ANC

Short Stories

October

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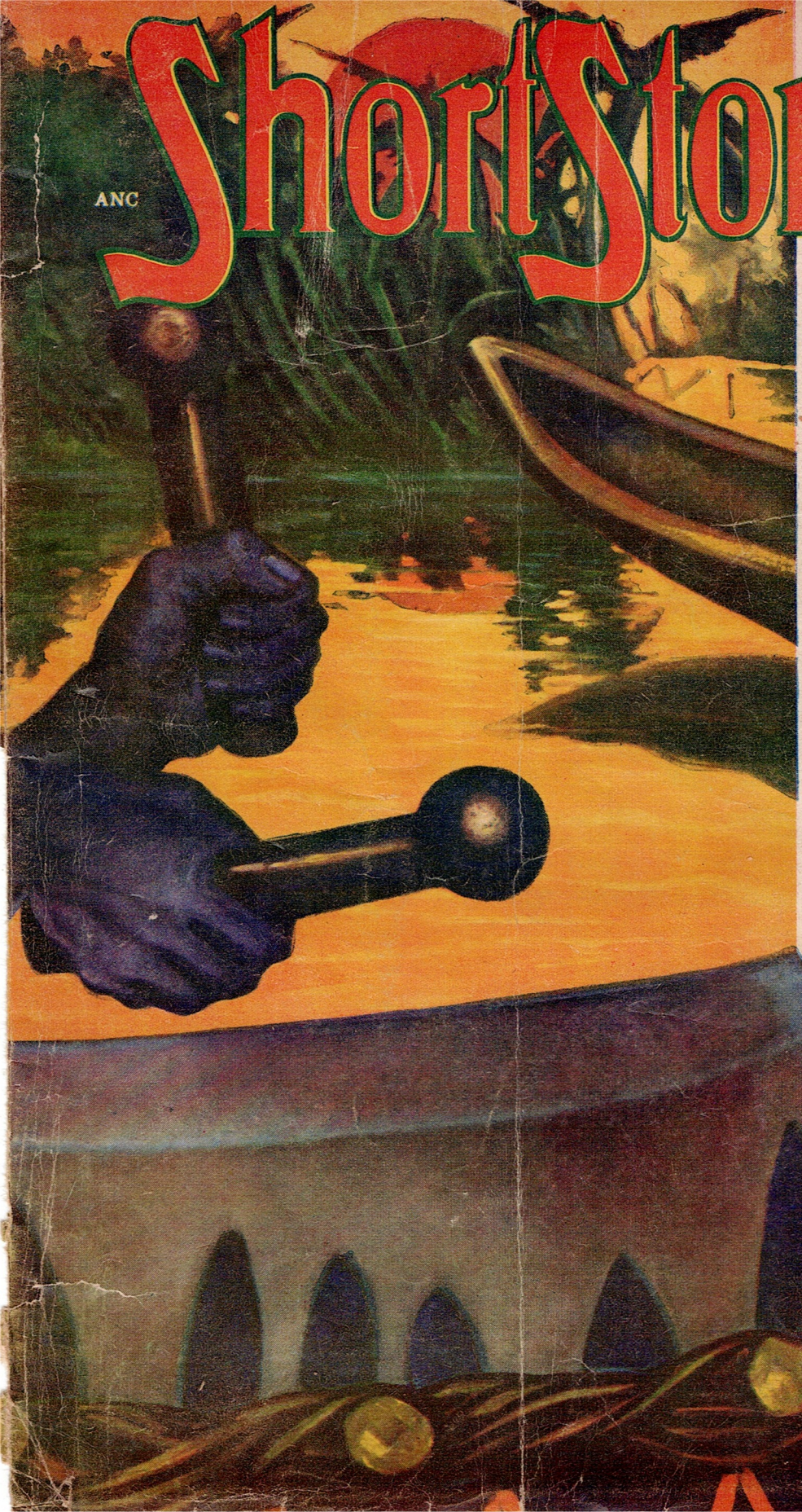

Anyone could sense trouble on that island!

LONG PIG LAGOON

by

R. V. Gery

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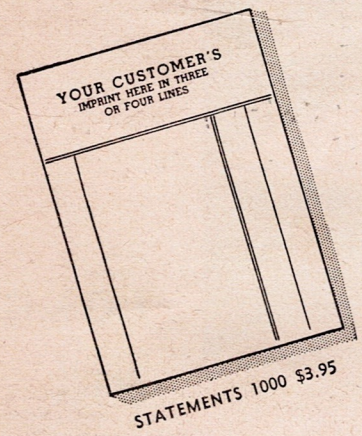

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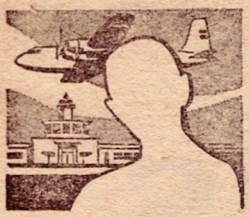

