been talking to me for months about a pension plan for employees. It's going to be put into effect as soon as I can work out the details with Elliott."

"You mean," said Sam, "if I work here I could get a pension?"

"Yes," said Johnny, "and you'd only have to work thirty-nine years."

The phone on Towner's desk rang. He scooped it up, said: "Yes? Oh" He held out the phone. "For you, Fletcher."

Johnny crossed and took the phone. "Fletcher talking. . . ."

"Wiggins," wheezed a voice. "I've got something for you. My operator—"

"Never mind," said Johnny, "the case is closed."

"Wait a minute," cried Wiggins. "This is personal." He spoke for a moment and Johnny's face lit up. He said, "Thanks" and hung up. He looked at Sam and rubbed his hands together. "Wiggins' man lost me last night, Sam, so he began back-tracking. He traced us back to the Eagle Hotel."

"Ouch!" said Sam. "The flea-bag that evicted us two weeks ago."

"The same joint," said Johnny, "hot

cockroaches and running mice in every room. But it was home for us, Sam. And they've got a telegram there. From Mort Murray. He's out of hock, Sam, and sending us a shipment of books, prepaid. Get that, Sam, prepaid!"

"We're back in the book business!" Sam beamed. "Then I don't have to work here for thirty-nine years?"

"That's right, Sam. We're free men."

"About that sales manager position, Fletcher," said Harry Towner. "The job pays fifteen thousand a year."

"Take it, Johnny Fletcher!" cried Linda Towner.

Johnny shook his head. "And see you coming in here to see you visit your husband every few days? Uh-uh, I couldn't stand that."

"My husband? Who are you talking about?"

"Freddie, who else? The guy loves you. He's so jealous he had me shadowed. And if it hadn't been for that, I wouldn't have solved this mess."

"Yes," said Linda, thoughtfully. "That was rather intriguing about Freddie. I didn't know he had it in him." She came across the room, kissed Johnny on the mouth and said sincerely:

"So long, Johnny. And good luck!"

The Shooter's Corner

(Continued from page 5)

The booklet is illustrated by photographs of part of this collection which seems well worth seeing.

Here's what G. W. I. has to say!

"I am enclosing a booklet I picked up on a recent trip to Detroit, Mich., and I have only this to say, that anyone that is a real lover of guns should not miss this very fine collection.

"Andy Palmer, the owner and collector of them has spared no expense in the gathering of this wonderful assortment of firearms.

"Mr. Palmer is a fine host and is more

than happy to show any interested person around, as he did my wife and I. But the booklet can tell you the story much better than I.

"I have been a reader of SHORT STORIES Magazine for more years than I care to mention.

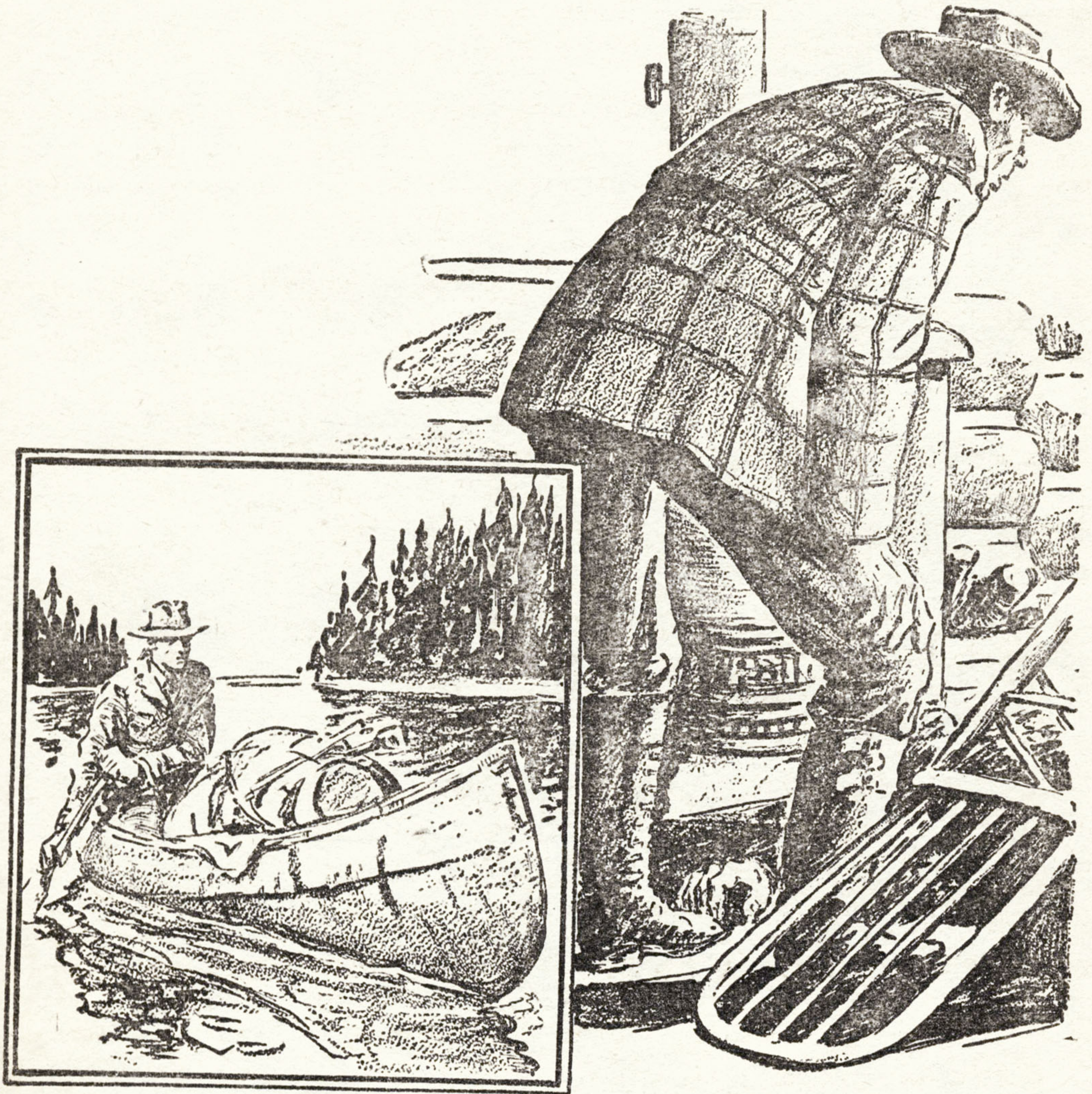
"Your column is always the first thing I read. The article on the Gun Laws in Africa I found very interesting.

"This is my first letter to you, mostly I'm satisfied to read what you and others have to say."

See you next issue!

PRELUDE TO MURDER

By H. S. M. KEMP



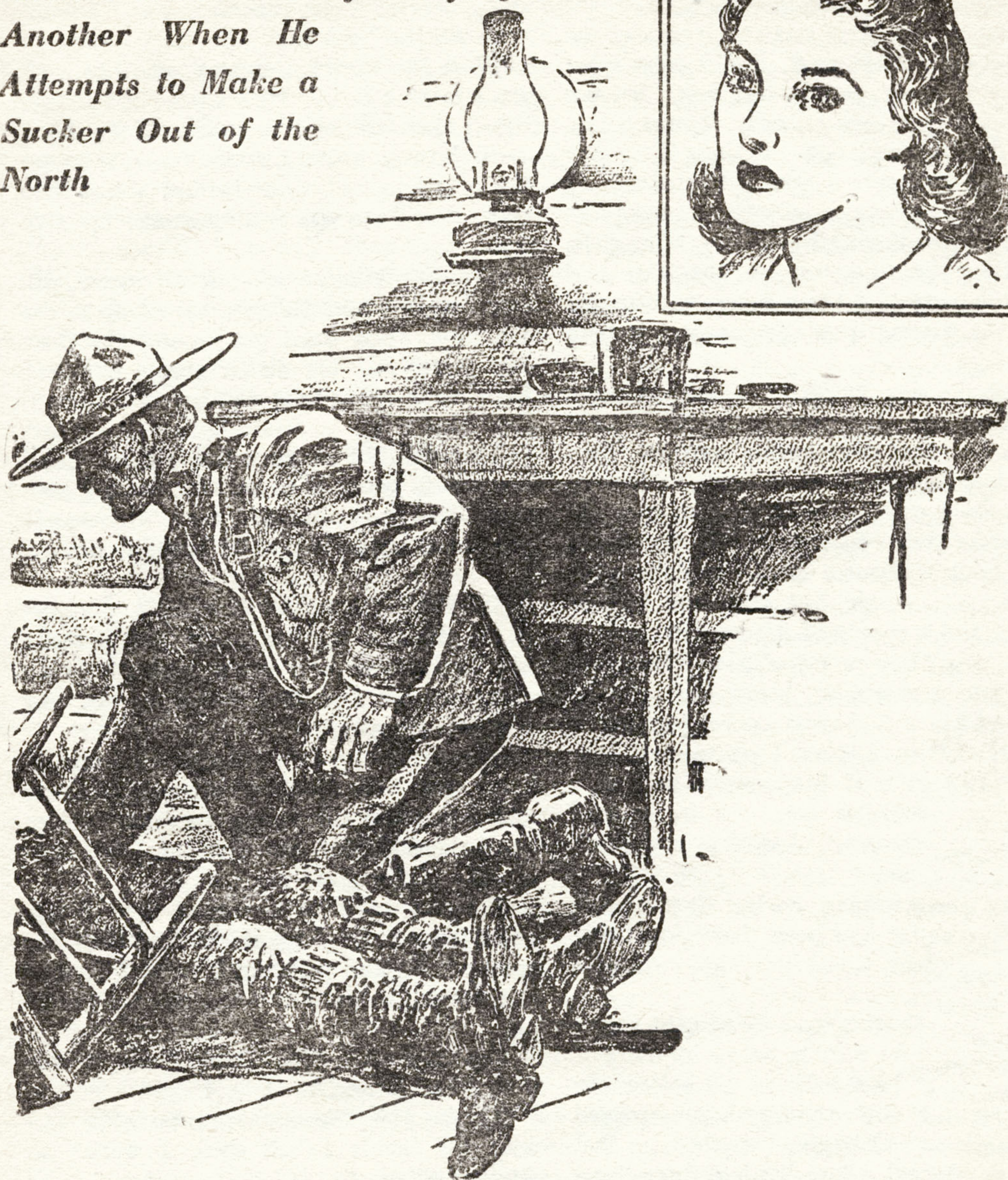
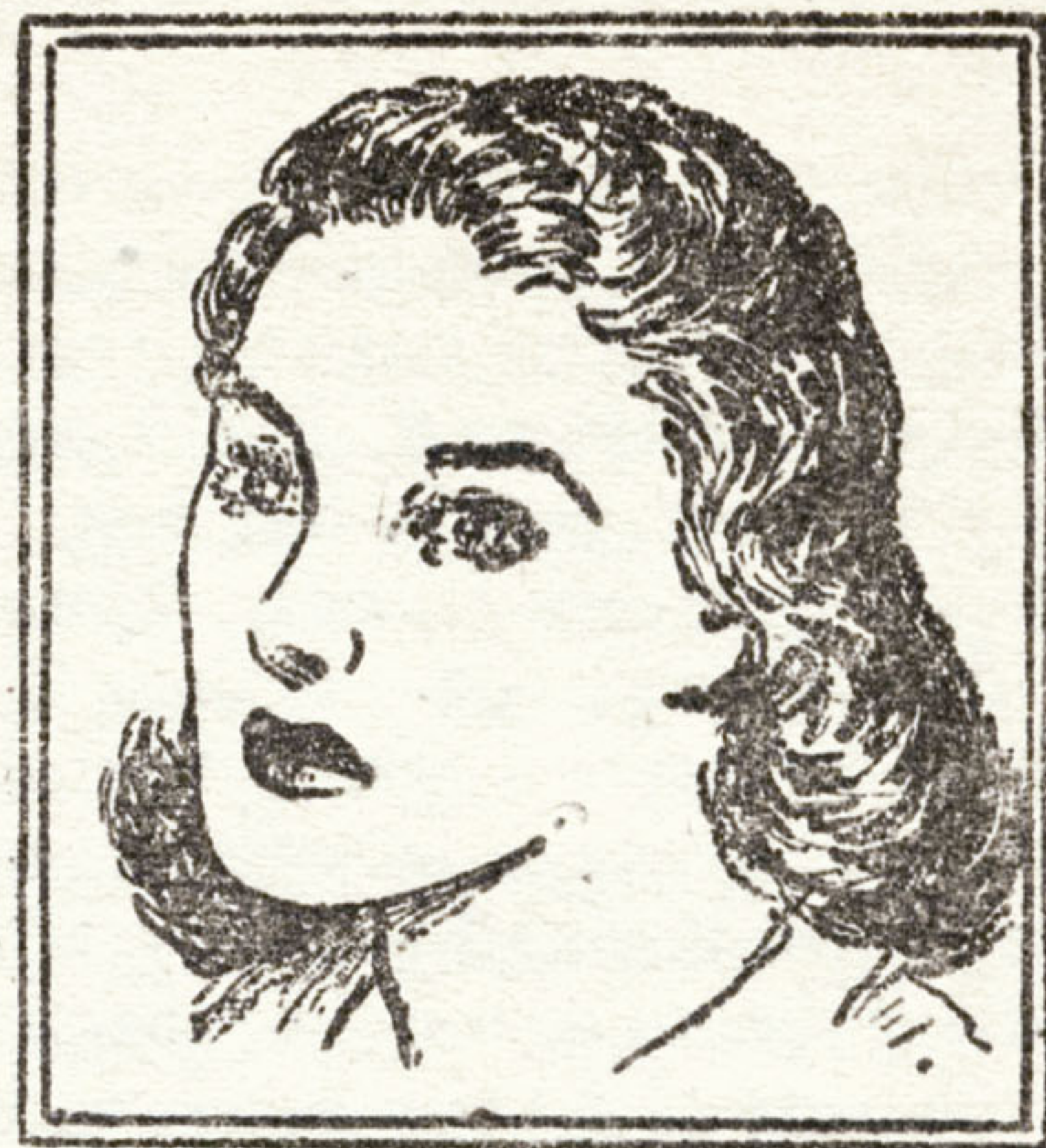
SOMEBODY once said that nothing was certain but death and taxes; but up there at Whitefish Landing the folks would have told you they knew something more certain than that. Meaning, that sooner or later Lew Briggs would marry Mary Bowes.

It was a foregone conclusion, and natural enough. Both Lew and Mary were born and raised at the Landing; and from the time they used to walk home from school to-

gether, there was nobody in Lew's young life but Mary Bowes.

Lew Briggs was the son of old Cap Briggs. Old Cap owned the *Annabelle*, a pot-bellied tug that used to haul a couple of barges between the Landing and a string of posts to the north. Mary's old man was a trader. When civilization sneaked up on the Landing, old Jim Bowes rebuilt the trading-post into a modern store. Both old-timers were comfortably well off, but getting their

*It Is One Thing to Have the North
Make a Sucker Out of a Guy, Quite
Another When He
Attempts to Make a
Sucker Out of the
North*



money the hard way, they knew how to hang on to it. In fact, each of 'em was supposed to be able to show you the first nickel he ever earned.

Lew, though, didn't take after his dad, old Cap Briggs. About the time he quit school, the highway came through and he went to work for me at the service station. He showed Mary a good time, bought her candies and such-like; and while the folks knew that some day he'd be marrying her,

we all wondered why he didn't put a few bucks away and get ready for the event.

But before either one thing happened, the war broke out. Lew, who liked the smell of high-power gas, went into the Air Force. He wanted to be a fighter-pilot but they shoved him into bombers; and every time the mail came in, there was always a letter for Mary.

And every day or so, Mary wrote right back. She was grown up now into a tall slim

girl with dark hair and blue eyes. There were quite a few good-looking girls in the Landing, and if Mary wasn't the pick of the lot, she came close to it. But it wasn't her looks that made people like her; she was warm and quiet and friendly. You run into girls like that every now and then. They may be plumb strangers to you, but after talking to 'em for a couple of minutes, it seems like you've known them all your life. Nice girls, friendly girls; no putting on the dog. And with that sort of a Mary Bowes to wait for him, we figured Lew Briggs was a very lucky boy.

Well, he was lucky; and lucky in more ways than one. Take on operations —. He put in one tour over enemy territory, then instead of coming home on leave, he figured he'd take a crack at another. He did, till he'd make sixty-odd trips in all. He landed home again without a scratch to show what he'd been through, but with the regular ribbons and a couple of decorations.

And was Mary proud of him! They gave him quite a reception, being the hero he was, and I guess that was the biggest day in the girl's life. But when I got to meet Lew himself, I felt a bit disappointed in him. I don't know what it was, but he seemed older, somewhat; sort of cynical and hard-boiled.

Other folks noticed it; but they figured that when a guy had been through all that Lew Briggs had, you'd be bound to find a change in him.

But this luck of his —. We heard scraps of it then, and we were to hear a lot more of it afterwards. Lew told us he rolled the bones on the ship coming home, played Black Jack and Crown-and-Anchor; so that when he stepped ashore, he had three thousand bucks more than when the trip began. But—

"Chicken-feed!" he grinned. "I'm just starting to hit my stride!"

Oh, he'd changed. He was harder, tougher, more reckless. But word got around that he was marrying Mary as soon as he took care of a few chores he had to do.

The chores carried him back to the city; and what happened there made us all sit up and take notice.

He got in with a moneyed crowd, a wise crowd. They gave him tips on the market, on

mineral-claims, and wheat. And the next thing we knew he was into some scheme with old Jim Burtch.

Now Jim Burtch is money, whether land, stock-market or oil. He's a wise old rooster who's been around a long time. Long enough to go broke a dozen times, then use the experience to shoot further ahead than ever. And Lew was getting mixed up with him.

We didn't know what it all meant, till one day Lew and old Jim turned up at the Landing. Then word got around that Lew was going into the air-freighting business. He'd come up to take delivery of a brand-new plane.

That should have been fine with us. Local boy makes good. War hero tackles big venture. And it would have been if it wasn't for one thing—the girl he brought along.

PERHAPS that isn't just right. Perhaps he didn't bring her along. The girl was old Jim's niece and she'd probably come along for the ride. But if that was all, she was sure enjoying it.

They drove up in a great green beetle of a car that was all chromium and plastics, and when the car swung into the service station and she and Lew got out, I was able to take pretty good stock of her.

She was easy on the eyes, though her paint-job was a bit too thick. And with her spikey heels and piled-up hairdo, I figured she was as far north as it was safe for her to go.

Lew grinned. "Hi, Pete! Shake hands with Miss Burtch."

But she didn't seem anxious to shake, and with the hands I had then, I wasn't so anxious either.

"And Mr. Burtch. Perhaps you've met him already."

Yeah, I'd met Jim Burtch. I'd worked on a diamond-drilling crew on one of the old buzzard's claims and I figured he still owed me a dollar or two. And as Jim Burtch was still in the car, I didn't have to shake hands with him.

Lew asked me to drive the car over to the hotel with them, then bring it back, fill up the tank and give her a grease-job.

That was the first time I'd seen Lew and the Burtchs together but I saw too much of

them together after that. They were around for three more days, waiting for the new plane to arrive. And odd as it was, in all that time I saw Lew with Mary Bowes just once.

They passed the filling station, but they never looked my way. Lew seemed sort of red in the face. He was talking a lot and his hands were going, but Mary was looking straight ahead. I wasn't imagining things, but they were no more the boy and girl I used to know than transmission grease is a banana sundae.

Then others began to talk. They'd drop around to the station, sit on the bench in the shade and gossip like a bunch of old hens. Lew had given Mary the brush-off; they'd had a row. Or Lew was going to marry this new babe and live out in town. Mebbe it wasn't true, mebbe it was half-true; but whatever it was, it was tough stuff to swallow. In a dump like the Landing, half-civilization, half-North, you're sort of one big family. You know every boy and you know every girl, and when they marry and settle down, you wish 'em luck and wonder if it's your turn to be godfather again. Then if some outsider steps in and does 'em wrong, you're on your ear and wonder what the rest of the family's going to do about it.

As for Mary—well, she kept on working in her dad's office, and whatever she thought she kept to herself. And kept to herself in more ways than one. She didn't visit around like she used to, hardly ever went to the show; and the rest of us would have liked to given Lew Briggs a swift and solid kick where it would have done the most good.