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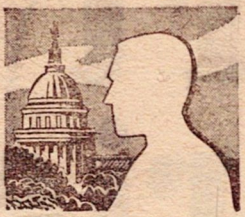

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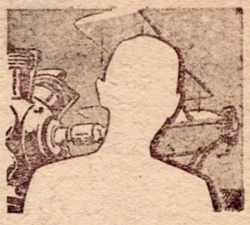

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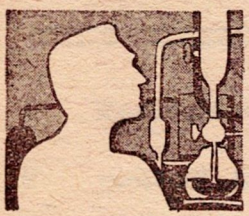

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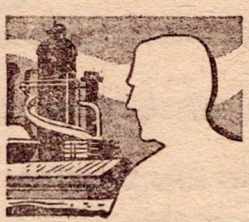

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SHORT STORIES issued monthly by SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City 20, N. Y., and reentered as second-class matter March 14, 1949, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico, and South America, $2.50 per year; Canada, $3.25; and to all other countries, $3.30. Price payable in Advance. October, 1951. Vol. CCXII, No. 4. Whole Number 1966.

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October 1951

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WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer* — M. DELANEY, *Secretary*

D. McILWRAITH, *Editor*

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

CONDUCTED BY PETE KUHLHOFF

The Ultimate in Rifle Precision

TODAY I want to tell you about a book which I know you will enjoy if you are even remotely interested in rifle shooting in any of its phases. From it you will get a wealth of information about rifles and rifle accuracy!

This book, "The Ultimate in Rifle Precision," is the 1951 Bench Rest Shooter's Annual. It was edited by Col. Townsend Whelen, who, as you no doubt know, is considered the dean of the shooting game in America—and you can bet your last buck on anything he has to say about the rifle or its management!

Various chapters of this volume of over 370 pages were written by individuals who have spent much of their time, energy and money in developing the most accurate rifles in the world.

The book is divided into five sections, technique, technical (don't be misled by this technical business—it's easy to read and understand), scores and equipment used, appendices, and advertisers.

The first chapter, under technique, describes bench rest shooting and why it is practiced, and then goes into the history of that type of shooting in America and covers such important subjects as construction of the bench rest, technique of bench rest shooting with dope on targets and conducting a bench rest tournament.

I'm sure that the technical section will prove the most fascinating to the majority of shooters. Col. Whelen describes in detail the heavy super-accurate bench rest rifle (a reliable precision instrument) as well as the somewhat lighter weight type of rifle which is ordinarily used for varmint and long range shots at big game. A fine example of this latter arm will group into an angle of three-fourths of a minute (¾ inch at 100 yards, 1½ inch at 200 yards, 2¼ inch at 300 yards and 3 inches at 400 yards) and naturally is great for woodchucks up to 300 yards and on mountain sheep at up to 400 yards. When (and if) you find a hunting rifle that will consistently shoot like that you really have something to be proud of. And I might add that you won't find one every day of the week!

Also in this section, G. R. Douglas of Charleston, W. Va. (one of our makers of super-accurate barrels) tells all about his method of drilling, reaming, rifling and "bore-honing" to obtain the best accuracy from the finished barrel!

Rifle stocks and their bedding (relation of the metal barrel and action to the inletted portion of the wood butt-stock and forearm) is well covered and the phenomenon of this relationship which takes place, when the gun is fired, is fully explained. And the whys and wherefores of the telescope sight are discussed.

Bullet making tools and components are gone over in detail (bench rest shooters usually make their own jacketed bullets), handloading of cartridges and the various elements important to the chap who loads his own fodder, as well as thirty-seven cartridges (mostly wildcats) are discussed from various angles.

A lot of statistics (previous scores and particulars of equipment used—which is

(*Continued on page 6*)

Labor Day or Any Day

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(*Continued from page* 4)

important and very helpful to anyone interested in this field of shooting) and a valuable directory of firms and individual gunsmiths who cater to the requirements of the bench rest and other shooters who want the ultimate in accuracy from their rifles.

In other words, if you want dope on what makes an accurate rifle accurate—this is the book for you! It is published at $6, by the Sportsman's Press, one of the publishing activities of the Association of the United States Army (readers desiring catalogues of that organization's publications can obtain them from the Association of the United States Army, 1115 Seventeenth St. N.W., Washington 6, D. C.) under the direction of Richard Gordon McCloskey (who has been responsible for a number of fine gun books!).

Here is a thought provoker that is a sort of preface to "The Ultimate in Rifle Precision"—

The Duty of Every American Rifleman

HERE are some serious thoughts for all of us.

For a generation, at least, our Nation must become an Armed Camp to preserve our Liberties and insure Peace. The writing is on the wall.

A soldier is no soldier at all unless he is a fighter. He cannot fight, nor will he have the will to fight unless he is skilled in the use of his weapon.

The recent picture of a few Reds infiltrating an air field, and with grenades wrecking five million dollars worth of airplanes while dozens of mechanics and cooks looked on helpless, because they did not know how to fire a rifle, is a sad commentary of the present state of affairs.

The shoulder rifle is the basic weapon of every soldier, and whether he be in an armed service, or in one of the supply branches, he should be trained in its use!

The Infantry are the Backbone of any Army. They close with the enemy, and consequently they suffer the heaviest losses. If your boy or your brother is drafted the chances are six out of ten that he will go into the infantry. The losses in the infantry are in direct proportion to its lack of training. The infantry is armed with the rifle. Do you wish to have a trained infantry or not?

New Winchester Rifle

THE boys over at the Winchester plant have been burning the midnight oil and have come up with a new version of the Model 52 Target Rifle in .22 Long Rifle caliber of course.

The original Model 52 was introduced in 1919. It was a bolt action rifle and was the first of its type as .22 caliber target rifles were single shot before that time. Winchester was in the middle of the post-war depression and there was practically nothing being manufactured in their huge plant as the sudden end of World War I brought about cancellation of all war contracts. But Winchester took a long chance and brought out the Model 52, which was an expensive arm to design, develop experimentally and to set up for manufacture. The Model 52 was the pioneer and many so-called experts thought that there was no chance of selling a bolt action .22 for target use. Needless to say, it gained great popularity!

Since that first model was produced there have been quite a number of improvements made in the 52, including at least one complete redesign job—but the latest Model 52 (which will soon be available) is the real "piece de resistance." I have one of the first to be completed on the way for testing, and will probably be able to tell you all about it next issue.

An Easy Gun Bluer

I HAVE been using the Minute Man gun blue for touchup on various guns and for complete blueing on small parts, such as sights, screws, etc., with good success.

The other day I decided to see how it would work out on a complete rifle. We had been fooling around with an old single-shot Ballard in .22 Short caliber, which I had bought at auction for $1.25. It was a sorry looking mess, and as I have a soft spot in my heart for Ballards I figured that it should be cleaned up so that it would at least look a little better.

(*Continued on page* 81)

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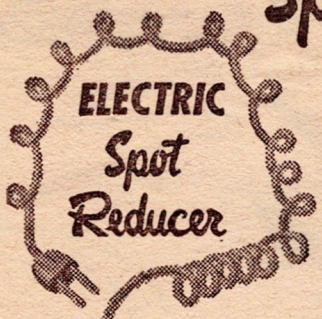

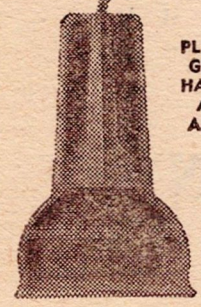

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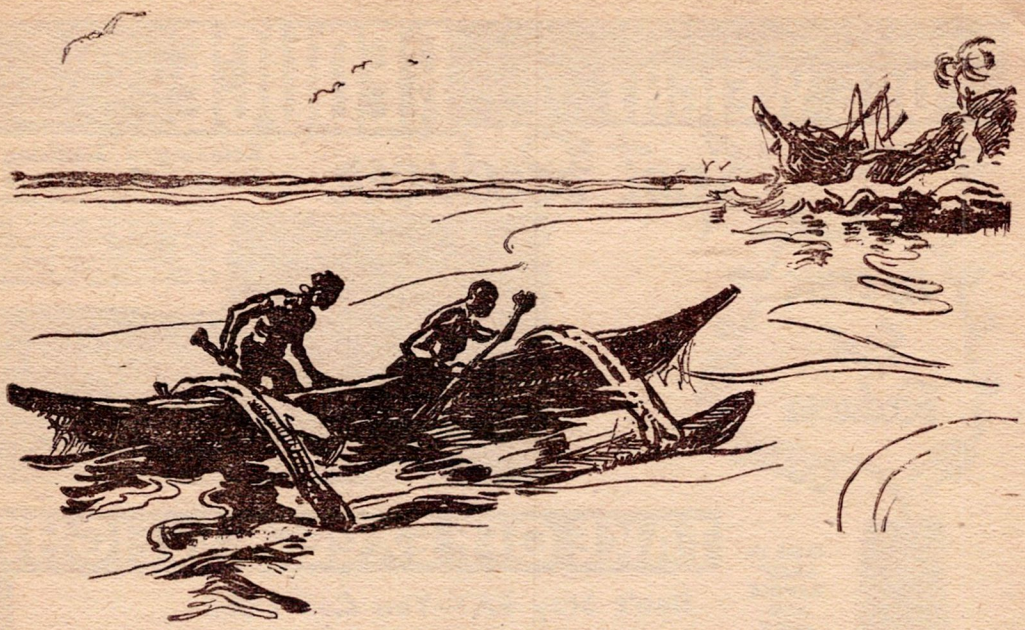


LONG PIG LAGOON

By R. V. GERY

CHAPTER I

THE STORE AT BUWI

DAWN was just breaking, cold and uncharitable, when I first clapped eyes on that island.