THINGS ran along like that all summer. Lew got his new plane, a nifty job that could handle half a dozen passengers or a ton of freight, and he was kept busy all the time. And his luck stayed with him. The way we heard it, this mineral scheme he was in on with old Jim paid off; so he took the money out of that and sunk it into a bunch of claims they called the Midas block up on Raven Lake. This was supposed to be high-powered stuff being developed by some Eastern crowd.

Meanwhile, talk was going round that he was marrying Peggy Burtch in the Fall.

The girl was up to the Landing every time old Jim came up and it was plain to see that so far as Lew Briggs was concerned, Mary Bowes had just ceased to exist. We couldn't understand it; couldn't understand how a feller could be so callous and blind. For fifteen years and more there had been no girl in Lew's life but Mary; and if he couldn't remember that, it shouldn't have been so hard to remember how she'd stayed true to him all the time he was overseas. Like I said, she wrote to him most every day, sent him a parcel at least every month; and though a dozen guys were chasing her, she turned 'em all down just on the chance that Lew Briggs would live to come home.

Well, he did live; and he did come home. And now that he was home, he was treating her like a grade-A heel.

Some of us blamed it on his money. Others figured it was his new-found sense of importance. The womenfolk all charged it up to this Peggy Burtch. Chances were a bit of each was to blame. And though we were all disgusted with Lew Briggs, there wasn't a thing we could do about it.

And then Fate stepped in and did it for us.

I call it Fate, but mebbe it was something simpler than that. Mebbe Lew Briggs reached the end of his string, and luck just ran out on him. But whatever it was, it made a job of it. In the space of three short days, he took a fall from a man of some importance to a guy without a nickel in the world.

It started with the Midas block. To look at the property, you'd say it was a hundred percent. It wasn't every prospect you could walk over and kick gold right out of the quartz. And as well as gold, nickel was there. Copper, too, and lead. Sure, it looked fine. But when the drills got to working, the rosy picture faded. The gold that was so rich on top petered out three feet underground. And a seventy-thousand-dollar company petered out with it.

Lew got the word by wire from old Jim Burtch. They say when he got it he wouldn't believe it. To make sure, he clambered into the shiny new plane and lit out for Raven Lake.

A couple of days he was gone, and when

he got back he didn't look too happy. No one asked him about it; in fact, no one asked him anything any more. By our standards, he was a double-crosser; so we only talked to the guy when we had to. It wasn't right, I know; he was young, and he was human, and I guess it's human to change your mind. But still, he wasn't pulling stuff like that on Mary—

The Midas catastrophe took care of his money, but he still had his plane. The next day he loaded up for the north and took off. And returning, at a spot seventy miles from home, he crashed in heavy timber.

The plane was a mess. I flew in there with Micky McManus, in one of the dozen other planes that went searching for Lew when he failed to show up. One other ship beat us to it, but we landed on a lake about a mile from the crack-up and walked in. About the time we got there, Lew and the pilot of this other ship were just starting to leave.

Lew looked tough. He had a black eye, one cheek was scraped, and he was gaunt-looking. Funny, I thought, him being gaunt-looking after missing only half-a-dozen meals. Then I realized he needn't have missed any meals at all. The plane hadn't burned, and he was sure to have carried emergency rations. What made him look so tough was the two days he'd spent in the bush alone. Not only the plane but his whole world had crashed about his ears.

"Tough break," I said.

Lew nodded. "Could have been worse. Going north, I was loaded."

I knew what he meant. If he'd piled up in the bush with a ton of freight aboard, he'd probably have been crushed in the landing.

I shouldn't have done, but I asked, "Any insurance?"

He gave a twisted smile. "Some. But that'll go to the finance company. She ain't half paid for yet."

We turned then and shoved through the bush towards the lake. Lew didn't want to talk; and there was little I could say to help him any.

THAT should have been the end of Lew Briggs and his financial ventures. By the time he had taken care of fuel and oil-bills,

paid up his mechanic and his office-man, his bank-account was finished. Unless old Jim Burtch or some of the moneyed crowd he'd been running with chose to back him again, it looked like Lew Briggs was just another guy hunting a job.

Well, they didn't back him, neither Jim Burtch nor anyone else. Those friends of his didn't even know him any more. And that went for this Peggy babe.

Up till then, she'd been a regular visitor at the Landing. I couldn't figure why she didn't live there all the time. But when a couple of weeks went by without a glimpse of her, I didn't need a crystal-ball to tell me that Lew's second love-affair was piling on the rocks.

But did I worry? Did any of us worry? We didn't like to hear of his tough luck over the Midas string, and we figured it was a tough break when he washed out the kite; but as for his current love-affair—well, the guy had it coming to him and he got it. Right in the neck.

But then he surprised us. Instead of moaning about his luck or looking for something else that was easy, he began to fight back. Or like he told me one time—

"The North made a sucker out of me, all right; now watch me make a sucker out of her!"

I said, "Oh?" And then, "How?"

"In the prospecting racket. That's the way I lost my money, and that's the way I'll get it back."

"You a prospector?" I asked him. "Since when?"

"I don't need to be a prospector to know what gold looks like. I saw what it looked like on the Midas. And it's gold that I'm after."

That sounded a funny one to me. But a couple days later he took off in a seventeen-foot canoe, and no one saw him again for going on for six weeks. Which made it the day after Jack Riley was killed.

Now this Jack Riley was a man of thirty or so who'd landed up in our country some years before. He was another prospector, and the year after he got there he married the halfbreed grand-daughter of old Joe Steeves. The girl's own father and mother were both dead, and old Joe was about the only relative she had. So when this Jack

Riley came along and married her, folks figured that mebbe she'd done all right. Jack ran a fish-camp in the winter when he couldn't prospect, and made good dough at it. Yeah, the girl would have done all right; but after six years of being married to Jack, she died. Died of pneumonia, and left Jack with a five-year-old kid.

That was a tough break for Jack Riley. He thought a lot of the girl, and just as much of the kid. He took the youngster out to the fish-camp, where the old squaw cook acted as a second mother to him; and the next summer he left the boy with the old lady to look after in town.

That was the summer that Lew Briggs got back from overseas. Jack Riley was partnered with a guy named George Dillman, a feller he'd known some place out at the Coast; and after he'd got over his wife's death, Jack Riley was one of those who made a bid for Mary Bowes.

Mary never encouraged him, though he seemed an educated sort of a guy and knew how to act like a gentleman; till one night while Lew was off prospecting she let him take her to the movies.

Well, there was nothing wrong with that. She and Lew were all washed up. And while going to a show with a guy didn't mean she was in love with him, a lot of the old hens began to talk.

However, a couple days later, Jack and his partner, George Dillman, headed north again themselves; and no one saw anything more of them either for two or three weeks.

Then the night they got back, Jack Riley was killed.

I happened to be one of the first to hear about it. Me and the missus were up at Bob Kennedy's Mounted Police detachment for a game of bridge. Bob's wife, Flo, had just gone dummy when old Nancy Beavertail bust in on us. She was all het up and out of breath but she managed to let us know that someone had clunked Jack Riley.

We forgot the women-folk, Bob and I. We just grabbed our hats and lit out of there.

JACK'S house, a good-sized log cabin, wasn't more than two-three hundred yards away. It was off the main road, set back apiece in a stand of heavy spruce. A

wall-lamp was burning when we got there, and the first thing we saw was George Dillman standing in the doorway.

"'Lo!" said Bob. "What's all this about Jack?"

Dillman turned, and said, "Well, there he is."

Yeah, there he was. But we had to look hard to make sure it was Jack Riley. He was on his back on the floor his head between a cookstove and a leg of the table; and when Bob Kennedy reached down the wall-lamp, we could see the head had been crushed in. As well, there was a messy-looking cut on his cheek and his nose had bled.

BOB took another look, gave me the lamp and felt for the heart-action he knew wouldn't be there.

"Well?" he asked Dillman. "What happened?"

Dillman shrugged. "You know as much about it as me."

"Then who found him?"

Dillman said, "Old Nancy. I was over to her place fixin' a gramophone and I sent her across here for a screwdriver. She come screechin' back to tell me what she'd seen."

I put the lamp back in its bracket and Bob Kennedy stood up.

"When did you last see him alive?"

"Not fifteen minutes ago," Dillman told him. "We had supper here, listened to the radio for a while, then went out. We started for town, only when we were passin' old Nancy's, Jack said he'd drop in and see how she was comin' with his moccasins. The old lady was tryin' to make her gramophone work; so, well, me bein' handy that way, I sorta took over."

"And Jack?" Kennedy suggested.

"He stuck around for a while, then said if I was goin' to be there long, he'd slide back and scribble a note he should of got off on the mail in the morning."

"And how long would that be before you found him?"

"I didn't find him," Dillman pointed out. "It was old Nancy. She only had a butcher-knife to work with, so I chased her over here for my screwdriver. That'd be about five minutes after Jack left. Then she come tearin' right back and told what she'd seen."

Said Jack had been killed. So while I took off for here, she went up for you."

Old Nancy must have reached home again, for a couple of Indian kids showed up at the door. Bob frowned at them, then told 'em "Tell Doc Forbes I want him. And make it fast!" Then he started to look around.

Well, I looked around myself, and saw blood on the floor around the stove and signs of a rough-house. Over in a corner a chair was lying on its back with a busted leg. The table was askew and rammed back against the wall, and the stove was so much out of place that the stovepipes threatened to collapse. Bob touched the stove, then pulled his hand away quick. He looked at the door, then turned to George Dillman.

"Did Nancy say whether she found the door open or shut?"

Dillman didn't remember, and asked why. But Bob didn't answer, except to ask if there was another screwdriver around. And when Dillman rooted one out, he went to work.

Now the door-knobs were of white porcelain, and Bob was careful not to handle them. He loosed them, inside the door and out, then took the two knobs and wrapped them in his handkerchief. I began to get his reasoning. Well into the Fall like it was, a feller wouldn't sit writing a letter with the door open. Too chilly. And Jack had been writing his letter, for a pad and an envelope and a pencil were still on the shoved-back table. So Bob figured that whoever called on Jack Riley probably opened and shut the door. If the guy took out again in a hurry and left the door open, the door-knobs would most likely hold his fingerprints.

In the meantime, Doc Forbes showed up. Doc's young and keen, an ex-army medico. Bob waved to the stiff on the floor, and while I held the lamp again, Doc gave Jack Riley the once-over.

After a grunt or two, he said, "Inter-cranial injuries. Brain involved." After a while he stood up. "Must have happened in the last half-hour. And it's got all the earmarks of murder."

"Wouldn't hardly be suicide," grunted Bob, and he told what he knew of the case. "But whatever it is, it means an inquest."

"Sure," said Doc. "But don't make it before three tomorrow afternoon."

Doc went soon after that; but as he left, three-four other guys showed up. Bob told them to stay outside, then he locked the door and said he'd go over for a talk with old Nancy. Dillman stayed behind, but I strung along.

OLD Nancy Beavertail is the squaw who cooked for Jack Riley at the fish-camp. She's also the one who's looking after Jack's kid. By luck, the kid's asleep when we walk into her house; and I'm suddenly glad of it. For I catch a glimpse of him in a little cot in a corner, and I suddenly realize he's an orphan, all on his own.

He's a cute-looking youngster, too; but then he ought to be. Jack's wife had been quite a looker, and Jack himself was a kind of a handsome cuss. The kid, at five, seemed to favor both of 'em—the mother for his high coloring, Jack for his curly blond hair.

But now Bob Kennedy was making medicine with the old squaw. He had chased the rest of the family outside, and he was asking her a few questions: Did Jack Riley and George Dillman come in together? Did George stay on when Jack left? Was the door of Jack's house open when she got there?

She said, "Yes," to all the questions, then Bob asked a couple more.

"When you went over for the screwdriver, did George Dillman stay behind here?"

Yes, he did.

"And he was here when you got back?"

"A-ha. Ota ke ayat."

That cleared that up. And again I knew what Bob was driving at. If George Dillman was in the house when she'd left it and was still there when she got back, George couldn't have been the killer. It wasn't more than a hundred yards over to Jack's house, and if the old lady had walked over there and then came "screechin' back, she wouldn't have been gone more than two-three minutes. And even if George Dillman had sprinted over there, laid Jack out and returned, old Nancy should have seen something of him—either going, returning, or on the job. I could understand why Bob Kennedy had asked old Nancy all these ques-

tions. He'd wanted to know where George Dillman stood. And now George was right in the clear.

I mentioned this to Bob as we walked back to Jack's house again.

"When it gets down to murder," he said, "I suspect everybody. I've got to. Even those who seem the most unlikely. George Dillman was Jack's partner, and they were old friends. They knew each other out at the Coast. Still, George had to prove an alibi, just like the next man."

I said, "Yeah"; then mentioned something about Jack having no enemies.

"Maybe none that we know of," Bob admitted. "But somebody must have had a grudge against him. Guy's don't bump each other off for fun."

There was a bit more to do at Jack's. Quite a crowd had gathered around the place, but Bob ignored them and shoved right through. We went inside again, and he locked the door.

For ten minutes or so he prowled around, then he turned to me.

"How'd you like to put Flo up for the night?"

I said, "Sure," but didn't get what he meant.

"I got to stay down here," he explained. "Sort of keep an eye on things. Flo's not the jittery kind, but with a killer on the loose, she might sleep better over at your place."

So telling him that we'd take care of Flo, I shoved back up to the detachment and picked up the two girls. We didn't get to bed too early, but when we finally did get there, I couldn't help but think of Bob Kennedy sitting up with his stiff. Yeah I told myself, there's worse jobs than running a filling-station in a frontier town.

The next day Bob was busy. Too busy yet to think about an inquest. He'd dug up two or three facts and he was working on them. We told Flo to stay on with us, and Bob could take his meals with us, too. Only when supper-time came the missus figured we'd be shy of cream and how'd I like to slip up to the store and get some.

The store is old Jim Bowes', just a block away, and Mary's locking up the cash-register at the counter. She gave me the cream, and as there's just the two of us there, we stood talking for a minute or two about the

murder. She said she went to the show with Jack again only a night or so before and it was hard to realize he was dead. Like me, she wondered who could have had a grudge against him. Then, going home and half-way between the store and my place, I met Lew Briggs.

Now there's no reason in the world why the sight of him should suddenly make me feel queer; but talking to Mary, hearing her speak of going to the show with Jack and now running into Lew, well, I guess the three happenings sort of connected up.

But I tried to sound casual. "'Lo, Lew." I said. "When did you get in?"

"Few minutes ago," he said. "Got to get organized for Winter."

I felt suddenly relieved—although again there was no reason why I should be.

"You picked a good day for it," I told him, "with all the excitement going on. Guess you heard about Jack Riley?"

I wasn't imagining things. Lew seemed to go sort of tight. He swallowed, and swallowed hard. Then he said, "Heard about it, yeah. Tough, eh?"

Standing there, I felt as though I was embarrassing him. Something told me that any direct connection between Lew and the killing of Jack Riley was out of this world; but I figured a connection between the two men was there just the same. And the connection was Mary Bowes. So I wanted to get away, didn't want to embarrass him further.

"Well, Lew, I gotta hurry," I told him. "Be seeing you." Then he went his way and I went mine.

BACK at the house, Bob Kennedy was there. Bob's in his early thirties, and generally has plenty to say. But when we sat down to eat, he clammed up on us. I caught him frowning once or twice, and I figured I knew what was wrong. Things weren't going so good; and the inquest couldn't be put off for ever.

And it wasn't put off again; for at ten the next morning, those of us who were lucky enough to get inside the detachment were there when things opened up.

Buck Henderson was the coroner. Being the J. P., as well as a well-to-do fur rancher, Buck was the big noise of the town. He'd

been a heavyweight pug in his earlier days, and his broken nose and battered face proved it. But he was a square guy, a good guy—until someone tried to slip something over him.

And Buck was in a good setting. Behind his blanket-covered table were Bob Kennedy's tools of trade. They hung on the wall. There were a couple of crossed carbines, a Colt .45 in a holster, two pairs of handcuffs and a set of leg-irons. And if these weren't enough, over in a corner was a big, green-painted steel cage. The cage was empty now, but most of us knew that before many days had gone by, some bird would be in it—a bird who knew too much about Jack Riley's murder.

The inquest didn't take long. The jury moved over to Sam Bright's undertaking rooms for a look at the body, came back and took their chairs. But if we were looking for a thrill when the proceedings got under way, we were sort of disappointed. Those of us who had been around on the night of the murder got our call to the stand, and after Buck Henderson had shot us half a dozen questions, he told the jury he figured that was it. Then the six men got up, went out for a smoke, came back in again with their verdict all cut and dried. Which was that Jack Riley had come to his death at the hands of a person or persons unknown.

It was all very tame, but the big moment was to come afterwards. As we shoved off out, Bob Kennedy followed us. I noticed then that Lew Briggs was one of those to leave the detachment, though I hadn't noticed him inside. Bob walked up to him.

"Too bad, Lew," I heard him say, "but in the name of the King, I'm arresting you. For the murder of Jack Riley."

Just like that! Just like he was asking him for a cigarette!

Lew went stiff—but no stiffer than the rest of us. He blinked a few times and the color left his face. Then Bob made a couple quick moves, and the next think we knew Lew was wearing the handcuffs.

That was the first arrest I'd ever seen. A murder-arrest, anyway. But I can see it again now—Lew standing there in expensive gabardine pants, a sloppy old wind-breaker and a white shirt open at the neck; Bob Kennedy, waiting for Lew to make one

false move; and a dozen or so of the rest of us standing around as though mesmerized. Then with a jerk of his head, Bob wheeled Lew back into the detachment again.

I couldn't get the angle. Lew arrested for murder? For Jack Riley's murder? It didn't add up. Lew had only got in the previous evening, and Jack had been dead for twenty hours. I told the others that. There were, "Yeah's" and, "Sure's," and somebody voiced the opinion of all of us. Which was that Bob Kennedy had put his foot in it bad.

But we learned more that afternoon. With the inquest barely over, Lew came up for a preliminary hearing. Buck was now the presiding magistrate, and as I was nailed as a star witness, I was certain of a front seat again.

This time I looked around, just to see who else was on hand. And right away I spotted the two old-timers, Jim Bowes and Cap Briggs.

Looking at 'em, Lew could have been the son of either of 'em. They were both tough-faced old coots, men who'd had to scratch a living the hard way; and they were looking over at Lew like the guy was hung already. Lew seemed to feel them, for he glanced back, caught his dad's eye and tried to grin.

But it wasn't much of a grin; and as he sat there in his chair off to one side of Buck Henderson's table, he was kneading a fist in his other palm. Yeah, the guy was scared, and scared bad.

But he wasn't kept long in suspense. Bob Kennedy declared the court open, read the charge, and Buck Henderson asked Lew if he pleaded guilty or not guilty.

"Not guilty!" said Lew. Then he added, "How could I be guilty when I wasn't in town?"

Buck nodded. "Well, mebbe. But you'll get a chance to talk after a while." Then he gave a nod to Bob Kennedy.

Bob took the oath, laid the Bible back on the table, and told what he knew. That was a brief summary of the finding of the body in the cabin.

Nancy Beavertail came next, then George Dillman, Doc Forbes and me. When we got done, Bob takes the stand again.

GENERALLY, Bob's not just what you'd call regimental. He slops around in slacks and a sweatshirt. Occasionally he manages to get into his dark-khaki service dress. But both for the inquest and this hearing he's wearing his red serge, Stetson and gold-striped riding-breeches. With his Sam Brown and sidearms and white lanyard, he's quite the figure of what a Mounted Policeman ought to be. Now he stands beside the blanketed table, hooks his thumbs in his belt and starts a sort of summing-up.

"Nancy Beavertail has told us that the door of Riley's cabin was open when she first went down there. George Dillman told me it was open when he got down there that night. But chilly like it was, I couldn't imagine Jack Riley keeping the door open while he sat there writing a letter. The stove was just a bit too warm to touch, but not warm enough to keep an open-doored cabin comfortable. If then the door had been shut while Riley was writing in there but open when Nancy found him, it could only have been opened by the killer himself, and left open by him when he came away."

Bob paused, and I knew what was coming next. I'd seen him remove those porcelain door-knobs. A funny little feeling seemed to draw my stomach up tight.