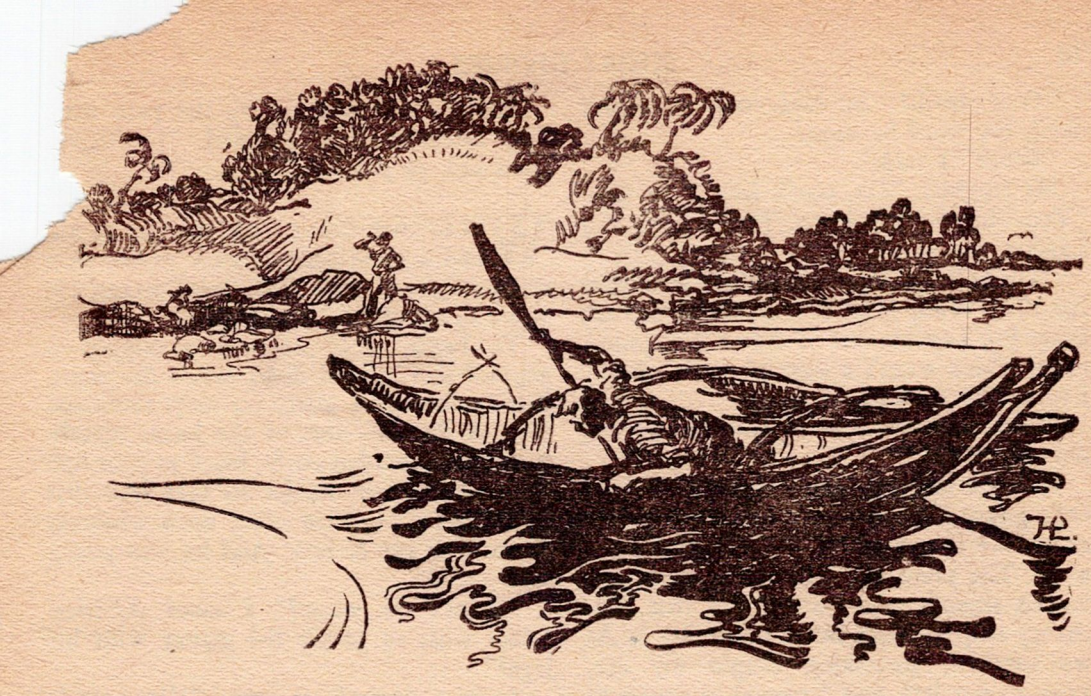
Old Andries, the sly, dry skipper of the *Hendryk Van Dam,* took a hand from the pocket of his coat, blew on the nails, and pointed.

"Dot's her!" he said with satisfaction. "Buwi Island—und right on der dot, py chinks!"

I looked, and I'll confess that then and there Steve Harkness' heart sank to a new low. All the way up from Sydney I'd been wondering about this Buwi—hearing things about it, doubtful things; growing more and more uncomfortably certain that Mannie Silberstein, the little shyster, had slipped one over me back in that office there. But now, with the reality before my sleep-gummed eyes, it seemed the last place God made.

Some detail. The old *Van Dam* was lolloping along in a slow cross-sea, in the middle of a channel that went twisting and snaking in and out of a perfect network of fanged reefs and coral-heads—standard equipment, I'd already observed, for any maritime scenery in these parts. Away off on the horizon, forty miles it must have been, there was a volcano at work. All about us, so that they shut out the sea-line, were the islands—rocky affairs with forbidding crests, a couple of thousand feet up most of them, and each one now streaked and wreathed in drifts and whorls of poisonous mist. The sea itself was green-yellow and looked sick.

Dead ahead was this Buwi. Its hue was dark-red, but most of it was hidden in the vapors, except its top, which shot up into a bare peak with a wet sun glistening against one side of it. The beach-level was clear,



though, and right away I noticed its amazing sweep and color. There was a mile or more of it, smooth as a billiard-table, shining like a silk-hat—and black. Polished black volcanic sand, I afterwards discovered. A lopsided house stood in some trees. Mangroves, their roots the limbs of writhing prehistoric monsters, lined the shore, And that was all.

"Hell!" I said aloud.

Andries rolled slow eyes on me. "You t'ink?" he said with the suspicion of a chuckle. "Hell, eh? Maybe hell, yes!"

And left it at that. Which was a good, cheerful introduction for Messrs. Walsh's new storekeeper, here in the island of Buwi. Seven days of Andries had informed me that pumping him was a crazy dream; he'd every bit of the Dutchman's fabled taciturnity, and then some. So I went and leant on the rail, took a further disgusted look at this that was to be my home, and fell to cursing Mannie Silberstein by all the gods of his plug-hatted, money-grubbing, cigar-sucking little soul.