"So," Bob went on, "I treated the door-knobs for fingerprints. For the murderer's fingerprints. I figured he'd have to grab the knob fairly tight to open the door, and his fingerprints should show up on the knob's surface. And," concluded Bob, "I found them."

Now Bob wasn't trying to be dramatic; he isn't that sort. But he couldn't have been more dramatic if he'd practiced up on the thing for a week.

I sneaked a glance across at Lew Briggs. Lew wasn't moving, but he was leaning forward in his chair and looking up at Bob as though scared of missing the next word. Or scared of hearing it.

"Today," Bob went on, "I found fingerprints to match those on the doorknob. And I got them off a glass in the London Cafe. The prisoner, Lew Briggs, used the glass for a drink of coke. I saw him. I sat two stools away with another coke. He went out soon after, and I switched glasses and took his home." Bob lifted a paper from the

table-top and produced a couple of photographs. "These, Your Honor," he said, "are the prints from one of the doorknobs. These others were lifted from the glass. They correspond in every detail. And as they are both the prints of the prisoner, they seem to prove conclusively that he was the man who opened the door of Jack Riley's house the night of the murder."

Buck Henderson squinted at the two photographs and looked across at Lew Briggs. "Well? What d'you say to that?"

It was a wallop for Lew. Unless he admitted Bob's theory, he had to think, and think fast. He licked his lips, looked from Buck Henderson to Bob Kennedy, then began to deny he was even in town.

"I only got in yesterday—"

But Buck Henderson cut him off.

"That's no good! I don't care whether you got in yesterday or not. Maybe you did. But fingerprints don't lie. And the fingerprints say you were not only in town but down at Riley's cabin the night he was killed. Put it this way—" and Buck warmed to his work. "That doorknob must have been handled plenty by Jack Riley, but he wasn't the last man to handle it. The last man to handle it would leave his prints over top of Riley's. Twisting it, he'd probably rub Riley's off altogether. Then before anyone handled it again, the corporal took the knob away." Buck suddenly looked up at Bob Kennedy. "About what time would that be?"

Bob said around nine or nine-fifteen.

"Okay, then," went on Buck. "They were left on the doorknob between the time Riley went in to write his letter and nine-fifteen. And as it has been definitely proved that your fingerprints show up on the knob, you were at the cabin around nine-fifteen."

We could see the struggle going on inside Lew Briggs. To me, he looked like a fox in a trap. His expression was about the same. Then the spirit seemed to go out of him and his shoulders sagged.

"I was down there, yeah," he said. "But I never meant to kill the guy. I hit him, hit him two-three times; but I never figured to kill him."

Buck was frowning. "Hit him? What with? A battle-axe?"

"No—with my fist."

Buck looked across to Bob Kennedy again. Then back to Lew. There was a bit of a hard smile on his face.

"Am I supposed to believe that—with the caved-in skull he had?"

Lew shrugged. "I never cracked his skull. He must have walloped it against the stove when he went down."

Buck asked Bob Kennedy if there was any blood on the stove.

"On the leg of it, yes," said Bob. "For that matter, blood was spattered around generally."

Buck mulled the point, then looked across at Doc Forbes.

"Could death be caused that way?"

And when Doc said it could be, Buck turned to Lew again.

"What happened then—after you hit him?"

"Well," said Lew, carefully. "he went down. And when he didn't get up again, I walked out."

"Where to?"

"Home. I was too mad for anything else. Then about an hour later my dad came in and said that Jack Riley had been murdered." Lew's eyes went panicky as he recalled it. "I knew then what was up. I'd hit Riley too hard. So I told Dad and Mom about it, then chucked my stuff into the canoe and hit out. Nobody had seen me come in, and nobody had seen me go down to Riley's. It was too dark for that."

"But instead of staying away," observed Buck, "you had to come back in again."

LEW nodded. "I figured I was safe enough. I had an alibi. And I wanted to see how things were turning out."

Buck put his elbows on the table and scrubbed his big jaw.

"Let's go back a piece," he suggested. "You admit hitting Riley. And you say you were 'mad.' What were you mad about? Did you have a row?"

Lew said, "Sort of a row. I told the chiseller a thing or two. Then when he took a swing at me, I let him have it."

Buck Henderson scowled. He felt the same as I did—that Lew wasn't telling everything. Finally he leaned back in his chair and turned the scowl on Lew.

"You've got to do better than that.

You've got to tell us what started this row." He shoved himself forward again. "A man don't crack another man hard enough to kill him unless it was over something worth while. So what was it?"

Lew stalled. He looked from Buck to Bob Kennedy. Finally, coming back to Buck again, he said, "Just a personal matter. Just something between him and me."

Buck didn't like that. Being the big noise of the town, he always figured he ought to be in on everything. Well, he wasn't in on this "personal matter" of Lew Briggs. It seemed like he took Lew's answer as a brush-off. So now he glowered up at him, a hard twist to his mouth. He said, "Mebbe I can guess at this personal matter."

Lew shrugged. "Mebbe you can. There's nothing to stop a feller from guessing."

He shouldn't have said that. Lew was always a bit hair-triggered, and Buck's manner probably got under his hide. But brushing off Buck like that didn't help him a lot. For Buck got suddenly mad.

"Listen!" he blared. "The way I see it and the way you tell it, we only know half the story. But from what we do know, you crash into another man's house, pick a quarrel with him and end up by killing him!"

Lew colored. You could see he was beginning to get a bit sore himself.

"I didn't kill him!" he insisted. "At least, I didn't intend to. If his jaw was too weak or his skull too thin, that wasn't my fault. Anyhow, he came at me first. I clipped him, sure, but it was in self-defense."

"Self-defense!" sneered Buck. "What suddenly made you think up that one? By golly," he said, "I can't keep up with you, you switch around so fast! Anyhow, you commit a trespass, you start a row, and as a result, Jack Riley is dead. Of course," Buck pointed out, "it isn't the duty of this court to decide how much faith can be put in your version of the happening. All we've got to determine is whether or not Jack Riley came to his death at your hands. Well, you admit that he did—although the admission only came when you had no other way out. No," said Buck, stubbornly, "so far you haven't done too well. You started off by denying you were in town when the killing took place; and if the Corporal hadn't found your

fingerprints, you'd probably have got away with it. Now, when you find you can't get away with it, you decide that Riley was killed by you in self-defense. It don't sound good, it don't even sound good enough to reduce the charge against you to manslaughter. So all I can do is to find you guilty of murder and remand you to the next sitting of the King's Bench."

FOR a moment we were all kind of numb. As the case had progressed, we could see that Lew Briggs was up against it. But to be hooked for outright murder—well, we'd never figured on that.

And yet, murder it had to be. Buck Henderson had no other choice.

So, while Lew, dazed-like, was put back in the cage again, the rest of us got up and walked out.

And I kept on walking. I didn't want to bother with anybody. But I had plenty of thinking to do. So thinking and walking I finally came to the end of the town's one main street that fronted the river, climbed a bit of a hill overlooking river and town both and sat down on a big flat rock underneath a crooked old jackpine. Then while the wind blew some of the cobwebs of the preliminary hearing out of my mind, I tried to sort out the facts and see just what Lew was up against.

To me, he was up against plenty. Buck Henderson hadn't put it into words, but when he said he could guess at what the row was about, I knew what he was hinting at. The row had been over a girl, and the girl would be Mary Bowes.

The way I saw it, while Lew was out in the wilderness he'd had lots of time to take stock of himself. He'd found out that there was considerable difference between a guy with money and a future and a guy without a nickel in the world. A difference, that is, in the eyes of a girl like Peggy Burtch. She'd hooked onto him because he was a good-looking cuss, a popular hero, and a guy who was going places. Now, when he wasn't going places any more, she cut adrift from him. More than that, when trouble had really piled up on the guy, she let him meet it alone.

I figure that Lew must have gone a bit sour on himself. He'd remember the figure

he'd tried to cut, the big splash he tried to make. And if he was anything like me, when he thought of how he'd acted towards Mary, he did considerable squirming.

He probably woke up then, realized that Mary Bowes was still the one big thing in his life. If it wasn't too late, he might even yet be able to go back to her. It was more than he could hope for, a lot more than he deserved; but he wanted her, wanted her very badly.

And then to get back into town that night and learn that she was stepping out with Jack Riley!

Well, it would sound like stepping out. A couple of shows that he knew of, to say nothing of other shows and other affairs that he knew nothing about at all.

That would hurt Lew a lot. Or at least, hurt his pride. Instead of grieving over him, Mary had washed her hands of him entirely. And when the pride of men like Lew Briggs is hurt, they never look for fault in themselves.

Yeah, Lew's business with Jack Riley was probably "personal" enough. The trouble was, however, that Buck Henderson knew all about it, too. And if Buck, as presiding magistrate at the preliminary hearing, had to write a report of the facts and that report was passed on to some hardboiled judge on the King's Bench things wouldn't look at all good for Lew. Murder over a woman, a crime of jealousy— Yeah, I figured that Lew had a couple of strikes on him right at the start.

So, sitting up there under the windblown jackpine, I began to get more worried than ever. About all I could see for it was to pass the hat around, hire a real smart lawyer, and start a petition. The lawyer could fight that murder charge, and a good war record should count for something.

So I went home, ate a moody sort of a supper with the missus, then had to shove off out to the gas-pumps when a car gave me the horn.

It was a police car. It had driven up the hundred-odd miles from the city and had a couple of constables aboard. They filled up and said they'd be going back in the morning. Which meant they'd come up for Lew Briggs.

I went over to the detachment myself

that night. I wanted to say so-long to Lew and show him that everybody wasn't against him. And as I got there, a girl was coming away. The girl was Mary Bowes.

Dark-like, she didn't see me; but I recognized her. She hurried off, and just then Bob Kennedy came out. He was standing there lighting a cigarette when I got up to him.

We walked off a piece and leaned over the fence.

"See that?" asked Bob.

"You mean Mary? Sure," I said. I didn't know why he asked.

Bob blew smoke. "Beat's the devil. She came up here and asked if she could speak to Lew before they took him away. Sort of got me," Bob confessed. "I've known 'em both too long. And with him in the cage and she outside it—she telling him to keep his spirits up, him telling her what a blind fool he'd been—" Bob coughed. "Sorta get anyone," he growled.

I growled too. "If that other dame had only left him alone, none of this would have happened. Money or no money, Mary and him woulda still been together. And Jack Riley wouldn't have stood a chance with her at all."

"He never did have a chance," said Bob. "I heard Mary telling Lew that. Then he told her he knew it, and not to worry. Only he didn't like to say any more because I was sticking around. And of course, I was supposed to."

We chewed the rag for a while, then I said I'd like to see Lew myself.

But when the time came there wasn't much I could say to him. Told him we were behind him and that his war record would help him out. But he said he didn't want that dragged in. The war had nothing to do with this. So I finally shook hands with him and came away.

LEW'S trial was slated for the first part of November, three weeks off; and time began to pass. I saw Mary now and then, and I could see she was taking a beating. Whatever Lew's feelings for her had been during the Peggy Burtch interlude, her feelings towards him had never changed. Now she went around with a hunted look in her eyes; and while I figured that Lew

would be on edge enough, Mary was sweating it out as badly as he was.

I told her to relax. Knowing her from a kid and being a friend of Lew's, she didn't mind talking things over with me.

"Take it easy," I said. "You're not helping him and you're only killing yourself. The worst they'll rap him is manslaughter."

"But they may not call it manslaughter," she argued. "They've only his bare word for what happened. And as Buck Henderson said, he didn't help himself by denying he was in town the night Jack was killed."

"So what?" I told her. "Can't blame a guy for trying to save his own neck. And if the worst comes to the worst, this petition that's going around'll help him. The war may be over, but the public still go for this hero-stuff."

In the meantime they buried Jack Riley and George Dillman put in to adopt Jack's boy. George said he'd got to like the kid, and anyway young Johnny was entitled to a better break than being raised as a Nitchie by old Nancy Beavertail.

And then one day, just a week before the trial was scheduled, Mary came up to the filling-station. It was cold and blustery, and the old river was all gray waves and rolling whitecaps. I sat alongside the stove debating whether I wouldn't be further ahead trapping or cutting pulpwood for the next six months than I would be peddling a few gallons of gas. But when Mary stepped in and closed the door behind her, I snapped out of it. For I could see she had something on her mind.

"Pete," she began kind of breathlessly, "an idea occurred to me just now. Something about Lew. We've always taken it for granted that he killed Jack Riley, but suppose he didn't? Suppose it was someone else?"

I didn't get her drift. "Someone else? Why, what d' you mean?"

She blinked those big eyes of hers. "I mean someone who really *wanted* to kill Jack. Someone with a real motive."

I still didn't get it, and she realized it after a while.

"Put it this way, then," she suggested. "Suppose someone walked into Jack's house between the time that Lew had the fight with him and Nancy and George found

him? This man, whoever he was, called on Jack with the idea of killing him. He saw him lying there unconscious, and, well, finished him off. Then he went away again, and a few minutes later old Nancy walked in."

I mulled it over, and it seemed sort of screwy to me. Too simple, or too far-fetched. But Mary didn't see it that way. She was excited, burning up with her new idea, and she tried to get me excited too.

"According to what Lew says, he hit Jack and knocked him out. He stood over him and waited for him to get up. And when he didn't get up, he swung away and left him. He shouldn't have done that," said Mary. "It was inexcusable, and Jack might have been seriously hurt. But you know Lew's temper; what happened to Jack then wouldn't worry him at all. But that doesn't take into account all the blood that Bob Kennedy says was there."

"It was there, all right," I told her. "I saw it myself."

"Then what would Lew have thought if *he'd* seen all that blood? Would he still think he'd merely knocked him out?" Mary shook her head. "I could understand Lew's action if the blood had only been on Jack's face. Lew admits hitting him a couple of times, and I'm told that at the inquest it came out that Jack's nose had bled. But that doesn't account for all the blood on the floor and on the leg of the stove. If Lew had seen that, he'd have known something was wrong."

"Yeah," I agreed. "And knowing it, Lew ain't the sort to go off and leave a man in a shape like that."

No, the more I thought about it, the less I liked it. There had been just too much blood in the cabin for an ordinary knockout. Even a knockout against the leg of a stove. Suddenly I told Mary, "Come on; we're going up to see Bob."

She kind of shied for a minute; Bob might ridicule the idea.

"Not him," I said. "Right now he believes Lew's responsible for Jack's death, because Lew admits it; but give him your facts, and he'd go all out to help Lew." Then I said, "And why be scared of Bob when you came to see me?"

But she had an answer to that. Not only

was I a friend of Lew's, but I was one of the first at the scene of the murder.

"Okay, then, I'm a friend of Lew's," I said. "And as a friend of Lew's, I figure we'd better lose no time in getting up to see Bob."

Well, we saw Bob; and from the little germ of suspicion we planted in his mind, we sure got action. The next five days saw Bob Kennedy the busiest man north of Fifty-three. He hunted and he snooped and he got the wires to humming, and the upshot was that when the King's Bench opened in the city a week later, Bob was ready for it.

So was I, and so was Mary; and though her old man was in court with Cap Briggs and half the population of the Landing, none but the three of us had any advance knowledge of what the payoff was going to be.

DID you ever see a man on trial for his life? It's drama of the first run. There's the judge himself, solemn-looking and wise as an owl; the handpicked jury, nervous and awkward. A Crown prosecutor looks the crowd over like a ringmaster and the defence lawyer whispers in an undertone to the man in the dock. You see clerks, reporters, two or three Mounties in red coats, and you figure the man in the dock hasn't a chance in the world.

But in Lew Briggs's case, the folks from the Landing would have told you he did have a chance. A good chance—that the murder-count would never go through. They knew Lew too well; he was no killer. They'd have given you two-to-one against it. But not the city-folks; and perhaps not the twelve of the jury. These folks weren't concerned with sentiment; all they knew was that a man had met his death and that Lew Briggs had admitted having a hand in it.

And Lew himself didn't look too sure. He was wearing a clean shirt and he'd got himself a tie. Those that hadn't seen him before would say he was a thin-faced, dark and good-looking guy of around thirty or so; and they'd say it for just that reason—because they hadn't seen him before. But us who had seen him before were shocked by the change in him. He didn't used to be thin-faced, and he was still quite a ways from

thirty. And that pallor he was wearing wasn't the result of flying a big cabin plane or prospecting the northern bush. No, the three weeks in a cell with too much time for worrying had put a heavy finger on Lew Briggs.

He looked over, saw us there and gave a bit of a smile. I glanced at Mary. Her chin was trembling, and her eyes were wet. And then, with all the regulation pomp and ceremony, the court was declared opened.

Charged with murder, Lew pleaded, "Not guilty." Bob Kennedy gave the facts of the case, and after that old Nancy, George Dillman, Doc Forbes and I were called to the witness-stand. One by one the prosecutor grilled us, while Ben Green, Lew's fat defense counsel, shrugged his shoulders and told the court that for the present he had nothing to say.

Lew blinked, as though he couldn't understand it; but when the prosecutor got finished, Ben Green lumbered to his feet.

There was a sort of expectancy amongst the crowd. They strained their necks for a better view and they looked all the harder when Ben Green called old Nancy to the stand.

Now if she had to, old Nancy could talk pretty fair English. Moreover, she was never very bashful. So standing up there in a white man's court with every eye on her, she figured she was really somebody. She folded her hands across her hefty bosom and went all out.

"I'm go down to Jack's place," she began, "and I look een. Firs' I'm see hees feet. He's on hees side, lak he's gone to sleep dere. Or mebbeso he's seeck. So I go closer fo' look some more."

Ben Green broke in. "Just a minute, Nancy. You say that Riley was lying on his side. Was he facing you?" And when the old lady didn't understand, he explained, "You see his back? Or you see the front of him?"

"Hees back. He's lie like deese—" And old Nancy gave a pantomime of placing her hands under her right cheek and turning her back on Ben Green.

"I see" said Ben. "He was lying on the floor with his back towards you. Well, go on. Where was his head?"

Nancy said, "No could see hees head. Not

at firs'. Eet was near stove, but under table. And den w'en I com' close and look—a-ee! —d' blood!"

"That's right!" prompted Ben Green. "The blood. Now where was the blood?"

"On hees face. All over hees face!"

Ben Green nodded. "But what about the floor? Any there? And what about the top of his head?"

"Hees head?" The old lady blinked. "I'm not stop fo' look at hees head! I'm run fo' George!"

Ben Green stood her down then; and one by one, George Dillman, Bob Kennedy and I took her place.

He grilled us. How was the body lying when we saw it? Well, we told him. Flat on its back, with the head not under the table but between the table and the stove.

"Now Doctor Forbes, please," ordered Green. And Doc took the stand.

The lawyer asked him, "You examined the deceased, Doctor, did you not?"

Doc said, "I did."

"Please describe the wound."

Doc obliged, in technical jargon that could have been Fiji to me. But Ben Green seemed to get it, for he nodded, and went on.

"Now, Doctor— Nancy Beavertail says she found Jack Riley lying on his side with his back toward her. There was blood on his face, but she didn't notice the wound in his head. The corporal tells us there was a space of about three feet between the table and the stove, and that both were pushed back against the north wall. Nancy says the body was on its side between table and stove, with the head under the table. When you and the other witnesses saw the body, it was flat on its back with the head nearer the stove than the table. I will ask you, considering the wound in the head, would the deceased have been able to move from the position in which Nancy found him to the one you saw him in?"

Doc's answer came promptly. "I can't think so." He added, "With the brain injured as it was, death must have been instantaneous."

The prosecutor was on his feet. He saw the way things were going.

"At the preliminary hearing, Doctor," he pointed out, "you agreed that death was

caused by the deceased striking his head against the leg of the stove."

Doc said, "What of it? Death could have been caused by that. A blow by a weapon or a blow from impact would look the same. The only opinion I'm giving now doesn't concern the manner of the injury. I'm merely stating that in my opinion after receiving a blow of such force, the deceased never moved again."

The prosecutor, a balding man with a hooked nose and a slash of a mouth, seemed stumped. Ben Green grinned at him.

"The point I'm trying to make is that we're not certain Jack Riley *was* dead when Nancy found him but that he certainly was when the corporal came along." Then he turned to Lew Briggs.

AT BEN GREEN'S prompting, Lew told just what had happened that fateful night. He admitted trying to lie his way out at the preliminary hearing, but said what he had told later was the truth. Telling of the row with Jack Riley, he said Jack swung on him, so he clipped him a couple times then let him have a good one. As to how he'd left Jack, he claimed that the last he saw of the guy was sprawled out on the floor just the way that Nancy had found him.

"I waited a second or two for him to get up, then I shoved off. He was only knocked out and I knew it. Only I was too mad to care if he did or if he didn't."

Ben Green turned suddenly to the bench.

"Your Lordship," he began; "I submit that the prosecution has failed to make a case against the accused. He is charged with murder, but there is no evidence to show that he murdered anyone. On the contrary, the evidence of Nancy Beavertail merely corroborates what the accused says himself. Briggs admits 'clipping' the deceased a few times and finally knocking him out; and all Nancy Beavertail can tell us is that the deceased looked dead because he was sprawled on the floor unmoving and had blood on his face. We must admit that Nancy had quite a shock when she stepped alone into the cabin. It was dark outside, and instead of meeting Riley as she expected to, she found him in this gory and odd position on the floor. The blood on the face of the deceased

can be explained quite readily. Briggs struck him twice before knocking him out, and a lot of the blood had come from his nose. So the evidence would seem to indicate that Nancy had come on the deceased in his knocked-out condition soon after the accused left the house, and that the actual murder took place after he'd gone."

Now the crowd of onlookers really had something worth straining for. I glanced at Lew, smiled at him, then glanced over at Mary Bowes. But she wasn't looking at me. She had eyes only for Lew Briggs.

But the old judge stalled. "I prefer to hear more evidence."

Ben Green shrugged his fat shoulders again, then called a Hiram Porter to the stand. I knew who Hi Porter was, but few of the others knew him. Still, they were going to find out.

Sworn, Ben Green asked him his occupation. Porter said, "Deputy Warden of New Westminster Penitentiary."

"Look around the court," invited Ben Green, "and tell us if there is anyone you know."

Hiram Porter did. "I know Mike Jackson. Only 'George Dillman' is the name he seems to be going under here."

Ben Green handed him a photograph. "And d'you recognize this man?"

Porter took a casual look at the photograph. "Yes, I do. His name is John Riley."

"And where did you know these men?"

"They were both inmates of New Westminster Penitentiary."

There was more than a stir then, and I noticed a couple of Mounties had worked their way over to George Dillman's chair. Most of all, though, I noticed George Dillman. He'd gone a dirty gray, and his jaw was working.

But Ben Green went on. "When were these two men discharged?"

"Riley, seven years ago. He finished a three-year term for a series of automobile thefts. Jackson got out last winter. He did a fifteen-year stretch for armed robbery."

There was barely a sound in the court. I sort of expected old Slash-mouth, the prosecutor, to put up a howl; but he seemed as groggy as the rest of them. And in the meantime, Ben Green called George Dillman to the stand.

But George had trouble getting there. It took the two Mounties to help him. Once he got set, though, Ben Green was ready with a few more questions. Did he know Jack Riley seven years ago? Was it in New Westminster Penitentiary? And did he decide to look up his old friend once he got out?

Dillman began to find his voice. Yeah, sure, he looked him up. He'd had a letter or two from Jack, and Jack had said for him to come on up and stay for a spell. Mebbe get a new start, where people didn't know him.

"I see," said Green, sort of cynically. "Very nice of Jack. And you stayed with him for about six months. Right up to the time of his death. And then—then you became very attached to his son. So much so that when Jack died, you took steps to adopt the boy. Is that right?"

Dillman said, "Yeah, sure."

"Of course," said Ben Green, and now he seemed to be purring like a big fat cat, "you didn't know that Jack's real name was Jack Michaels and that he was the only son of old Anthony Michaels, the big steel man down East? And I don't suppose you found out at any time that Anthony Michaels had died and that Jack Michaels, alias Jack Riley, was the sole heir to his father's estate?"

But George Dillman couldn't answer that. He seemed too far gone. So Ben Green faced the judge once more.

"I submit, Your Lordship, that there is no case against the accused, and I ask that the charge against him be withdrawn."

And His Lordship nodded grimly.

BUT there was nothing grim about the little party we had that night. We took the Blue Room of the Palace Hotel and there were about a dozen of us on hand. It was going to cost somebody something, and that somebody was Lew Briggs. We had a quiet little dinner, and when it was all over, Bob Kennedy showed us what made the wheels of the Law go around.

"Nothing much to it once Mary gave me the tip." Bob looked across the table to where Mary Bowes was sitting closer than necessary to Lew Briggs. "When I got it into my thick skull that Jack Riley might

have been killed between the time old Nancy found him and the time it took me to get down there, I knew that only one guy was responsible. And that was George Dillman, the guy on the spot. He'd probably been looking for a chance to kill Jack for quite a spell, and when Lew gave him that trimming, here was his chance. Nancy came hollering that Jack was dead, and while she was off for me, George made good and sure he was. But *why* should he do it? That's what had me guessing?"

Bob looked again at Mary, and Mary began to color.

"It took a woman," he said. "While I was groping around, she wondered if it were to get possession of Jack's kid. She said it didn't make sense, for George didn't look exactly like a family-man. But it made sense to me. Stuff like that had happened before. So when I managed to get a good set of Dillman's fingerprints—the lamp-glass in his house this time—and shot 'em into the Fingerprint Bureau in Ottawa, I got a lead. He'd been in New Westminster pen—and he claimed to have known Jack Riley 'out at the Coast'.

"That tied in. They'd been chums in the pen, and Dillman had found out who Jack Riley really was. But for me to find out, well, that was a chore, though finally I got it. How? Oh, bits of paper in a trunk of Jack's, an old snapshot and a crested ring that Dillman was hanging onto for evidence against the time he'd produce his adopted son as the heir to the Michaels' fortune."

"But why didn't Jack claim the fortune?" someone asked. "Didn't he know his father was dead?"

"Probably not," agreed Bob. "Probably never expected it. Anyway, he was the black sheep of the family; so when the family dropped him, he dropped them. Of course, he'd have heard of it some time—but George Dillman managed to beat him to the punch."

Amongst those at the table were Cap Briggs, Nancy Beavertail and old Jim Bowes. Old Jim suddenly looked down at Lew as though he'd just remembered something.

"That row, that scrap you had with Riley—was it over what I think it was?"

"What you think it was!" Lew looked

puzzled, then started to grin. "What d'you think it was, anyway?"

Old Jim looked suddenly awkward. He switched from Lew to Mary, dropped his eyes and told Lew that mebbe he'd best forget it.

But you couldn't expect Lew to forget it like that. He, too, glanced down at Mary as though she could furnish the explanation. But all Mary could furnish was a blush you could warm your hands by.

"I don't get it at all," said Lew, and he sounded a bit impatient. But the next second he frowned, and started to fiddle with a fork. "No," he told old Jim, "I don't think it was what you think it was. In fact, the row was over some rock samples."

"Rock samples?" I guess half of us echoed his words.

"Rock samples," he said again. "Remember me going prospecting late this Summer? Well, I was up on the Midas property, trying to see where my seven thousand bucks had gone. I knew it had gone into some holes in the ground, but I wasn't satisfied. I figured that showings on the Midas must mean something. The stuff was all surface there, just float; but I told myself the real vein should be somewhere." Lew suddenly grinned. "I don't know much about prospecting, but I took the lay of the land and the run of the surface-vein and followed it. Every day it seemed I was getting a bit closer, and I only had one worry. And that was that someone was dogging me.

"It was a funny feeling," said Lew. "I'd hear odd sounds at times, and once I came across the keel-mark of a canoe in the sand. Another time I got back to my tent and found someone had been through my pack-sack. I had a few rock-samples in there, and this someone had been interested in 'em. Finally, coming down the river one evening I saw a canoe pulling away from the tent with a couple of guys in it. They were Jack Riley and this Dillman. That finished me; so I took after them and followed them in. And as soon as I landed that night, I hit for Riley's and jumped him."

That seemed sort of tame, sort of commonplace. "So why," I asked him, "couldn't you have told Buck Henderson that?"

Lew gave a crooked smile. "D'you figure I'm that crazy? If I'd had a mineral-strike mixed up in the killing, they'd have hung me sure. As it was, saying nothing about it, George Dillman didn't mention it either. It would only put him in a poor light—snooping around another man's camp—and things were going nicely for him, anyway. No," said Lew; "I don't want any gold-claim mixed up with murder. What a swell motive for killing Jack Riley that would have been!"

"Gold-claim!" Old Cap Briggs sniffed scornfully. "That Midas stuff? Men don't kill each other over flops like that."

Lew gave his old man a fond smile. "I'm not talking about flops. I'm talking about a strike."

It gradually sank into us, though it was Mary who got there first.

"You—you mean," she stammered; "you found it? The gold you went looking for?"

Lew gave her the smile. "How did you think I was going to pay for this supper?"

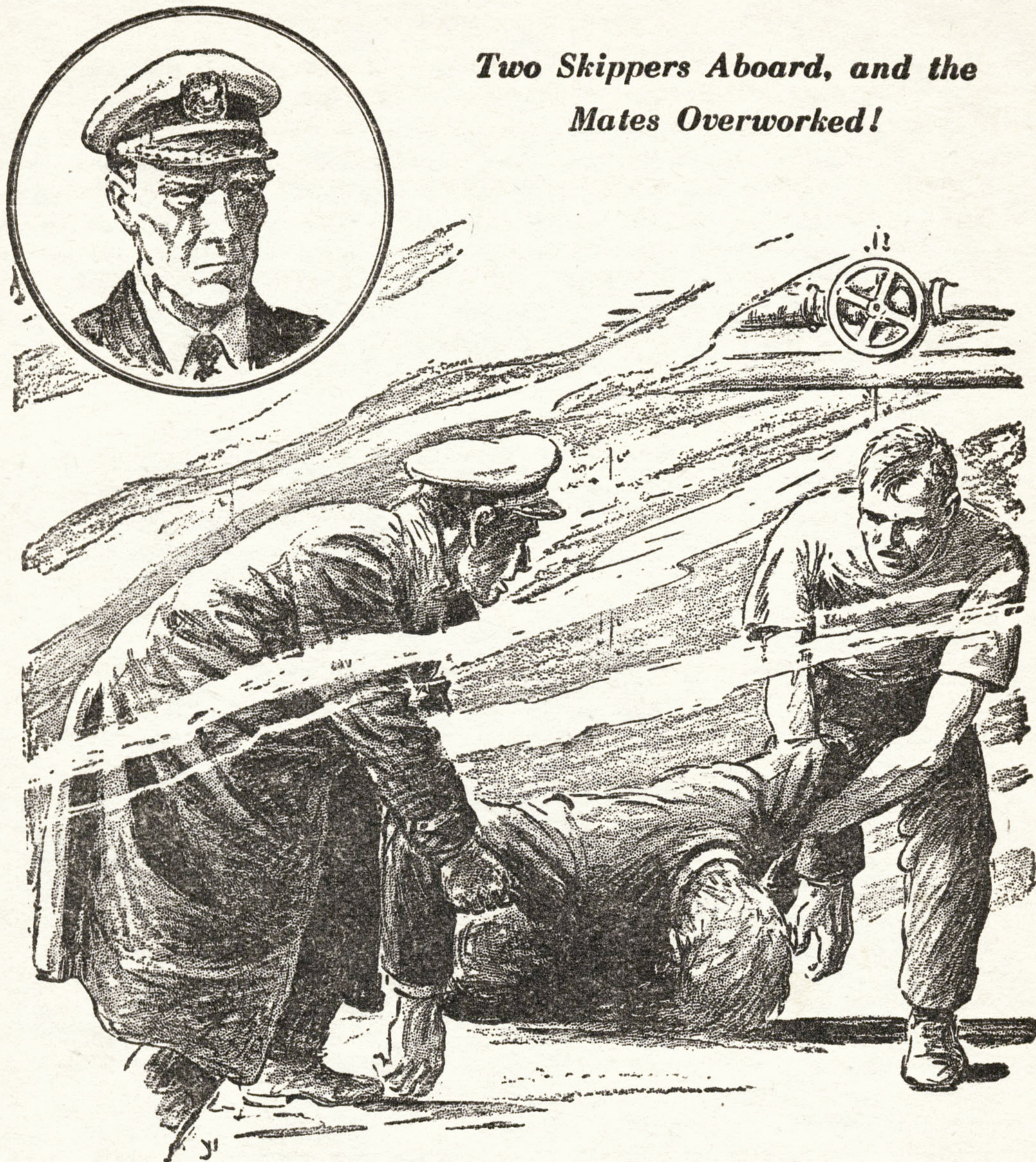
I guess we all went a little wild then. Not one of us there but had sweated it out with Lew. We'd worried with him, suffered with him; now, not only was he a free man once more, but he'd hit the jackpot again. Old Cap Briggs had an arm around his shoulders and he was saying to him what we all felt, "Are you ever lucky, son! Boy, I'll tell the world!"

Yeah, we were a happy lot, happy just in sharing the greater happiness that was Lew's. He sat there grinning, the old man's arm around him, and his own arm around Mary. I thought to myself, "Yeah, you're lucky, all right."

But I wasn't thinking about gold-claims; I wasn't even thinking about murder-raps. I was thinking of Peggy Burtch, who ran out on the guy when trouble came; and of Mary, who walked with him through the blackness of it all.

"Yeah, you're sure lucky," I told him. "Luckier than you'll ever know."

**Two Skippers Aboard, and the
Mates Overworked!**



THE SPARTAN

By BERTON E. COOK

THE wharf end boomed in the final rush. Hand trucks clattered on the run. The *Tupper-ton's* cargo nets bulged full of the last big grabs off the wharf and out of the sheds. They swung in grayish balls, ill-formed and grunting, high across black bulwarks and jerked downward past whining winches.

Carl Corbin, master in steam, felt too young for his mean errand. But Captain Flannagan must have received the fatal word from the main office by this time; it must have skimmed off the sour cream of anger and resentment. So he fervently hoped, anyway, picking a passage through the rush, shoving his brand new yellow pigskin bag before him.

The rancid smells of stevedores' sweat mingled with the clean odor of fresh, green lumber off packing cases. Corbin often wondered whether other people were so sensitive to smells. Repeatedly his dark eyes took in the black bulge of the funnel, the clean white upperworks, the buff-painted masts reaching toward wooly clouds. A fine prospect, this, after two years in that old tramp.

If only they had called Flannagan away before this trip would begin! He kept looking for the Old Man on his deck, on the bridge, hoping to anticipate his mood of the moment and meet it. Flannagan was not in sight anywhere. Had he indeed been notified and called? Had the change been advance dated?

He read the plimsol marks from the gang-plank; down to her summer marks. But time was short and he went aboard, his mind reverting to the port captain. In Corbin's appraisal, he had tried too hard to glaze over the nasty chore, aiming to avoid a discussion of how Flannagan would deal the cards to a young master sent to supplant him. Corbin had not been deceived by his flow of words.

He entered the lower bridge remembering, "Don't you throw this in his face. Don't get brusque with him. He knows more in one minute than you'll know in years." Corbin, in the darker passageway, found the stairway, seeing in vivid memory the port captain's blocky hand cross his heavy features, painting a new expression there. Then, in a quick impatience he had grunted bluntly in his discomfort, "Damn it, he's got more to offer than I have in this job ashore!" Whereupon his voice had tapered off until he let drop one word, "handicapped" and he quit talking as though he had said too much.

Corbin went above, wondering about that final word, the abrupt ending. What handicap? Whose? He glanced down at the pig-skin's too new, too yellow glow in the dim half light. Greenhorns sported new luggage. But Flannagan had a wide reputation for sight taking and he also might talk tough about stowage. All a man's gear plus the books and sextant to meet the challenge required a big, stout bag. Thus Corbin excused himself, unconvinced, knowing that a million volumes could not match long experience like Flannagan's years against

weather and sea and the characteristics of a vessel deep in cargo.

The blood crowded his temples, he'd be facing the beached skipper inside a minute. Why in hell hadn't the management retired the man as of today instead of "when you and Capt. Flannagan both deem it advisable but not later than arrival in New Orleans"?

But he knew the reason, of course; he must absorb Flannagan's stowage methods, the courses he had established. Gypsum under package cargo, fog, the Labrador Current. On second thought, how could any relieving master get brusque in the face of it all? How could any young skipper stick out his neck so far with the master whose reputation for Irish temper and discipline and unpredictable impulses and withal an enviable record—who but a fool would rush into this?

Now the skipper's fame filled Corbin's thoughts full. He sat his bag down outside the master's cabin door, his plan of approach well in mind. Before he could rap on the door, it opened bang in his face. It forced him backward and one foot shoved the bag into the sun. He could have shoved his rocky fist into somebody's face.

But not Flannagan's. The Old Man's gray, piercing eyes bored down at that yellow creation. A cynical chuckle began in his throat and was quickly checked by some ugly presentiment. Corbin tried to read the change on his lean, almost gaunt, weathered features. Then the reputed spartan self-discipline asserted itself and Flannagan bypassed his surprise and suspicion by asking curtly, "Where in hell did you get that thing? It's the color of our quarantine flag."

STILL provoked, Captain Corbin replied, "No apologies, skipper; we all wear clothes. And prefer our own sextants for those star shots for which you're noted." He turned aside to let that sink in, ending the impasse and looking for the cabin in which to bury the damned bag. And be damned if middle-age could talk down to him. They both were skippers, both had reason for pride in their records.

A hint of pain crossed Flannagan's face, instead of pleasure, at mention of his reputation. Then he did a surprising thing; it was unorthodox as between captains. He crossed in front of Corbin to the after cor-

ner of his cabin. There he pointed to a door in the recess. "Park your monstrosity in there," he directed, the edge still in his voice as he faced the cabin indicated.

The next instant Corbin was more amazed than angry to see him turn his back and head aft in the orange light from the sun where it quivered downward behind heat radiations off a corrugated freight shed. He watched the proud, military set of Flannagan's trim figure out of sight; it moved in brief, almost self-conscious steps and a splinter of admiration pierced his resentment. Cussed shame to retire such a skipper, to forfeit forever his accumulated know-how.

He entered the guest cabin—the fools who charted men's lives in their lifeless statistical tables and came up on a slide rule with an arbitrary date for retirement on pension of a master in steam! He hove his gear onto the bed. He still had to present to Flannagan the port captain's orders; Captain Flannagan was supposed to read that letter himself. But Corbin couldn't picture him giving up command until her last line would be fast in New Orleans. All that time, then, for the Old Man to invent surprises, further insults, demonstrations of how he could make Corbin's unwelcome presence hell.

He hung his things in the locker, stowing his weather boots handy. Anybody but Flannagan would have at least mentioned the port captain's orders which he, too, was expected to read or talked about having to retire. Many a skipper would have chuckled over plans for a farm or a sailboat—he slammed the locker shut.

A LAZY old moon under the horizon poured gold toward Venus. The *Tupperton* throbbed from swell to long swell like some diffident monster. Captain Corbin wondered what next. The Old Man had confined his few brittle words at mess to remarks on current shipping, forestalling possible debate while he faced his pork chops and onions forbiddingly. Now he had his successor-to-be neatly maneuvered into a solitary wing of the bridge. Corbin assured his pride that he'd be damned if he'd raise his voice hereafter.

Despite the port captain's warnings, Flannagan had his goat. "Handicapped", he'd

said; tonight it became as ridiculous as that rave about blowing the nose.

The Second took over at midnight, then the Old Man came all the way out to Corbin. "Second is brewing coffee inside," he said crisply. "Join him?"

"No thanks."

"Fine. Come below with me."

"What's fine about it?"

Flannagan's library lined the inner side of his cabin. Arresting pictures hung elsewhere. "Alquist . . . Fischer," Corbin read aloud. "And you found this oil painting of the old side-wheeler Portland? Not bad, mister."

"You appreciate such things?"

"Who doesn't?" Corbin turned to meet his glow of pride. It was not there. Only a touch of sadness, a haunting stare beneath which deep, dark lines strung down the face like crepe. And Flannagan was not looking at him, but at a picture of the *Cottage City* of a former day. "Her lines," he remarked without turning his head, "would be graceful even today. My father stood to her throttle many a watch below in foggy going."

Corbin attempted to warm him up. "Now compare a Hog Islander with any one of these. No camber, no rake, no tumble-home—"

"I boarded this four-master a greenhorn. Portland to Ponce. Lumber for the Winslow people." He appeared not to heed what was said to him at all.