Back there in Sydney, he'd offered me this job with the air of one handing out a sultan's largesse. He *was* Walsh and Co.—for the good old trading firm had fallen upon evil times—and I ought to have known better than to touch him with a forty-foot pole. But evil times had been getting at Steve Harkness, too, and in that office of his the chance looked enormous. It was still looking so, when I left Sydney with a new outfit and a general assortment of stock, Mannie seeing me off effusively.

"That damn' Horrocks," he'd said, referring to my predecessor here, "he's run out on us, delinquent, but we get him yet, no fear. You go in and take hold, my boy, an' the best of luck. It's a be-ewtiful station—"

WELL, I considered the beautiful station, and wished Mannie Silberstein where he belonged, in hell, and myself there with him for a fool; because all the way from Darwin, and that was plenty more than a thousand miles, I'd been running across the same attitude at the very mention of this Buwi. The lifted eyebrow, the shrug, the changed subject—now and again the grin.

And there'd been that fellow at Malaita. He'd been a real old-timer up in these parts—one of the hard-bitten, devil-may-care outfit that have made this Black Belt what it is. He'd been pretty well plastered in the cafe there when he came up to me.

"You—ic—goin' to Buwi?" he asked.

I said I was. By this time I was beginning to be a bit nettled at some of this talk. He hitched up his pants.

"Poor devils!. he said—only it wasn't devil, the word he used.

"Why?" I said.

He laughed. "Oh, you'll learn," he said. "You—huc—you'll learn. Thas'h Long Pig Lagoon, that is—"

"The hell you say?" I said, and let it pass for that. Well, here it was—Buwi Island, Long Pig Lagoon, and it didn't look promising. There wasn't a sign of a soul about. I turned to Andries.

"Swell welcome, eh?" I said. "Lamp the red carpet, eh?"

But that one was over his head, and he only grinned dumbly and ordered the boat away. We rowed ashore without speaking a word. The place was still utterly quiet, the lagoon smooth as a mirror, and that mischancy strip of black beach bordering it. As we touched, something caught my eye, away to our left, and I turned to squint at it. It was another house, also up in the trees.

I took a good long look.

"Hello!" I said. "We got company, eh? Whose place is that, d'ye know?"

Its roof was in view over the mangroves, the best part of a mile away—at the other end of that beach. Andries shifted to look at it and produced one of his grunts.

"Dot's der doctor's," he said. "Crazy mans."

"Encouraging, aren't you?' I said. "Well, what's this crazy doc's name?"

He shrugged. "Me, I don't know," he stated. "Whisky Jack, dey call him—"

Once more, cheerful. A crazy doctor for company, one that was hitting the bottle presumably. I got out of the boat without any more questions and joined Andries on the sand.

He was looking at the store, thoughtfully, and as if he'd something on his mind, it seemed to me. Then he let out a foghorn bellow of a hail and waited; he didn't set foot in the garden, though its edge wasn't twenty feet from us. Just stood there, peering and rubbing his chin.

Then there was a movement, a shifting of shadows up by the house, and a figure showed for an instant.

Andries roared again, and it came out on to the veranda.

"Who's this?" I said. "Caretaker, huh?"

Andries was walking up the path no' "*Ja,* caredaker!" he grunted. "Dot's it- caretaker, py chiminy!"

WELL, that didn't clear matters at all; and a close-quarters view of the man on the veranda only made them worse. He was a figure of fun, if you like.

To begin with, he was a cripple—a gnarled and twisted thing below the waist, that hauled itself along on spay, mutilated feet. A Papuan—one of the local, squash-nosed, mop-headed outfit, black as your hat. What made him harder to take was that he'd been a big man once, until whatever it was had got at him. And he was young still.

"What's his name?" I asked Andries. "And what in heck's the matter with his legs?"

Andries looked at me. "His name's Chim," he said. "Leasdtways, dot's what he's called—"

"Jim, eh?" I said. "Well, and the rest of it? How'd he get chawed up that way?"

Andries didn't answer me at once. He'd nodded to the man and held out a hand. Jim took it and looked at me as the skipper spoke my name. Unless I was a mighty deal mistaken, there was a flash of alarm, or something like it, in his flat features and rolling eyes. He gave me the impression—if I'd not had it long ago—that I wasn't welcome here.

Andries gestured towards the sea, where the *Van Dam's* second boat was already coming ashore, gunwale deep with my cans and supplies. Jim grinned, made a queer kind of a duck of the head, and went off, hirpling and wabbling down the path. I turned to Andries.

"Well?" I said, pretty short I've no doubt. "What about those legs, eh?"

He gave me another of his blank, useless stares. "You dond't know, eh?" he said.

"Dammit, I'm asking you!"

Andries rubbed his nose with the back of his fist. "You hear of potpie, maybe?" he inquired.

"Potpie?" I jumped. "What in thunder are you talking about? You mean—cannibals?"

He was silent for an instant. Then he nodded. "*Ja,* cannibal—dot's it!" he said.

"Chim, he's been took for der potpie one time, und dey bust his bones an' t'row him in fresh-water stream. Make him tender, dey say."

Well, it took me a second or so to grasp it, and then I fairly gasped. I remembered that guy at Malaita and what he'd said.

"But hell," I said, "Jim's a young man; he's not thirty. All that maneating stuff's out, long ago."

Andries had turned into the door of the store. He sniffed.

"You t'ink?" he said over his shoulder. "*Ja*, der missionary dey say so—und der tamn-fool government dey say so—all gone, finish, wipe out, how you say? But—" He jerked a thumb down at the beach, and quit talking.

"Holy smoke!" was about all I felt competent to say to that one.

THE store, inside, wasn't so impossible as it had appeared from without. There was a good large room, with shelves and cupboards, and in one corner a heavy green sheet-iron safe. Behind it, facing into close-growing green pandanus, were two other apartments, one a kind of office, it seemed, the other with a bed and what was left of a mosquito-bar. Out back there was a lean-to kitchen.

Andries perked up a little. "Preddy goot blace!" he said. "Eh?"

I looked round. "Yeah," I said. "It's all right—sure. What's the trade like?"

He was at the window now, watching my stuff coming up the path.

"Der trade," he said slowly, and hesitated. "Der trade iss goot, *pa*—"

He broke off altogether, chewing at his walrus mustache. I lost my temper with him altogether.

"For the love of Pete!" I exclaimed furiously. "Quit fooling, skipper, and talk sense. What's the matter with this damn joint, anyway? There's something—so don't you try to tell me no. What's wrong here—outside cannibals, that is?"

Andries shuffled. "What dey say in Sydney?" he asked.

"Never mind what they said in Sydney," I exploded. "They didn't say anything about potpie, anyway. Come on—come clean, Andries; I'm not a baby."

"Dey tell you somezings about Horrocks, maybe?"

"Sure. He skipped out, owing 'em money. I'm here to clean up that little mess first. But damn Horrocks, anyway; he'll keep. There's something more than him. Out with it, now!"

Andries seemed forty miles away in a kind of daze, and it was a good minute before he replied. Then he ducked again.

"*Ja!*" he said. "Dot's it—Horrocks he skip out, und dere's a mess. Dot's all, mister—"

"You're a liar!" I yelped at him. "You be damned. It's not all. To hell with you—"

Well, I guess that was pretty tough, and for a second I thought he was going to turn on me. But as it was, he did something even worse. He swung about, and waddled off into the open air and away; he was down the veranda steps and gone before I realized it.

"Andries!" I yelled, and ran after him. "Skipper! Hey, have a heart! I didn't mean that. Come back here—"

But he went solemnly stumping down to his boat, not so much as looking back at me. Twenty minutes later I was standing alone on the beach, biting my fingers, and watching the *Hendryk Van Dam* puff away into the morning.

Long Pig Lagoon, eh? I took a devil of a look at it before I went up to the house.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCING JOHN HORROCKS

WELL, that was how I first saw Buwi Island, and I'll defy anyone to say it was a promising beginning.

Things didn't improve any, either. I spent the rest of that forenoon at the pleasant job of hauling my stores—for Andries' men had dropped them like hot coals, and Jim, the poor devil, was a total loss with those legs of his.

They gave me the willies, those wrecked underpinnings. I'd heard, of course, of that cruel, cold-pickling game of the maneaters—break a subject's bones and lay him bound in chilly water to gain flavor. But all the dope was that such jamborees had been

put down and stamped out a half-century before. Even here in the Black Belt.

Yet—look at this Jim. He wasn't thirty, as I'd said.

I tried talking to him, but got little but "Yi yi, sah!" and so forth. Jim's English was like his legs—paralytic. And he was nervous, too; I could still see that. Not any hearty company, I'll tell the world.

It wasn't till around noon that I got a flash out of him. I'd just finished lugging the last crate on to the veranda, and was standing wiping my brow, when here he came, shuffling along, with a tin tray in his hand. There were glasses on it, biscuit, and a can of beans haggled open. He set it on the table.

"You like gin?" he queried, and produced a bottle—not one of mine, either.

"Uh-huh?" I said to him. "You savvy white man, eh? Where you get dem gin. Horrocks have him, maybe—"

Well, it was odd. At the sound of the name something seemed to happen to him, as it had to Andries. He shut up, wriggled awkwardly, and finally left me without further words. I heard him tinkering in the kitchen and sat down to tackle the beans, and think.