Very well, you tyrant, thought Corbin, go on. Talk at your pictures. But he remarked casually, "Nice sea library," as he read titles.

"It is and it isn't. I shall want to add—" The thought broke like a piece of Sevres ware dropped to the floor. Corbin turned quickly. "Add what?" he asked. But he caught the drift; the Old Man's life in this cabin was ending. So many long threads of self-satisfying living were fraying out.

Flannagan forced a chuckle as his face aimed toward a push-button. "We'll have coffee," he declared as though to escape any possible mention of the future after that broken sentence.

The mess boy's eyes scarcely left the skipper from the moment he entered until his tray was on the desk. His departure suggested an escape and Corbin detected

tyranny in Flannagan's gray, sharp stare. But the latter seemed to ignore the boy to watch his pouring and say, "You refused coffee with the mate. So you've learned the folly of getting acquainted too readily—with mates. That's your coffee, here's the canned cow."

By that time he had Carl Corbin frankly puzzled. Slam a door open in his face. Indicate the guest cabin offhandedly and march away aft. Clip the table conversation and isolate him on the bridge. Now the extraordinary creature admitted pride in his books and art stuffily while presuming to approve—and never yet had he mentioned his retirement orders or enquired for Captain Corbin's.

"Go on, it'll get cold," Flannagan interrupted. "My steward knows coffee."

When Corbin drank, the crisp voice caught him off guard. "Cap'n Corbin, presumably you came aboard me with orders? And haven't mentioned them?" with rising inflection.

Captain Corbin's dark eyes struck fire. After preventing him from mentioning the orders, did old Flannagan think to accuse him of neglect? His first impulse was to bang down the cup hard and curse the man. His second one revealed more talent. With synthetic humor he laughed in Flannagan's face and gloated, "So I came with orders! And have forgot to produce them? I haven't cornered you, you mean. I haven't shouted them into your damned, close-hauled ears." Hours of irregular treatment shot fury into his tongue. He'd bring this widely reputed crank to terms. His terms.

Flannagan poured himself another cupful. The cabin might have been silent instead of thunderous and tense. Corbin had failed to jar him out of that cold poise of his.

And quickly Corbin made a startling change of attack. With utterly disarming composure he remarked, not about the orders in his pocket but, "Er, cap'n. You say you accumulated all these volumes one by one?"

That got a rise. Flannagan spilled coffee onto himself. His close-cropped, fine head jerked upward. For the first time, Corbin got a split-second's look into the slatey eyes and they were daggers, closely focused and flinty. Only for one instant, then Flannagan rose like a Marine officer and went to the

open porthole, standing back to his guest, facing the moonlit sea.

Once he turned around as if to speak his mind, but the other skipper by then moved along the rows of books. Thus their meeting was adjourned and Flannagan, figuratively speaking, realized that a door had been slammed in his face too.

MUTUAL, outspoken admiration or approval is not always to be expected between two executives of the sea. They are stark individualists. They have to be. Deep in the *Tupperton's* cargo, Flannagan's flashlight featured for Corbin the stowage plan and method. Probably it was not original but it looked impressive. Narrow, clear lanes among cases with their markings all in sight. Dunnage so ingeniously laid that it more than contained the bulk gypsum down under. Cargo shifting had been rendered just about nil, so Flannagan declared, his positiveness in voice and manner brooking no contention.

To hell with his statement. Corbin's eyes roved expertly here and there and he remarked, "Gypsum settles more than coal."

"Coal!" Flannagan snorted. "Why did you quit the colliers then?"

Still absorbing information around him, the young skipper replied without much interest, "Got to able seaman in colliers, three mate ratings in coffee. Santos run." He spoke pointedly. "Had the *Torrington* after that, to San Juan and Havana, then the war." Seeing the tension mounting in the thin face, he reached for the torch—"If you don't mind," he said and took it.

He aimed it low to see exactly how the dunnage was joined. In returning it, he aimed its beam into the skipper's face an instant, then downward. The cheek bones stuck out in white knobs under smoldering fires. Half closed fists completed the picture. Were these storm signals or would it be some internal struggle of the spartan, fighting down an emotional display?

Flannagan all but snatched away the torch and led directly to the little vertical ladder out. He couldn't seem to get out fast enough. In the cool, damp air on deck, Corbin tried to read that ghostly gray face with its glittering bullseyes shining wet in deep sockets.

He felt guilty. He believed that the man's

desire to read the port captain's orders had burned him to fever heat in resentment. Flannagan was not used to being thwarted, evidently, so he said calmly, "Shall we go above, cap'n? The orders involve joint action."

"Joint what!"

But Corbin now led the way; he was not hearing anything to interrupt him.

Entering the cabin, Flannagan snapped, "Come inside. Read them aloud."

This was odd. Said Corbin, "Of course your own orders from the home office must have referred to my coming along to familiarize myself with the courses you run, your stowage methods, the ship herself and so on."

Flannagan's jaw fell. His eyes remained low on the paper in Corbin's hand. "Read it." He sounded like an echo in a deep well.

". . . to assume command of the *Tupper-ton* whenever you and Captain Flannagan both deem it advisable but not later than arrival in New Orleans. . . ." So read the poignant orders.

To break the tension, Corbin said, "Hell, your own notice must have mentioned my coming."

"I got no notice."

"Wha-a-at! Somebody's balled things—"

"And they send a ninety-day-wonder like you to take over this run. Wet back of the ears. Quick product of the war. Opportunist. Gawdam—"

"Take it easy, cap'n," Corbin warned him. "You haven't mentioned the reason for pensioning you. Well?"

This seemed to puncture the bubble, but it was a slow leak during which Flannagan, looking exhausted and stubborn, combing bony fingers through his iron gray hair, pinching sweat from his eyes to say, "We Irish can be profoundly emotional. An intense race. The rough and tough ones wolf down their corned beef and cabbage, go berserk at times to clear the air. Others of us were born to die for a cause in the public square. We all have fire."

"Helluva way to learn the bad news, Flannagan. I am genuinely sorry I had to come with it."

"You are not! You young strappers have the gall of the ignorant. What do you really know about hull construction, about fitting all kinds of cargo to the peculiarities of your

vessel. You brazenly accept the biggest pay, the best tonnage offered you, cut-throating us when we've mastered the profession." He wagged a long, trembling finger: "We're like doctors, you upstart; at our best at my age."

CORBIN'S ears burned, but he held to his text. "For all your argument, you haven't disclosed their reason for retiring you. You're not yet at the usual retirement age, you know. What about a disability?"

Flannagan turned his back and resumed the pacing. He refused to answer it and he would not argue.

Which reminded Corbin of something the port captain had let drop—the one word "handicapped". Was this the pith of the matter? Had he hit upon the reason behind all this fury? Flannagan, if so, had said too much. "Who do you think you're talking down to, mister?" he let fly at him. "We took to boats under fire. Get that. And now the war is gone, how often is a vessel abandoned? We like yourself have to accumulate experience. Enough of your glory-be-to-us ravings."

Flannagan couldn't take it lying down. He led off on a different tack. "You'll risk ship, cargoes, crews and your future on this run. Fog will ruin you. It's closing in right now. Fishermen cross this course constantly and they all ignore our whistling as they did in the days of sail off here. All the way from the Banks to east of Nantucket they run free and they've been here ever since John Cabot discovered huge cod here. The worst offenders are the Portuguese."

"Finest sailormen in the world," Corbin objected.

"But no earthly good with the diesels they use. They neglect them and tinker them at sea with haywire. They have fires, breakdowns, explosions. Oh hell, man, what you don't know!"

Corbin brought him right back again to, "You're not at the retirement age, Flannagan. What's the answer? Out with it, mister."

"Retirement," Flannagan muttered. He waved a hand toward his books and pictures, then he was gone.

Corbin stood there in the unnatural silence, trying to weave some definite pattern out of all the skipper had said, im-

pressed with the fact that he had arrived at the verge of cracking up. Had "handicapped" referred to the man's nerves? One thing was sure: Flannagan would not surrender command until the vessel docked—unless he broke down before then. His notice from the home office had miscarried and he would make the most of that. Now he could hear him somewhere on deck shouting.

The haze had thickened to that blurry, deceiving stage between mistiness and outright fog. He spotted the Old Man down on deck abaft the bridge, still shouting up to the mate: "I say, you'll be in thick o' fog before you know it. Clear the condensation out of the whistle . . . I say clear . . . whistle."

Some of the condensation sprinkled Corbin on his way down. From now on, he considered it his duty to keep an eye on the man. However, when the latter saw him coming, he made for the lower bridge entrance.

Already down there beyond him, Corbin studied that short stride, trying to divine what could have relegated so able a skipper to the beach. Suddenly the whistle screamed and directly out of a wall of fog ahead came a black and white smear, a short mast, a fishing boat head on.

He shouted to the skipper, but the latter went right on into the lower bridge. The trawler passed so close that her bow nearly scraped along the guard. He watched her aft, first washed away, then drawn into the ship's boiling green and white wake. Her crew shook their fists, yelled in a foreign jargon and hurried to their lines over the stern. Presently they were gone.

It had been a close call indeed; why had Flannagan marched right on into the bridge? He must have seen it coming when Corbin had. Very soon he'd take the measure of the mate on watch and it would be well to witness it. At least Corbin would learn Flannagan's judgment of the man.

But he found the wheelhouse strangely silent. Over the helmsman's left shoulder he saw the wet shine of the mate's coat, his winged-out ears, harking into the fog. The Old Man straddled a weatherboard. Now he reached in to the whistle lever and the irritating scream vibrated everything. Next he shoved his face over the compass and

Corbin saw it in the yellow glow. It fairly took his breath. In mere minutes that spartan face had aged years. The piercing eyes bent a drab squint toward the compass card and came away with a hint of madness, a touch of frustration. Impulsively the taut lips parted to cry out. He held it back in time.

By that time the Old Man had noticed his ultimate successor through the glass partition and for this Corbin was thankful. For, just as surely as the eyes are the windows of the soul, Flannagan no longer was his former self. Instead of commanding the ship from the open bridge and at reduced speed, he lingered inside the wheelhouse, he moved without vigor and always he came to a pause with his feet astride a weatherboard.

Corbin coughed. Flannagan looked his way and muttered, clapping one palm onto the post at the inside stairhead. Impulsively he turned back and went out to the mate. Once the latter peered into his face, then nodded and went away. Again the skipper came in, laid a hand on the post and went below.

To Corbin, all this bespoke a synthetic calm. Leaving the bridge in this weather meant sickness. Corbin would have followed him but he couldn't forget that Flannagan had evaded him on deck. Of what use would it be if repeated?

THREE bells passed and no skipper. Corbin went to the mate to remark, "The cap'n must be sick."

"How soon do you take over, skipper?"

"Hard to say."

"Good God, I want to know. He talked like a slack mouthed ghost out here. Three bells and he's not back up. He never leaves the bridge in a fog."

"What did he think when we nearly hit the trawler?"

"I expected he'd raise hell. He didn't. He's got something heavy on his mind," the mate guessed. "May be you, sir." He peered sharply into Corbin's face.

"Could be. I'm not on the articles."

The mate blew up. "Well if you're not watch for him and he ain't coming, who the hell is running things? I want to cut speed 'fore we run down the next stinking trawler we meet." He strode off to cool his ardor, but the strain of so much responsibility remained a millstone round his neck.

Corbin left it that way. When the clock tinkled off another bell, he decided to go below. Flannagan did not answer the wet knuckles on his door. Corbin looked in through the open port and saw him stretched on the bed, taut, fists clenched and face averted.

He went inside. "Cap'n, your mate wants to cut speed. Can't see beyond the bow."

Flannagan might have been asleep. Or dead.

"I say! Shall we cut speed or not?"

Flannagan wiped his face over the bedding and on around with eyes closed. The thin lips opened. "He's gone mate fifteen years, seven in this vessel. He knows enough to reduce speed if he's afraid."

"That is your order then."

No reply. The tight mouth only pursed the tighter.

Corbin had a better thought. "Cap'n, it is plain as hell you're not fit. Remember my orders from the port cap'n; when you and I deem it best that I assume command—"

Flannagan sprang to a sitting posture. He shook a hard fist at his tormentor and aimed a lancing stare to Corbin's face. "This is my four hundredth trip as master. Neither the owners nor the damned port cap'n can keep me from making mine the longest record in the company—and I have never lost a man. Not one single death in all the crews I've had." He ran both hands over his wet face and added in sarcasm, "And you, a kid with a license, a war baby commander, board my ship to break the string at the last moment. Preying on a mate's bellyaching for an excuse." He flung a wide gesture towards the door. "Get the hell out!"

ALL that night the mate operated the ship and suffered over it. Captain Corbin stood by without authority, impelled by habit and too deeply concerned over the peculiar situation to so much as catch a few winks. This could not go on forever. Nor could he supersede Flannagan without exceeding the orders in his pocket.

Toward morning he concluded that he had allowed the ailing skipper time enough to either perform his duties to ship and owners or surrender them. Regardless of the big word "both" in the port captain's tactfully worded orders, one or the other of two masters aboard the ship must assume

active command. All three mates had stood a combined total of thirty-four hours on fogbound duty without ever leaving the bridge, without even a few minutes' respite on the wheelhouse settee.

Physical consideration was but half of it; they felt and showed mental tension. Two licensed skippers aboard and neither assuming the responsibility which was to be expected of one or the other. Captain Corbin had kept tabs on these, his future subordinates, and he liked what he saw.

The change of watches at eight bells had come to mean that one turned over the log to another, almost an empty gesture as matters stood. Corbin overheard their complaints only indirectly by then; he had to concentrate on devising an urgent solution to the impasse. Until his deductions became this simple: a man is not sick without symptoms. At least some of them must be evident to even himself. But Flannagan had proved himself extremely clever at concealing what it was that ailed him. Once again that word "handicapped" came to mind.

The dirty gray, cheerless promise of another day lessened the blackness. The jackstaff took shape from the bridge when Captain Corbin shook his hundred and eighty-five pounds loosely but firmly into his heavy weather clothing and decided he'd been patient and tolerant enough.

He conferred with nobody. He went directly to Flannagan's cabin and entered without warning. "Cap'n, I have to work with and depend on these mates after you are gone. All three have been on the bridge since sundown yesterday. I am assuming command of the ship."

A smirk livened the skipper's face as he got to his feet. "Like hell you are! I told you the mate bellyaches out loud from long habit. I also told you that this happens to be my four-hundredth trip, a record when I complete it as cap'n."

Corbin gave him closest scrutiny, nor did the piercing gray eyes once leave his face. Quite suddenly he discovered something. What a situation! He marvelled that he hadn't observed it long ago. Handicapped indeed—and so amazingly crafty about it!

He sprang his test too suddenly, much too unexpectedly for it to be dodged. A loud rustling of paper close to Flannagan's nose checked his flow of words. "Read these

orders yourself this time," Corbin demanded. "Read."

Flannagan's right hand jerked upward slowly, exploratively. Before it got to the noisy paper, it fell slack at his side. "He knows," he groaned, then sharply, "Very well, Cap'n Corbin, the jig is up. I can't see your damned—" He collapsed.

Corbin straightened him on the floor and waited. Not for long. The eyes and mouth sprang open simultaneously: "I'll go." He sat up without pretending to see, at the moment. "I beg of you, Corbin, do not give me away. Not yet."

"I know, your sight comes and goes. You didn't see me very clearly when I came aboard, kept your face in your plate through that first mess. But you saw me coming when you shouted up to the mate for clearing the whistle; you got tempery about it, though, and that cost you another blind spell."

Flannagan massaged his face slowly, saying, "Waited in the wheelhouse doorway for it to return. Couldn't read the cussed compass and that was an awful shock."

"I should have caught you then," Corbin confessed. "You looked terrified. Well, you've been below thirteen hours running, skipper, and you're not yet fit to go above. What? Mister, if anything should happen——"

One long, sensitive hand reached for the dark blurr which was Corbin's uniform. It touched the wide open rubber coat. "I am regaining some—some of my sight," Flannagan ventured exploratively. "For God's sake, Corbin, please—I must complete this trip as master. I have no plans for afterward, no future. Thirteen hours, you say, and I haven't yet managed to figure out how to live, forbidden the sea and blindness closing down oftener and oftener." He got to his feet brushing himself. "Might as well die—come, be reasonable, this will be a record. Four hundred trips without losing a life." At last he did seem to scrutinize Corbin's features one by one.

The hand on the latter's arm sent a wave of something nameless through his robust body. It softened his pounding pulse. It laid a humane gentleness over stern, sharp peaks of his thinking like rays of the setting sun through dust.

Yet, judgment warned him from the

darker zenith of realities; the safe operation of the vessel, the duty to her owners, the weariness and attitude of her officers—these could be more pertinent than a beaten man's fetish. And whatever his eyes might do to favor the attempt, Corbin couldn't forget that his nerves resembled a telephone system after a blizzard.

So he weighed and set one factor against another, torn between brain and heart. To stall for time he said, "You must get to a specialist."

"Specialist! I've been to them in Philadelphia, New Orleans, New York, Boston. The last one told me the awful truth, Corbin. Well?" On the lips of anybody else, Corbin thought, the query would have been begging.

"What did this to you?"

"You mentioned my reputation for star shots. It came like a blow to the head. I used to look directly into the sun; took sights that figured, many times, within half a mile. Your remark about your sextant blurred things, so I headed aft."

"In short steps, almost counting to the companion stairway," Corbin added.

"I have the steps counted between several points of departure." He looked earnestly into the younger skipper's face—"Well?"

Corbin watched how bravely he stood, tall, determined, courageous to a fault; yet he was unspeakably anxious within. It was too genuine an exhibition to crush. "Go on, cap'n. You are splendid," he had to declare. "And forget that foolishness about you might as well die."

Some of the light fled from the skipper for one fleeting instant, then once again the spartan in him asserted itself and he strode away.

CAPTAIN CARL CORBIN stood outside his quarters in the foggy drip, mulling over the tragedy and the cleverness with which it had been concealed. "Awful thing," he murmured. Ambition drives a man to the top where one vital error can claim his license. And if he throws himself into the work, goes all out with sextant, stands watches with mates, personally supervises stowage—if he gets into the habits of the perfectionist—he pays some terrible price. Nature can reach for everything but his very soul. Small wonder that Flannagan had

considered death as his only way out. Going blind, a skipper!

Now overhead a moist, irritating siren screamed. It knifed into his contemplation and he scowled up at the thing against the stack, wondering if he ever could become accustomed to such a whistle. A random draught of air hit his wet face. But it tingled inside his nose and his pulse quickened.

His questioning gaze moved down the funnel and discovered a brownish smear in heat waves rising out the fiddlies. The smell of hot oil came stronger, the brown color deeper. Men's loud cries came up in the fast blackening fumes—"Fire—number three, I hear. Let's go!"

Still listening, still dragging his mind off Flannagan, he heard again: ". . . got the foam dope? . . . Chief's gone in with the Third. Yeah, it's Fagan, they say; he was scrapin' hexes . . . Hey you b'lo-o-o-ow there . . ."

The *Tupperton* was afire in her boiler room!

MILLIONS of people speed to see a fire, thrilled by the gongs, the racing apparatus, the roaring flames and the uproarious spectacle. They like it.

Seamen do not. Fire is their arch enemy, their worst threat to life, and prehistoric man never attacked monsters with greater ferocity. Only the men on watch, chained to their several posts, stand apart from it.

Captain Corbin's first impulse was to look into Flannagan's cabin. He was not there. Of course not, he had gone onto the bridge. His second impulse swept him into passageways and down. He passed steward's men sniffing the smoke and looking both ways, their complexion muddy, their eyes big.

He coughed along the main passage to the upper engine room exit, starboard side. The second assistant on the "bridge" at the throttle took wispy shape in swirling clouds which rose from under the high pressure cylinder to uite with blacker rolls out of the stack space. "In the boiler room?"

The engineer identified him before answering. "Yeah," he shouted. "Third boiler must 'ave—don't you go down there!"

Corbin dashed water off his face, salty in his eyes. "Why not?"

"Hell, they got enough men to spit it out. One o' my wipers got left—"

Corbin raced to a lower landing, still in his heavy rubber clothing. His wet boots slid over the width of it. Down the next flight he thumped and slithered and his brain raced with his feet. Until he heard without seeing the big journals rotating in and out of their respective bilge puddles. Then he turned right and went on, his breath singing in his lungs.