There was plenty to exercise the brain, too. Mannie Silberstein had lied to me right and left, I was sure—and Andries, if he wasn't exactly lying, was keeping his thumb on the truth. I didn't figure that dramatic exit meant anything; he wanted to get out of an uncomfortable corner and chose his own way of doing it. And now here was this Jim on the same tack. They were all of them in it—whatever it was.

I lit a pipe and went out on the veranda. Noon had passed now, and the lights were changing and hardening. There was a storm beating up, somewhere to the east; I could see the stab and flicker of its lightning. And the snub peak of that nameless volcano, smoking away there in the distance, reminded me that this was one hell of a long way from Sydney, and radios, and airplanes, and all the little gadgets of civilization.

Pretty raw nature hereabouts, I mused—and remembered Jim's legs. That thought sent me in under cover again, perhaps the least trifle hurriedly.

The sight of my gear and goods did something to restore my confidence, and almost automatically I began to set things in order, measuring shelves, estimating floor-space, preparing for custom. It might be a day or so, I calculated, before word got round that the place was functioning again, and meantime I'd some strenuous work in front of me.

One thing intrigued me, right away. This Horrocks, in getting out, seemed to have done so pretty completely. There wasn't a trace of him—neither stock, nor kit or clothing, nor even any records. Beyond a pile of blank order forms roosting in one corner of the green safe, the place was as empty as a bass drum. Even the safe was open, its key swinging in the lock.

I stood in front of it a moment, wondering. Here was the picture I was supposed, by Mannie Silberstein and Andries, to get—Horrocks crouching there at midnight, the monies and shell and maybe the pearls of Messrs. Walsh & Co. dropping into a bag clutched in his hand. And then the getaway. I found that scene somehow mighty hard to visualize.

A scrabbling, heaving sound came from the bedroom, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Jim enter it.

He had my suitcase in his hand, and set it on the bed-frame, clicking the catches expertly enough.

"Hey!" I called testily. "Easy there. What you do, huh?"

He was looking down at something that lay on top of the shirts—my little black automatic pistol.

"You got gun, eh?" he remarked interestedly.

It seemed to me that his black paws weren't what I wanted among my affairs, so I took a couple of steps forward and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"You get out of here!" I told him. "*Footstack—imshi*—beat it, d'ye hear? I'll do my own flunkeying, by thunder!"

Well, he got it all right, and went—sulkily, I thought. I might have trouble with this guy, I was meditating as I looked round the room. It had been Horrocks' sleeping-place, as I said; there was the remains of an iron bed in it, and a mouldy, mildewed chest of drawers over against the

wall, warped and twisted from the heat. I inspected this piece of furniture.

There was nothing in the drawers; they were empty as all the rest of the house was, and once more that didn't render to me at all. I stood in the middle of the floor, scratching my head and cursing mildly over the puzzle; and then—almost automatically again—I began to unpack and stow my belongings. One of the drawers was stuck, jammed in its guides; I yanked at the thing with a sharp oath, and next moment it had come flying out, and I'd gone staggering across the room to land with a resounding thump on the bed.

"To hell with it!" I said violently.

And then I stopped, for something had come away with that drawer—out of the cavity behind it. It was a small calf-bound ledger, the sort of thing a very careful man might use to keep personal accounts in. It lay on the floor staring up at me, and there was the name, in neat upright characters lettered on its side. "John Horrocks, Buwi. March 19— to . . ." The last date was blank.

I stopped and picked it up, sat down on the rickety bed and flipped over the pages. In about two minutes I was sure enough of one thing—Mr. John Horrocks of Buwi, late agent for Messrs. Walsh & Co., was no absconding delinquent. Whatever else he was—or wasn't.

They say a man's financial records are a pretty fair index to his general character. That's as it may be; but in this case there wasn't any doubt of it. That little ledger contained, in the careful, crabbed script of a born man of detail, the tale of Buwi's trade for more than a year. It was all there, neat, firm, and precise; incomes, outgoings, week by week, telescoped and checked and balanced just as nicely as you please.

"Oh yeah?" I said aloud, and grinned.

Here was the proof Mannie had lied—here was what Andries was driving at in that cryptic, clumsy manner of his. This was a finicky bird, this Horrocks, an old woman, a worrier—

AND at that thought I jumped again, for Mr. Horrocks had had something to worry about. His balances were eloquent; the trade of this Buwi store had been all shot to pieces in that year he recorded. From a fair average, it had gone clear to pot, almost to nothing. His last week, and that was three months back, he'd taken in hardly enough to buy lamp-oil.

I sat there staring at the figures, more flummoxed than ever. No, sir, I said, it didn't work; it certainly didn't work. John Horrocks, Esquire—I could picture him bent over the table at nights, scrawling away at those laborious calculations—wasn't any delinquent. He couldn't be, in the name of commonsense. Then why all these damned lies about him?

And if he wasn't delinquent and a runaway, where was he?