He groped his way past the engine in a stooping, crablike advance, past the first eccentric rod that showed between clouds. He turned left toward the boiler room exit and ran into dungarees and a sooted white jersey. He shouted hoarsely against the loud noises of the machinery at his back, against the roar of furnaces coming with the smoke out the exit. He jabbed the dirty jersey: "Did they get that wiper out?"

The huge oiler shoved his smeary face close to Corbin's ear and howled. "Somebody said the skipper's in there too. What in hell's he—for?"

"Who says so?"

"The first assistant told the Chief 'fore they sent me here."

There couldn't be much doubt about it then. Flannagan in his vessel's boiler room? He must have gone stark mad—or had he? Corbin recalled his remark about preferring death to blindness—and retirement. He also remembered the story of having gone from one specialist to another. True, the last one had given him no hope for his waning eyesight, but one doctor's word wasn't God's. He couldn't forget the miracles which had come out of the war, Flannagan had a splendid constitution, his mental attitude seemed to be the serious drawback lately.

Then something else struck into his thinking process: Flannagan had boasted that he'd never lost a life in his ships. Had he been foolish enough to run below into a boiler room to rescue a wiper? It appeared incredible to Corbin, gasping for breath in the swirling blackness, seeing the huge oiler through salty tears.

Abruptly something inside him refused to allow events to take their course, refused to stand there while a man with failing eyes groped around in that mess of smoke and heat and fire while the Chief and his men attacked the fire scientifically with foam stuff. Flannagan must be dragged outside!

Quite as abruptly, the oiler lost him;

rather, he cleverly lost the oiler by edging off into the murk. Then he ducked low and went in against the thick dark clouds and rushing heat. He'd plant his big fists onto Flannagan himself and run him out of there if he had to knock him cold to do it.

Now he sank to his knees, dimly hearing what was loud around him. He fought for more air and crawled toward where number three should be, the boiler and the wiper—and Flannagan. He heard the oiler's booming hoarseness somewhere behind him and it drove him farther into the uproar of boilers, the occasional hiss of extinguishers.

Until, nearly winded, he sank to the iron plates, gasping, sweating, squirming out of his outer garments. Freed from them, he began to sweep wide from both sides with both arms, reaching for Flannagan lying flat, for blind Flannagan dragging out the wiper in time to save him and save his record.

He pushed himself on to fiercer heat, thicker smoke, more deafening noises. Again he reached and touched nothing but sooty plates getting hotter. He felt the torrid breath of death close in around him and he began to curse what Flannagan had done, what he himself was doing—two captains aboard the same vessel and both of them groping around blindly in her boiler room. Flannagan had taunted him about his youth; perhaps Flannagan had been right.

But he could not turn back now. The only place to go was ahead. He hitched on and his temper mounted. Damn that fool—and the port captain—and the owner's policy—and this reeking black gang's hole! The rolling motion of the ship on the swells troubled his advance efforts. The nasty iron plates became hotter against his ribs. He coughed his insides nearly out, then swept both arms wide again.

If only Flannagan would keep his sense of direction enough to head out the right way, the fool! He heard men shouting off at his right; none of them had come across the wiper yet. None mentioned Flannagan and the fire apparatus came nearer.

He hauled up one ponderous leg furiously and jerked toward the awful heat. In a fit of madness he questioned how much further he could progress, how much longer his lungs— He passed out.

And came to with his nose flattened to the hot plates, his arms wide. Startled by his failing strength because he had never fainted before, he gathered all his force and shot ahead. And fetched up against something. Flannagan? He tried to shout and only wheezed. He grabbed at the thing and a husky voice protested, "Lay off. Gimme a hand. Haul—no, this way. Now!"

It could be Flannagan; he was too giddy headed to find out. The man shoved an arm to him and together they pulled a form over the slippery plates. Corbin did his best for a few feet, then both stopped still, rubbing soot, tears, sweat, steam and extinguisher spray from their blackened vision. They finally discerned the lighter brown tinge under the smoke. That way must be the exit to the engine room, that way escape. They resumed way.

Rather quickly came a distinct change around them. The smoke thinned. Men came closer, shouting all at once. A voice directly behind them cried thickly, "I found it. Hunk of old sweat rag and waste—hot bucket o' them hexes Fagin was scrapin'."

"Found him?"

"Nobody here. I'm lookin', Chief."

Two men with another stretched out between and behind them tried to shout. They got to their knees in the thinning smoke to look around, hearing men converging on them, wheezing in short gasps.

"My God, look here!" came a cry somewhere near.

A large flashlight's beam spotted the three on the floor. It settled down onto the figure stretched flat and still. The engineers stared through their grim sootiness, unbelieving. The wiper looked at them, then at Corbin. He muttered, "Must 'ave come in after me, I guess," and got out of earshot as fast as his condition allowed.

Corbin nodded to the Chief and the latter said fervently, "I be damned. Gave his life for that wiper Fagin."

Corbin had a different explanation for what Flannagan had done. He opened his mouth to say so, but thought better of it. He was the only man there who knew better and he would leave it that way. The spartan had remained a spartan to the very end.

*Something in Being Shot at by a Lady—Always the Chance
That It Might Lead to Something Better*



BROTHER BLACK SHEEP

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

THE water-hole lay between the Dos Hermanos peaks, which showed for vast distances over the desert, so Rame Larimore had no fear of missing it. Yet he was sparing with water, and he rode into sight of it with one of his two canteens half full. This was fortunate. He found the hole bone dry.

And that wasn't all he saw. Just beyond the depression, in the shade of a boulder,

the figure of a man lay as inert and as silent as the boulder itself. Larimore rode fast around to him, dismounted and let the rein fall and knelt with the heavier canteen open. The man was tall, but thin; he had very gray hair, mustaches and goatee. His clothing, dusty now, was of expensive cut.

"Drink this, amigo," Rame said. A big young man and strong, he lifted the unknown to a sitting posture easily with one hand. "Come on—drink!"

The oldster took a few swallows. His eyes, of steely-gray, blinked upward. He waved the canteen aside and spoke in tones that betrayed great weakness:

"Days to water. You'll need that yourself. Can't save me anyway. It's my ticker—it's nearly gone."

His breathing was tragically short. Larimore remembered buzzards circling high, off southward. "I reckon your horse fell and broke a leg and you had to shoot it. But I don't see any gun on you."

"Couldn't carry even that—after I'd shot the horse." His smile was pale, faint. "I've got only a few minutes. Just who are you, friend?"

"Nobody much," Rame said. "A cow puncheroo who ran with a wild bunch long enough to pick up a bad black-sheep name, is all. Square with John Law now and headed out beyond this desert to start over again and ride 'er straight from there on out. I could take you up on my saddle—"

The other interrupted very gently.

"I was a black sheep, too, cowman. Went clean to tidewater Texas to make—a new beginning—long time ago. One black merino ought to do another a favor! But I want you—to keep my watch as pay for your trouble. . . . My inside coatpocket; heavy envelope, with important papers. Take it—third ranch house—northwest road out of Ironwood. . . . Santos River valley. Name of Callahan. . . ."

The voice sank to a mumble, and in this there was another name. It sounded like Yulie. But that didn't seem right. Larimore had never before heard such a name, except among Swedes, and this man was not a Swede. He pushed his buckhorn-handled six-shooter back out of the way, and bent an ear close.

"Afraid I didn't get that last, amigo. Yulie, did you say, or was it Julie?"

Although the steel-gray eyes were taking on a glazed look, the voice strengthened queerly here at the last:

"Alexander Pope said, '*All men are brothers, but some are finer clay.*' You'll be finer clay and be faithful in doing me this favor, I know, brother black sheep."

"I sure will," promised Rame Larimore, with feeling that he hadn't guessed was in him.

Again the faint, pale smile, and there were a few words more. Part of this, too, was something that Alexander Pope had said, or written, in the long, long ago.

Of thick brown paper, official size, stuffed full and very carefully sealed, the envelope was. There'd been a name and address in ink, but perspiration or rain had blotted the whole so badly that it was unreadable. The watch, of gold and with the head of a horse engraved on the back, was worth, perhaps a hundred dollars.

As for Santos River valley, it lay west of this desert. Rame had had that particular cattle country in mind from the start.

HE arrived in Ironwood City several days later. Since crossing the broad wasteland he'd had water and food in plenty, and some rest, and now was feeling himself once more. He turned his sorrel cow horse over to a livery-stable helper for a grain feed, then proceeded to make talk with the grizzled liveryman.

"How far to the Callahan place, old-timer?"

"Callahan place? Never heard of it," tugging at his wiry billygoat beard. "Why?"

"You know anybody named Callahan, or Yulie, or maybe Julie?"

"Cain't say I know anybody wearing any of them titles," answered the stable man. "Why?"

"Who," inquired Larimore, "lives in the third ranch house on the northwest road?"

"Samson Arn," was the drawled response. "Big as a grizzly bear, mean as a pizen snake, more dangerouser'n dynamite. Why?"

Rame spoke sharply now.

"If you just got to know why, listen. I found a powerful nice *viejo* dyin' at the dry Dos Hermanos water-hole, and he asked me to see Callahan, whoever he is, and it seemed that this Callahan lived in the third ranch house on the northwest road. If the old gentleman told me his name, I didn't catch it; he was far gone. I found a deep-sandy place and buried him there. How long has Samson Arn lived in that third ranch house?"

"I been here might' nigh it a year," the stable-owner said, "and Arn was there when I arrove."

"When my sorrel is through with his grain I'll ride up to that place and see if I can find out anything," Rame said. "You can maybe tell me if the first three houses are in sight from the road, so's I won't miss the third one, and you might could also tell me how far it is."

"Dozen miles, about. All houses above here is in sight from the road. Valley ain't but a few miles wide, but it's as long as the river is.—Now wait a minute. I overlooked something. There *is* a house, a shanty like, which ain't in sight from that northwest road. Far up the valley, beyant where the road follers the river into the left hills. Owned by a widder name of Rensford. Got a few cows. But this ain't important to you, I reckon."

"No, I reckon not," absent-mindedly replied Rame Larimore. "I'm beginnin' to wonder if that name, instead of being Callahan, could be Calhoun, or Lanahan, maybe."

"I don't know any Calhoun or Lanahan."

"Sure adds up to puzzlement," muttered Rame.

He reasoned that the papers he was carrying probably bore the name, or names, that he wanted. But the envelope had been so carefully sealed, he felt, somehow, that he would be breaking faith if he opened it. There was a good deal of sentiment hidden far down in the heart of this big young man. He wasn't going to forget, ever, that other black sheep who had called him brother.

Half an hour later, Larimore asked for his horse and got it. He called to the liveryman, as he stepped into the saddle:

"I forgot to ask you. You know any Alex Pope?"

"No. Why?"

"Well," said Rame, a little put out in spite of himself, "damned if I know why. The old gentleman mentioned him."

The stable man pointed to Rame's six-shooter, and the billygoat beard began bobbing once more: "Don't forgit what I told you about Samse Arn. Make sure that weepon slips easy out o' leather, is my advice."

Larimore grinned. There'd be no trouble about that.

The road lay close to the cottonwood-

shaded Santos River, which flowed through the finest grassland he had ever seen, and all cattle were short-necked, stubby-headed Herefords with legs almost straight down behind.

AFTER the sorrel had kicked off the dozen miles, its rider pulled leftward and soon was approaching a comfortable-looking big house of frame and adobe, set in a grove of liveoaks. He dismounted near the front gallery steps, flung down the rein and halloed. From somewhere deep inside a heavy bass voice rumbled sourly:

"Come on in!"

A moment afterward, Rame was in the livingroom. He noted that the furniture was old but extremely good. As he sat down, a tall clock on the mantel caught his eye. It made him think of the watch the desert man had given him, and he compared the time of the watch with that of the clock.

More than an hour slow. Much of this was the difference between time here and time back in tidewater Texas, but that did not occur to Rame. He knew how to set a watch to running faster, unscrewed the horsehead back, then caught his breath sharply. Pasted neatly inside there was a very good bust photo of two women, one elderly and the other young, both more than ordinarily handsome.

A staccato rattle of footsteps to his right took his gaze off the little picture. A man in range clothes was hurrying in through the front doorway. With the merest glance toward Larimore, he began calling, "Samse! Hey, Samse!"

"Tell it!" came from deep in the house.

"I didn't even hardly get in talkin' distance," the newcomer said, and hastened on—"they shot at me!"

"Bluff."

"Yeah? Come out here and see this bullet-hole through my John B. Stetson hat."

Arn growled, "I'll take your word for it."

The newcomer turned and hurried out. Rame Larimore's gaze went back to the photo. After a minute, boot-heels began pounding in the central hallway, and a man who must be Samson Arn, wearing a low-sagging heavy gun-belt, appeared within two yards of the visitor. In his left hand he carried an empty sotol bottle.

"Who're you?" he rapped, and tossed the bottle crashing into the cold fireplace.

The visitor had gone to his feet. His eye ran fast over Arn. A squat giant, the man was, with the shoulders and neck of an ox; long arms, knotted with muscle; tousled hair, flushed cheeks, blood-shot mean eyes.

"Been on a real bender," Rame was telling himself; "sotol, too; the right amount o' that, and next thing is to walk head on into a freight train."

"You after a job, or what?"

"I'm on the hunt o' somebody named Callahan, and a Yulie, or maybe it's Julie," the visitor announced. "I figured that you might could help me."

"No," came instantly from Arn. He repeated it. "No."

He was uneasy, Larimore saw. Rame then held out the little picture in its round golden frame. "You know these folks?"

"Where'd you get that?" cried Samson Arn, and his voice was not steady. He had no answer. With a thick forefinger he reached to turn the watch-back over, and he saw the engraving and was even more concerned. "Where in hell did you get this?"

"So you've seen it before."

"You bet I've seen it before. It's Fitzhugh's. You're leaving that watch with me!"

He made as if to pull his weapon. Larimore stopped him.

"Don't try that, Samse." Indicating the six-shooter under his own hip, "I could beat you to it, but there's no sense in it. I don't mind telling you where I got the timepiece. A man who cashed up on the desert, he gave it to me the minute before he went. Old like, gray hair and mustache and goatee, mighty nice clothes. He asked me to come to this house and find somebody named Callahan. You see?"

SAMSON ARN smiled queerly. He had jumped to an idea and a conclusion; the man was cunning. With neat sarcasm, "Of course you wouldn't murder old Fitzhugh for his watch and whatever else he had on him, and likely he had plenty!"

Larimore throttled a desire to make a fight of it. He realized the grim possibility connected with this thing: the black sheep name he was running from, that could easily

make big trouble for him here. He spoke, marking time:

"Fitzhugh a gambler?"

"No. Well—yes, he was a gambler, but with oil wells instead of cards. Did Fitzhugh give you anything to take to Callahan?"

Rame said nothing, started a battle of eyes. He won it. Arn clipped, "So you won't answer that. Bueno!"

He turned and vanished in the central hallway. His boot-heels were soon rattling across the back gallery, then down the steps, and a voice that Rame hadn't heard before was calling, "You be back for supper, Samse?"

That would be the ranch house cook. His question brought no response. Cooks were likely to know things. Larimore put the watch together and pocketed it, and hurried to the kitchen.

"I'm wonderin'," he said to a squinting little old-timer, "if you can help me out. I'll sure make it worth your while if you'll tell me whatever you know about a man named Fitzhugh and another one named Callahan."

The cook looked slowly around from the pan of potatoes he was peeling. He drawled, "I don't know no Fitzhugh, i-god, ner yit no Callahan neither."

Rame Larimore began scowling at the floor.

He wasn't throwing down his intention to make good his promise to the other black sheep. But it appeared that he had worked his row to the end, so to speak, unless he opened the big envelope he was carrying inside his shirt and found the exact name, or names, that he wanted. He had a strong suspicion to the effect that Samson Arn was even now riding townward for the purpose of demanding his arrest and imprisonment charged with robbing and killing old Fitzhugh.

"That fool wild reputation I built up," muttered Rame—"I'll have to move fast!"

On the cookstove a kettle boiled. He stepped quickly to the stove and held the back of the envelope over the steam. The old cook watched out of the corners of his squinted eyes.

In the time of three minutes, Larimore had quite the greatest surprise of his life. The big envelope contained important

papers; no possible doubt of that.

There were nineteen one-thousand-dollar bills and a fistful of fifties!

And no name, except for those on the heavy currency.

The cook saw too. He sprang up, dropping potatoes and pan and knife to the floor, and creaked, "Hey, amigo!" His voice was vibrant with cupidity so rank that it would have shamed swine. "Let me in on that, amigo, and I'll ferget all o' Samse's rules and regulations about not talkin' none about nothin' and tell you where Callahan is, i-god, and—will it supprise you to know!"

Rame crammed the bills back into the envelope, thrust the envelope back inside his shirt. He was pale now under his range tan. If the law caught him with all that money in his possession it was going to be too bad for him and he knew it. The money must be delivered. Only this would clear him. He barked:

"Listen, you old cabron! The dinero is not mine to give, but just the same you're going to tell me where to find Callahan! I wouldn't admire to choke you plumb to death, but I sure might could if I have to. All right, where is he?"

Since it was not in him to hurt the wizened little man seriously, he had to put on an act, and he did and he made it a whizzer.

"Out with it, or by the lord I'll—"

The old-timer broke fast. He chattered, "Y'won't never tell Samse I tole you?"

"Sure won't!"

"Well, Callahan is at the Rensford place."

LARIMORE decided that the little Arn man was not lying. He hadn't forgotten the Ironwood City liveryman's telling him that an elderly Widow Rensford owned a small cow outfit far up the valley.

"And who," Rame asked, "is Fitzhugh?"

"I don't know. Hope to die I don't."

"Ever heard o' any Yulie, or Julie?"

"No," the cook said. "I jest happened to find out they was a Callahan at Rensford's by overhearin' some o' Samse's talk. He sent a rider up there yesterday and when he comes back Samse asts him what message he brang from Callahan, and he says to Samse, 'I ain't brang no message 'cept that the next jigger who goes up there will be shot at!'"

"I get it," Larimore said. "Arn sent a man

up there again today, and he *was* shot at. Fast, now—what else can you tell me, old coot?"

"I ain't been here long, amigo. They ain't another thing I know to tell you, i-god, not nary thing ay-tall."

Rame ran out of the house, very soon was in his saddle and riding hard up the valley.

The liveryman had said that Mrs. Rensford's little place wasn't in sight from the road. It was not, therefore, on the river. Then it would be on a creek, beyond a doubt. So Larimore kept an eye out for smaller streams, and within a few miles he found one that led off northeastward.

He lost a good two hours on that stream. There should be another creek, he kept telling himself, over northwestward.

There was.

It ran through upper valley narrows, which were crossed by wire fences above and below a quarter section; the Widow Rensford was saving herself the expense of hiring a rider or so. Larimore remembered that an Arn man had been shot at here, and he rode toward the Rensford two-roomed shanty with his right hand high, the palm frontward, ancient sign of peace.

He had ridden to a point within two hundred yards of the cheap little ranch house when there was the shattering keen thunder of an old Sharps' rifle. He wilted off his sorrel cow horse with the sunlight growing swiftly more and more dim to him. And then all the light was gone. It was very like the snuffing of a candle in a high wind.

There were the shaken cries and hurried footfalls of women, the women of the photo in the watch that Fitzhugh had given to his brother black sheep.

Larimore came to half sitting, half lying, in a propped-back old rocker. There was a bandage about his temples. The upper left side of his shirt had been ripped open, and his shoulder had been bandaged also. A voice came from back of him, the Widow Rensford's; it was low, and not quite steady.

"My daughter—Ellen—didn't mean to shoot you. She had aimed over your head, to scare you off. She's gone for the doctor. Arn has so persecuted us! You do work for Arn, don't you?"

He moved himself a little and saw her, the older woman of the photo, tall and

slightly thin, rough-handed from work, and burned by sun and wind. But there was something exquisite about her. He answered her question in one word.

"No."

His head pounded. So did his shoulder. To save him he could not think clearly. Awkwardly then he drew out the gold watch and passed it to her, and told her, haltingly, about—the desert. There was silence that seemed long to Rame Larimore. He missed the thick envelope, and mentioned it. She explained that the envelope had fallen out when she'd ripped his shirt open to bandage his shoulder, assured him that it was safe.

She said then, speaking very softly:

"Fitzhugh was my brother. His middle name was Lee. We called him Hugh Lee, and that's the 'Yulie' that puzzled you. So he told you of being the family's black sheep, God love him! He thought there was money in oil, and we backed his investments; borrowed the money from Samson Arn, on notes with the ranch as security. When we owed Arn eleven thousand he'd got so mean that we moved off up here and let him have the place. He'd kept tormenting us—wanted me to *make* Ellen marry him!"

This filtered slowly through Larimore's consciousness. "You say it's your place, where Arn lives? Big house, and so many white-faced cows, on the best range I ever saw?"

She nodded. Her eyes were dim.

"And so you buried Hugh Lee in the desert."

"Yes," breathed Rame. "He asked me to, and he said part of it in somethin' that sounded like poetry, which was this:

*"Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lie."*

After a silence, Mrs. Rensford said, "That's from Pope. He liked Pope very much. I hear hoofs and wheels: Ellen with the doctor; please, don't blame her too much."

ACCOMPANYING Ellen Rensford and the bespectacled practitioner were Samson Arn and a tall, hard-eyed man who wore a sheriff star over his heart like a target and a dare. Arn had seen his cook, who'd been

unable to keep the secret of the Fitzhugh envelope.

"There's the thief and killer," blared that worse than thief and killer, stabbing a finger toward the wounded big young man in the propped-back rocker. "Right there!"

"I take it, Samson," at once said Mrs. Rensford, "that you'd have us think you're doing us a great favor. You're very wrong. This fine boy—" pointing to Larimore—"brought us a fortune in cash when he might easily have run off with it. Hugh Lee sent it to us; was lucky, in oil, at last. And now I'll ask you to present my notes for payment, and then get out of that house just as fast as you possibly can!"

"I'd sure like to shoot me a rattlesnake," Rame heard his own voice telling all and sundry. The sheriff said:

"Samse, I've heard a lot about how you've worried these ladies. There is, I'm afeared, some likelihood of a necktie party in your immediate vicinity. Now gallop after the notes so's we can witness the transaction. 'Scat!"

Arn blinked, paled, and scatted.

The doctor was already at work, Miss Rensford helping. He took a bullet from Larimore's shoulder and dressed the wound, looked after the temple that had hit rock when Rame fell from his horse. Although there was still a link missing, the patient had recovered sufficiently to look at the Rensford girl for the fifth time. A really handsome filly, he had to admit.

"This boy will soon be all right, Callie," the doctor assured Mrs. Rensford; and Larimore cried:

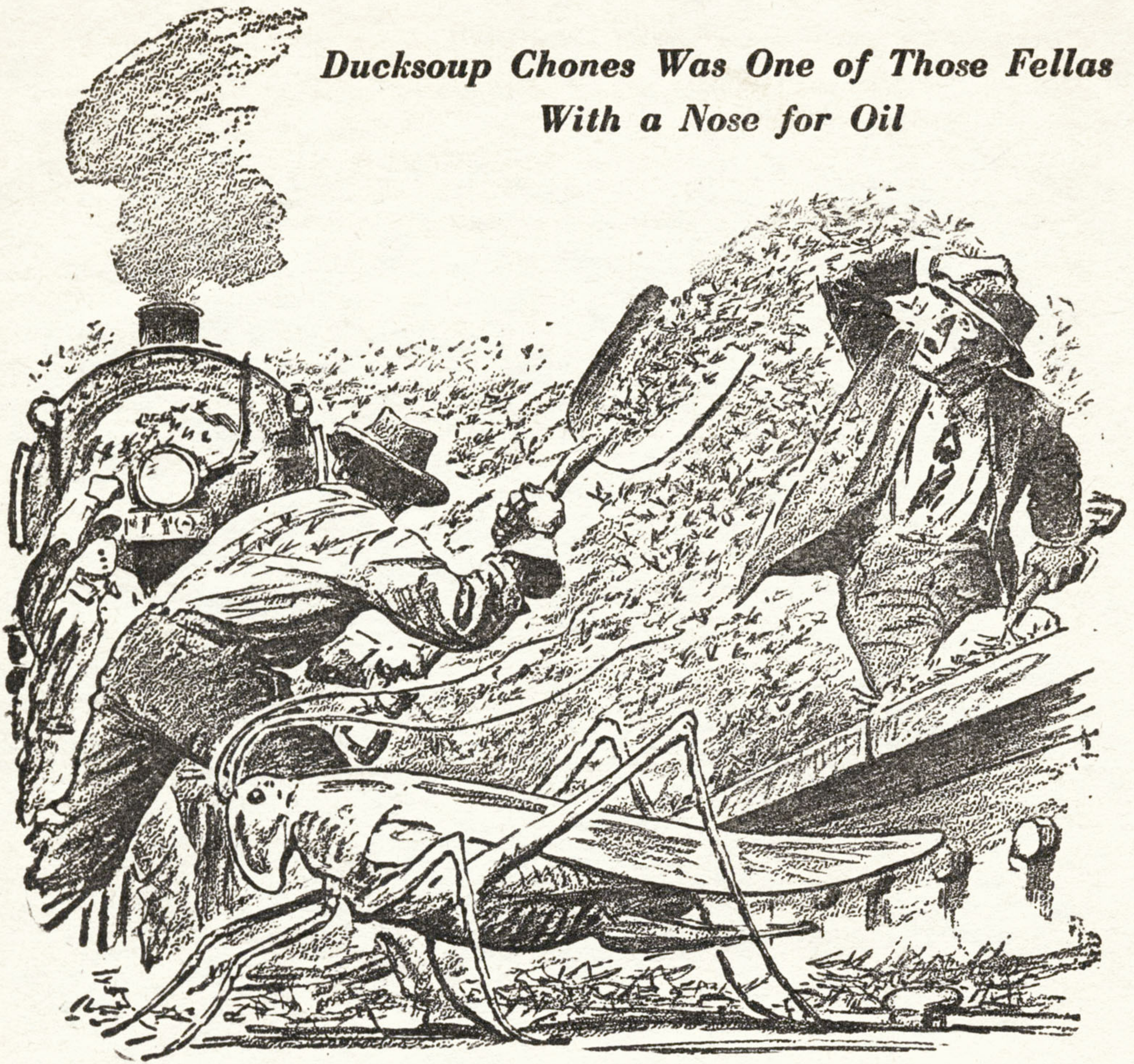
"Callie—Callahan!" His head now was all clear. "So that was you, Miz Rensford!"

An old family name, of course. Arn returned with the notes, got his money and left with the sheriff. An hour later, when the doctor had gone, Rame Larimore picked his time and half whispered to Ellen Rensford, "Thanks for shootin' me, ma'am. I'm wonderin'—you reckon it might could lead to somethin a heap better for the both of us?"

They must have known, even then. Her eyes held a fine twinkle as she answered, also half whispering:

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised."

*Ducksoup Chones Was One of Those Fellas
With a Nose for Oil*



GRASSHOPPER OIL

By JOHN E. KELLY

MEL HARKNESS, the master mechanic, was just in to see how's chances for a new crown sheet in case we want little old 202, the yard engine, to keep on running. After I turned him down, like he expected, for the Uriah North & South never has money for new parts, and told him he's got first call for salvage from the next wreck, we got to yarning on what's the most useless thing in the world. Mel 'lowed it's grasshoppers. I said I heard they made fine chickenfeed, dried and stored for winter. Harkness came back with one on his cousin, Ab Scroggs, who's dry-farming down Fresno way. The hoppers lit on his fields and gobbled up every green leaf. But Ab's

a philosophical cuss and then and there made up his mind to go into the chicken business. He grabbed an armful of gunny-sacks and dashed out to stuff 'em with hoppers, figuring his first hundred dozen eggs would cost him nothing. But the bugs had different ideas. Scroggs barely made it back to the house, with his straw hat chawed off and his overalls nigh gone. And his shepherd dog, Terror, that won first prize at the County Fair for long fur, looked like a Mexican hairless. Then I reminded Mel of the time the hoppers saved Pers Mallon's oil well. Harkness stamped out, hollering that the longlegs coppered their bets that day, but just the same he owes me a stogie next time we met in Angelino's quick-and-dirty

across the yards where the train crew always eat.

THAT was back when the Old Man was breaking me in as relief telegrapher here. Usually I'd draw the owl or graveyard trick, when there was little coming over the wire, and being a young sprout, I made out to get in a full day running around with the other kids and sleep with my head on the table where the first clatter of the sounder brought me to. Or if things were dull in town, I'd come off shift in time to grab Number One, our daily passenger southbound, and ride down the line, matching nickels with the train butcher for eats and beer, until we met Number Two, which brought me back to Lumberton just early enough to beat the other boarders to the ham and eggs Miz Ellers served every night except Sunday. After the oil boom started, I made the round trip nigh every day.

It's called Petrolia now and the ranchers have a nice thing in oil royalties. Nothing gold-plated, like in Oklahomy, but enough to keep the mail-order houses hopping shipping out store-bought clothes and Grand Rapids fumed oak. We didn't even have a whistle-stop there before a duck hunter fell in a slough and couldn't wash the grease stain out of his canvas coat. There was plenty oil underground but for a while it looked like the only ones to make a dollar out of the boom would be Ducksoup Chones and our road. We got ours honest, hauling boilers and casing for the drilling wells, and Ducksoup made his pile outsmarting everybody else. Until he picked Pers Mallon as an easy mark and outsmarted hisself. Like the wise old Chinee, Confuse-us, claimed, anything can happen and usually does. But Chones had figured all the angles—and a grasshopper hadn't been seen in Evergreen County in nigh twenty years.

Ducksoup musta had a nose for oil, for he showed up in the county while we were building the first siding at Petrolia. Mostly he hung around Uriah, which was nearer to the oil field, and handy to money. Wine grapes were bringing skyhigh prices that year and like Jesse James said, easy come, easy go. Chones got a few pieces printed in the Uriah *Nonesuch*, telling of the big wells he claimed to have brought in down in Texas, and the grape ranchers crowded

around, waving checks and begging Ducksoup to count them in his syndicates. Chones gave them action. He had a drilling crew and a cable tool rig and weekends there'd be parties at the well, with a cold keg and barbecue pit serving all comers. None of his wells ever struck oil, but the excuse was always reasonable. Water would leak into the bore, or the casing collapsed or even sometimes—though Ducksoup made his own locations with expert geological savvy and a secret doodlebug he kept padlocked in a big chest—the well would hit a tight place in the sand and come in dry.

Chones was always so cheerful when luck was bad, so determined to try again, that lots of his subscribers went along for a second, sometimes a third ride. Only after he'd ske-daddled a jump ahead of the sheriff did they learn Ducksoup's secret. He'd organize a syndicate with thirty-two equal shares and take two himself, so "my risk is twice anybody else's." But he was a mite careless counting and sometimes he'd sell eighty thirty-seconds of a wildcat. On failures he couldn't lose and the syndicates dissolved when the members got the bad news, so nobody got a look at the books, if Chones kept any. A real well would have ruined him and Ducksoup was mighty careful never to strike oil.

Nobody suspicioned him, then, but folks tagged him unlucky, which was nigh as bad for his business. After a while he couldn't raise syndicate money in Uriah any more and began to beat the bushes for easier game. We saw him in Lumberton a couple of times before he latched on to Pers Mallon. The Old Man, who turned him down cold, called Chones a "black-headed ferret," and he did favor a weasel with his shoe-button eyes, high cheekbones and slit of a mouth in his thin face that fell away at the chin. He was a dude dresser, with a standing collar that plowed his jaw and a pearl stickpin in an oversize black satin tie. His tongue was hinged in the middle so's to wag on both ends and he could spot Willyum Jennings Bryan and Billy Sunday four paragraphs and lap them in the home stretch.

I got Pers Mallon into the oil business. Once I'd say I "took the blame for getting the youngster in," but when he came up here some years back riding in his private car made from the start he got at Petrolia, I

handed myself a few pats on the back and grabbed the credit. Like I said, I used to ride Number One most every day after oil was discovered and have about an hour's layover at Petrolia before I'd hear the north-bound passenger whistling for the yards that had mushroomed about the whistle-stop. On good days I'd run out to the nearest drilling wells, in rainy weather I'd hang around Belgrano's chili joint and lap up the hot stuff and all the oilfield dope. Back in Lumberton I had the news a day ahead of the paper and a couple of wise-money boys around town took to boarding at Miz Ellers', chokign down her razorback ham and stale eggs, to hear me sound off.

MALLON roomed there then. He was working in the State Bank for about what I was getting at the depot, not enough to keep a modern kid in cigarettes and cokes, but which we thought good enough to be going steady with the prettiest girl cousins in Lumberton. That drew us together. Pers never said much at table, but would quiz me after in my room and he knew a lot of the oilfield lingo heard at Petrolia. I could see he was getting itchy to get in, but I figured maybe the fellows in the bank were chipping in for a share in a syndicate, with Mallon putting up a couple of ten spots.

The first thing I knew Pers was dickering with Chones and Ducksoup was rarin' back like a galled mule. The kid came from Pennsylvania where it seems they've got oil, too, and his folks had a farm with a couple of wells on it. The blond hair he'd got from a Dutch grandpop had a hard trading head under it. Mallon wasn't playing Chones' game. He wouldn't join a syndicate, he wanted an option on a tract Ducksoup had leased, and planned to drill his own well. Chones held out for a cash deal, but money was tight with him right then and if Pers had luck, Ducksoup began to see some real gravy without cost to him. So he sewed the kid up in an option on a ten-acre tract smack in the middle of Chones' leases. If Mallon struck oil, the market for Ducksoup's surrounding acreage would skyrocket.

They had trouble over the length of the option. Pers held out for four months, Chones stuck on three. Finally Mallon took a day off and went down to Uriah to close

the deal. They argued all through lunch and then through stogies, sitting on the porch of the old Empire House, getting nowhere fast. Finally Ducksoup jumped up, stuck out his arm like a ham actor telling his daughter to take her baby and vamoose, and pointed to the big clock on the courthouse across the square.

"Hear my last word," he hollered. "When them hands mark twelve o'clock one hundred days from now, have the gold here to pay me, or you lose the lease."

There's folks who'll take a Mexican stogie over a Havana perfecto any day, others'll lay you odds their fillers are tar paper soaked in sheep dip. Pers was so sick from his first *puro* that he couldn't talk, and Ducksoup got his way.

Mallon wrote his folks about his big deal and I guess they were proud of him. Anyway, with what they sent and what his friends in Lumberton chipped in, his syndicate was filled quickly. Marie and I wouldn't touch the nest egg we'd been saving to get married on, but we swore off Sunday buggy rides and church socials for six months and anteed up fifty dollars for a half share. Ready cash was like catnip to Chones and he tried to change the option, but Pers stuck to his bargain. If he struck oil, he took up his option; if the hole was dry, Ducksoup got his lease back, all within one hundred days.

Pers threw up his bank job and moved into a tent 'longside the drilling rig. He hashed his soft pencil-pusher's hands helping the roustabouts run casing, and nights the clanking of the walking beam and the bullfrogs' belling got him no sleep, but he wouldn't have traded for Governor. For the first time he was boss of something. 'Course, he was mostly in the way, but he learned fast.

DUCKSOUP was uncommon short of cash, even for him, and he figured to give Mallon a boost, unbeknownst, and rake in his purchase price. One Sunday night, when the rig was shut down while the crew were bending their elbows on Skid Row and Pers was holding hands with his best girl, Chones sneaked out to the well and poured a barrel of crude oil down the open hole. Ninety-nine wildcatters in a hundred, seeing the color of oil in the bailer, would have

hightailed it to town, paid Ducksoup off in jig time and got their title on record. But Mallon just kept on bailing until the hole was dry and then told the crew to run the tools and go on drilling.

When Pers didn't come to Uriah, Chones hitched up his buckboard and drove out to Petrolia. Wildcatters are always dancing on top of the derrick or lying down in the sump, in their feelings, I mean. All the other wells shut down and their crews come a-running as Mallon's bailer had brought up oil. But when it played out, everybody got to thinking maybe the whole field was a flash in the pan and Ducksoup saw nothing but long faces. The blues got Chones, too, so bad that when a stranger came up and offered him a hundred dollars cash for a six months' option on all his acreage, Ducksoup nigh picked his pocket to get the *dinero*. What Chones didn't know was the hundred was Mallon's, handled by a visiting fireman from Lumberton, namely me.

But then Mallon's luck petered out. His old boiler blew a tube, then the drilling tools stuck in the well. Pers had a calendar hanging on his tent pole and he marked off the hundred days. There weren't more than four-five left when they started making hole again, and Pers looked ten years older.

If this was fiction, Mallon's well would come in on the morning of the last day, and that's just how it was. She broke through into the oil sand late in the second tower, before sun-up, and when the tool dresser woke Pers, the well was flowing by heads over the top of the derrick. But the kid didn't hardly stop to look at Petrolia's first gusher. He grabbed his pants, making sure his wallet was in 'em, and hiked for the railways, having no other way to keep his date with Chones at noon.

Gen'rally when we pulled into Petrolia half a dozen loafers would be spitting and whittling on the cinder platforms, but this day there was only Mallon. Everybody else had skedaddled to see the gusher. Pers was pale, hopping up and down with nerves and as soon as I stepped down from the cab, where I'd been gassing with the engineer, he dragged me to the day coach. When I heard his story I broke away long enough to have the station agent wire the Old Man at Lumberton that I couldn't take my trick that night.

Number One was due in Uriah at eleven-fifty which gave Pers ten minutes to get to the Empire House and find Ducksoup Chones, who wouldn't be anxious to see him, for the wire had already spread the news of the gusher up and down the line. Chones was selling out for a plugged nickel with no way to recoup his loss from offset acreage. I looked for him to skip town, so Mallon couldn't locate him until Ducksoup had rigged some shenanigan to cut in on the bonanza. But Pers' only worry was that the train be late, which it was more likely than not. To calm him I went through the express car, over the blind baggage and the tender to get Mart Camerson to bear down on the throttle. He did, too; when my watch marked eleven-thirty we were only ten minutes running time out of Uriah.

IT'S open country north of Uriah, first swampy, next dairy and corn land, then you're running through vineyards until the whistle blows for the upper yards. Even a railroad office stiff gets to know the feel of a train and I'd been riding 'em nigh daily for the past three months. Sitting on the aisle beside Mallon, all of a sudden I noticed black spots raining down outa the sky, striking the windows, too big and *squashy* for cinders. I was just saying "Grasshoppers!" when I felt Number One slow down fast, like the engine's driving wheels were locked. But the airbrakes weren't on. The train slid to a stop and as I heard Camerson whistling the conductor forward, I got out and ran to the cab.

Flying hoppers belted me in the face and covered my clothes. There was a black cloud of 'em over the telegraph poles, thick enough to shut out the sun, and they were 'lighting on the right of way. Camerson had plowed halfway through the patch, mashing the bugs by thousands before his drivers slid on the greasy rails. He dumped sand but the crushed bodies soaked it up into a slippery paste on which the big wheels couldn't gain a yard. The engineer let live steam spurt from his cylinders. He might have roasted a bushel of grasshoppers, but there were millions to take their place. For a hundred feet ahead the track was heaped as high as the cowcatcher with a squirming pile of waving legs and wings, like something you'd see only in a bad dream.

Pers stood beside me, up to his knees in grasshoppers and I saw he was going sick inside, figuring what the lost time meant to him. Anything was better than waiting. I got a spare coal scoop from the fireman and Mallon took another, to try to scrape the rails clean. But when I had cleared six feet, I looked back to find the track buried again. Finally we had to shovel a foot at a time, right under the pilot truck, while Camerson poured sand and inched ahead. Hoppers got in my hair, up my pants' legs and down my collar. I could feel 'em kicking inside my shirt. My ears rang with the noise of those millions of bugs rubbing against each other. But the worst was the sickly sweet smell of the crushed ones. I nigh to lose my lunch a dozen times and Pers nearly passed out.

When we finally worked clear and Camerson whistled us aboard, Mallon and I broke for the express car and stripped. There musta been a hundred hoppers in my clothes and our shirts and hair were soaked with their juice. Just as I was scraping the last one outa my shoes, Camerson blew for the Uriah yards and we hustled into our clothes. The train was still rolling when I jumped, trying to knot my tie, and set out at a dead run for the Empire House, trailing Pers by two lengths.

IN URIAH the first things I saw were grasshoppers. The street crawled with 'em, blobs of bugs hung from poles and wires and broke branches with their weight. They had made a clean sweep of the rocking chair brigade on the Empire House porch and Chones was puffing a stogie in the lobby, looking mighty pleased with himself.

"Yer too late!" Ducksoup yelled when he sighted Pers. "You lost yer option and I'll thank you to git yer tent off'n my land!"

"Now look," began Mallon and he told Chones about the hoppers stopping the train. But Ducksoup wouldn't listen.

"That don't make no never minds," he barked. "You gotta expect anythin' in the oil business. You didn't show up here at noon and the gusher's mine. But I'm a reasonable gent. Gimme back the option on my other land that that skinny feller," and he gave me a dirty look where I was standing near the French windows of the lobby,

"hornswoggled me out of, an' you kin take the boiler an' derrick off'n the lease after I get the well closed in."

Pers turned white. Ducksoup had him where the hair was short. There was nothing I could do to help. I felt pitiful and turned away, looking through the windowpane across the square to the courthouse. The tower was plastered with grasshoppers, the higher the thicker, so they almost hid the clock. I thought I was seeing things, but I scrubbed the dusty glass with my sleeve and it was still the same. The hoppers had jammed between the hands and the clock was stuck at precisely ten minutes before noon.

"Pers!" I yelled. "The clock, the clock! Your gusher's safe, it ain't noon yet!"

They both looked at me like I was crazy, and I was, almost. I grabbed Mallon's arm and dragged him to the window. Ducksoup came, too, and he gave a dirty laugh.

"I've no time for fools," he yelped, and he meant me. "It's nigh two o'clock," and he yanked out his watch to prove it.

"That don't make no never minds, neither," I yelled, batting his timepiece outa his hand. "You gotta expect anything in the oil business. Pay him, Pers, and the lease is yours."

Mallon reached for his wallet. "You said when the hands mark twelve o'clock," he reminded Chones. "You made the deal and you're stuck with it."

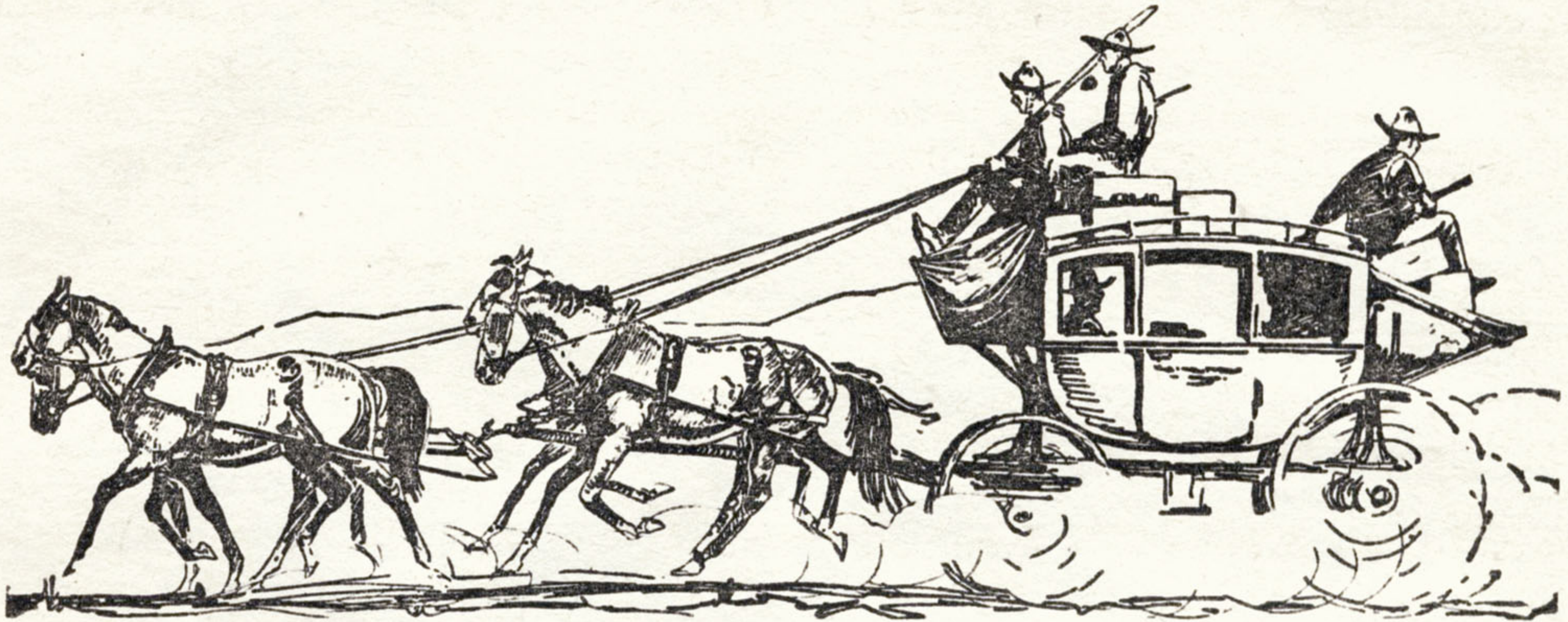
Ducksoup didn't think so, at first. He grabbed for his hideout gun, a mite late, but at that, he took a heap of persuading. I broke a knuckle. The hotel clerk and Big Sambo, the cook, came running, but in our country folks don't horn in on a private fight. After Chones 'lowed he'd take Mallon's money in his pocket 'steada down his gullet, we let him up. While I held him, just in case, Pers got paper and a pen from the writing desk.

"Write the receipt and put in the syndicate's new name," he told Chones.

Ducksoup's tail was dragging, all the fight was out of him. "Whut is it?" he asked miserably, scribbling with his stove-up fingers.

Pers winked at me across Chones' head. "The least we can do," he said, "is call it the Grasshopper Oil Company."

The Story Tellers' Circle



The Old West

FROM Turkistan and the Northwest frontier to the old West of our United States is quite a piece of traveling—even with the sort of space and time machine utilized by authors. One of the best of these contraptions is owned by E. Hoffmann Price whose "Inspected and Condemned" appears in these pages. That cowpunchers and sod-busters, gun fighters and card sharks, sheriffs and rustlers were not the only people who had a hand in shaping the old West, the following by Price goes to prove:

"Something like forty years ago, I lived way up north in California, in an isolated section whose inhabitants did most of their shopping by boarding the trading boat which plied up and down the Sacramento River. It was a floating department store. You could get anything from calico to a box of .30-30s or a quart of bourbon. The kids I went to school with were grandchildren of the pioneers who settled that neck of the woods. Except for the underprivileged ones of the handful who made up the eight grades which did not quite fill the one-room school house, we rode cow ponies or plough horses to school. There was considerable indignation when the teacher decided that there'd be no more toting rifles or shotguns to class, which put the kibosh on hunting during the lunch hour, or on the way to and from home.

"While farming predominated, there were still cowpunchers and cow critters. And the youngsters who had the chore of herding dairy stock to and from grazing in the river "bends," the space between river and levee, did their best to play it along the traditional lines; and, lacking the proper gear, had to imagine themselves wearing chaps and Mexican spurs. There was just enough of the old time Real McCoy left to stimulate the imagination.

"The Indians had for quite some years been herded off to rancherias, but somewhat further north, toward the end of my stay in that region, there was actually a 'war'—Modocs and cowpunchers, shooting it out in the lava beds. A so-called war in which, nearly as I can remember, some thirty-forty Indians were exterminated, with practically no white casualties.

"Anyway, that is part of the background: my recollections of the final feeble flare up of a wild west which for years had been dying its way to its present tameness; that, and my father's yarns of driving cattle in Wyoming and the Dakotas in the middle '80s.

"I remember also the 'spot-knockers' who used to drive around the country, horse and buggy of course, rounding up pictures from family albums. These pictures, ranging generally in size from 'stamps' to 'cabinet,' were shipped to Chicago to be photographically copied and enlarged. The 'blow-up,' sixteen by twenty, had to be retouched with air

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brush, or charcoal, or colored with crayon or oil, to sharpen the definition. The customer usually ended by paying a fancy price for a frame. All this did its bit toward increasing the spot-knocker's commission. In some cases, one salesman made the rounds, collecting the originals, and with each, a dollar deposit, which he kept; and a follow-up man did the high pressure work of collecting for the costliest frame the customer would pay for. Again, there were salesmen who not only took orders, but who later returned to put on the finishing touch.

"An old timer who lives less than a mile from this fiction factory told me about his experiences as a spot-knocker, some fifty years ago, and while he did not get into any predicaments quite as ticklish as those in my story, he made it clear that while a young fellow did most certainly go places and meet people, the same results could be more pleasantly and more profitably obtained in almost any activity other than spot-knocking.

"So there you have two elements of 'Inspected and Condemned': the sorry condition of the Redman, and the not much better life of the spot-knocker.

"The third ingredient, that of the photographic expeditions into then unknown country, deserves a word. William Henry Jackson (who died not long ago at the age of 97 plus) and others of comparable stature in their profession, did for our frontier what Brady did for the Civil War. In addition to the value of their photographs to historians and other scholars, the pioneer cameramen actually contributed to hastening the development of the west. Jackson's albums of pictures of the Yellowstone convinced congressmen that such a region actually existed—therefore, stories of the area had been dismissed as tall tales or downright lies! The photographs convinced them, and so thoroughly that the congressional committees recommended that the Yellowstone be a national park. And so for other regions. Railroad builders studied the albums prepared by Jackson and others and were thus aided in planning the routes of proposed lines.

"For a young man to get a chance to get away from studio work, or spot-knocking,

and go into the field with an acknowledged master of photography, was a great opportunity. And those old timers, handicapped though they were by the limitations of the plates and the processes of their day, did work that even now is not excelled, and rarely equalled."

E. HOFFMAN PRICE

Telegraph in the Office

WHENEVER we start reading one of Bill Rohde's stories about that intrepid detective of the Atlantic and Northern Railroad, Mohawk Daniels, we seem to catch a whiff of soft coal smoke, and hear the clatter of telegraph sounders in the office. So we couldn't help asking Bill if this Mohawk Daniels adventure, like some of the others, had a basis in fact.

He writes:

"As they say in the front of the books—and incidentally Mohawk Daniels may soon be out in one of his own—'all characters are fictional.' But I've been waiting for someone to add that all fiction is based on fact.

"The origin of the grappling iron and rope for robbing railroad cars by entering them from the roof, is lost in history. I've heard of it being done about 1860, but it's safe to guess that some smart operator tried it before then. There are about five widely separated instances of trains being robbed in this way, but I imagine Daniels broke up the first gang to operate on moving trains since the advent of the Diesel.

"Did they break in young patrolmen on the railroads by just putting them to work? Yes, and still do. There have been some very famous peace officers, past and present, who have worked for the railroads. They included the two-gun lads who kept peace at the railheads during the westward rush of tracks in the last century, as well as the less picturesque men you can see around stations today—if you know where and how to look.

"The average railroad officer looks like—an average man! The plainclothes crew at New York's Grand Central, for instance, look like bored insurance men and hotel managers. Mohawk Daniels would feel right



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at home there, except that he is perhaps ten years younger than the average and inclined to pick his suits carefully with the fastidious eye of a 34 year old bachelor.

"I'm still amazed at the lads, particularly railroaders, who write to me about Daniels' adventures. They've given me a lot of information about railroads that couldn't be found in any book. The readers of **SHORT STORIES** are certainly an intelligent crew, who take their stories seriously.

"In particular, telegraphers and ex-telegraphers had a lot to talk about after a previous story of mine in **SHORT STORIES**, 'Un-code my Double-Cross.' And—if the telegrapher on the Sante Fe who sent me a long letter, but forgot to put in his exact address, will send it along, I'll send him the information he wanted."

73 Bill Rohde.

Death Flower

"**P**ERHAPS the readers of the Story Tellers' Circle would like to hear a little more about the *ohakra*—the 'death-flower' which so terrified Chun Tai in my story 'The Tower of Heaven,'" suggests Walter C. Brown.

"Like the famous 'black patch' of pirate days, the *ohakra* flower was a Chinatown warning that death would follow. Its use goes back to the time of the tong wars, when Chinese who found themselves in receipt of the small white death blossom frequently committed suicide, since Chinatown legend declared that no man who received the *ohakra* had ever managed to escape death.

"Incidentally, there is a story about a certain Chinatown Sergeant who got himself quite a reputation as an expert tong-buster by the clever device of tracking down the official (and highly secret) *ohakra*-grower, and then keeping an eye on his customers.

"So that is the basis of Chun Tai's terror on finding what he thinks is an *ohakra* warning in his room. Knowing nothing about the *ohakra* except that it is a small white flower, it would be only natural for him to mistake the unfamiliar gardenia for the death-blossom—and a certain sign that vengeance has finally caught up with him."

WALTER C. BROWN

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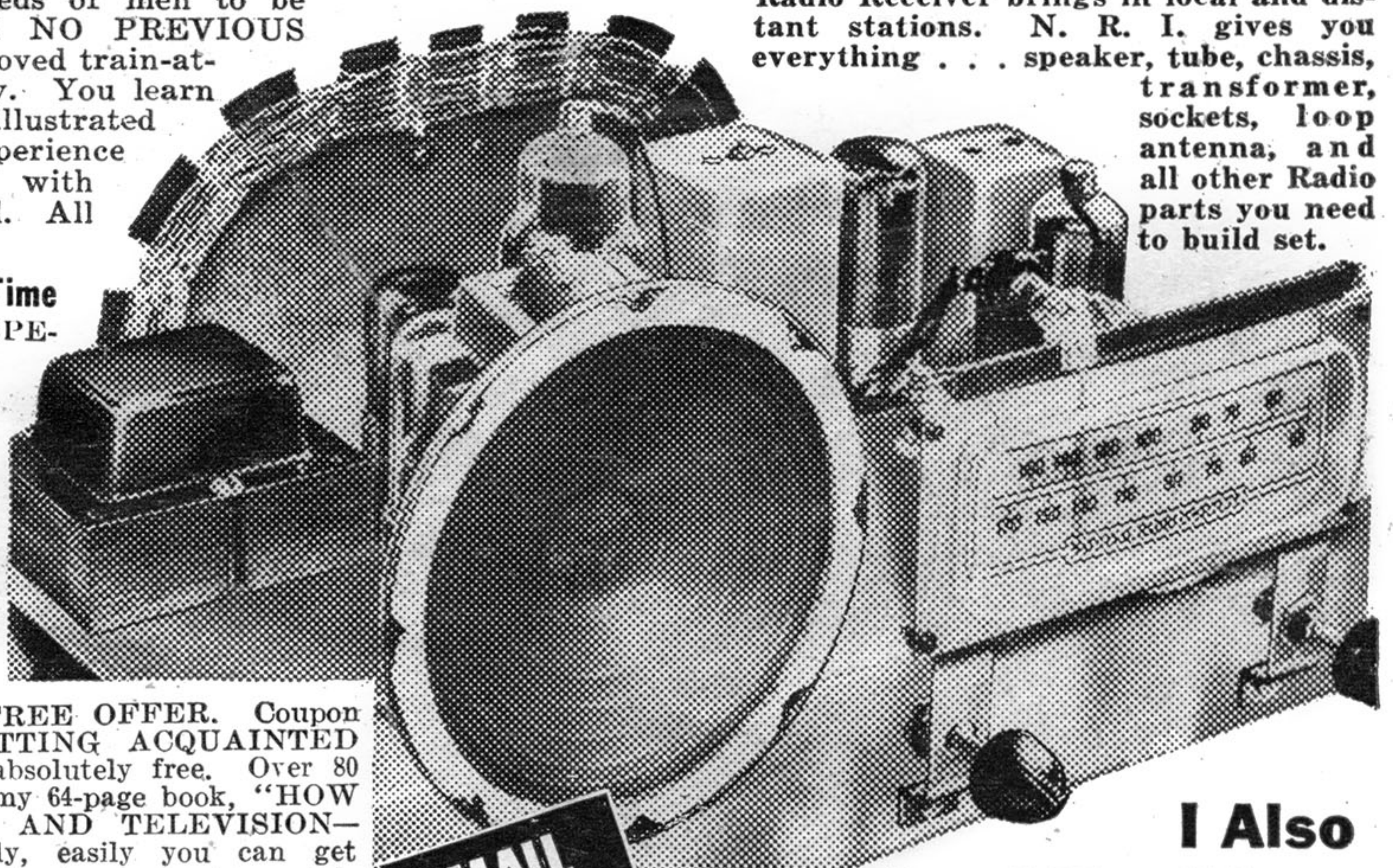
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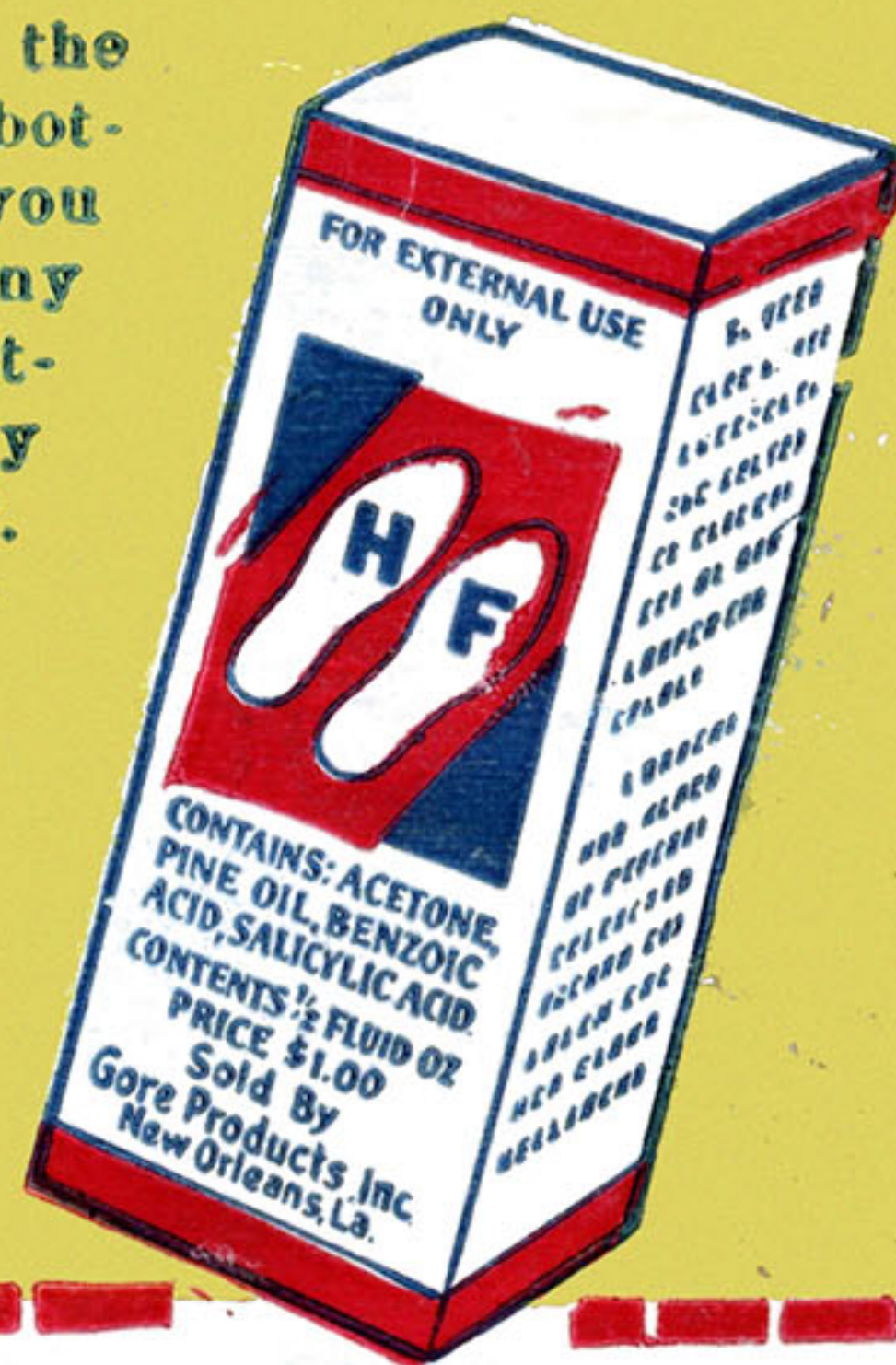
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Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

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