My head went down into my hands, puzzling over that one. There was a certain grim possibility I couldn't shove aside, now. I jumped up and went to the door, bellowing for Jim, to twist the truth out of him. But Jim wasn't there.

He'd gone off, slid away upon some business of his own—and that made me finally and conclusively mad. Mad with Buwi, mad with Jim, mad with this vanished Horrocks and Mannie Silberstein and Andries and the whole kit and boiling of them.

"Damnation!" I shouted against the mocking silence, and ran into the garden.

It was empty under the blazing afternoon sun. Down at its foot the water lapped uneasily on that uncanny beach, and I went down to its edge, looking this way and that for signs of the missing Jim. But I saw none—only, away along the smooth blackness, there was a man's figure now. It was moving, and even at this distance I could see it was a European.

I remembered the house I'd seen down there, and Andries' name for its owner.

"Whisky Jack, eh?" I said sourly. "Yeah, just needed a boozed doctor to make it all perfect—"

I watched him for a moment. He seemed to be parading up and down the sand, in a short, quarter-deck kind of a fashion; and every now and then he'd stop and wave his arms, by the look of it.

"Oh yeah!" I said. "Bugs, too. Well, all right—I'll be bugs myself soon, and then we'll all go to the bughouse together!"

I went back up the garden; and half-way up the path, something struck my eye. Sun-

shine glinted on metal—moving metal; it was off among the trees to my right.

Well, I couldn't just tell you why—one of those things, I guess—but I took my foot in my hand and nipped into that house like one o'clock. From the front room, in the shadow, I watched the woods.

Sure enough, in a minute, here came Master Jim. I got a good view of him, lurching along, and of the thing he'd got over his shoulder—the thing that had glittered. It was a spade.

And that was that. The hairs on the nape of my neck began to tingle. Gardening, eh? What kind of gardening was it Jim was doing out there among the undergrowth? In a moment he came hobbling into the open, and now he wasn't carrying the spade any longer. I reached into the bedroom, caught up my pistol, and with it in my hand went down to meet him.

"Okay, you black scum!" I said to myself. "Now we'll just see—"

He stopped at sight of me, and his face was a picture. It wasn't his first experience of pistols—or of angry white men.

"Hey you!" I said. "Where you been, huh?"

He cowered away from me, and I walked past him as if he didn't exist. From behind me I heard him gulp some kind of a protest, but I didn't so much as turn my head. I could walk twice as fast as he could, anyway, and I was too mad to worry about him. I yanked up the spade from where he'd dropped it, and went straight back along the line he'd come from.

IT DIDN'T take me fifteen minutes snooping around before I'd struck what I was looking for—the darker marks of turned earth. And when I finally stood by Jim's handiwork, I knew what it was, all right. I need scarcely have dug in that cheesy, soft soil. But I did, carefully; and in no time at all I was looking down at the answer to part of the riddle.

Well, to pass over some messy work, he'd been shot. The back of his skull was shattered, and there wasn't a great deal left of his face. Close quarters, and a .45, I figured. From what I could make out, he answered well enough to the ideas I'd already formed of him—a little guy, neat and tidy and respectable—respectable as all hell.

I stood for quite a while looking at him.

"Uh-huh?" I said aloud at last.

By way of answer there was a kind of a groan from somewhere close handy. I whipped round, and there was this Jim. So far from having beaten it to parts unknown, he'd followed me, and now he was standing there with his mouth open, and those twisted, crippled legs of his looking more fantastic than ever.

"Well?" I said. "What you got to say about it? Why you do this, eh?"

And I pointed to where he'd obviously been smoothing the ground round the grave. Be damned if he didn't grovel to me—go clear down on his face, like the picture of Man Friday in the nursery books, and try to grab my feet. I gave him a lovely kick in the backside.

"Get up!" I said. "You savvy all this, huh?"

He rolled his eyes wildly at the late Horrocks. "Me savvy!" he managed to gulp out.

"Then you'll talk," I said. "Talk, see—or I'll beat seven kinds of hell out of you, my word! Who kill him, eh?"

Well, it wasn't any use. He couldn't talk, mostly from fear, it seemed to me. All I got was a senseless jumble of words and names that meant nothing at all, and gibberings that meant less. Finally I handed him another boot in the pants.

"Who did it?" I said furiously.

At that he began pointing hither and yon, and it struck me there was a little more sense in some of his remarks. There were names—one of them sounded to be like "Ginger."

"Yi, yi, Ginjol!" he said.

"Who's Ginger, anyway?" I asked him.

But there again I missed out. All he could do was point and jabber—and I'd pretty nearly given him up as a hopeless case when he said something that sounded like "Doctor."

"Aha?"" I said. "Doctor? Whisky Jack, eh?"

He nodded violently. "Yi, yi—dolctol!" he said.

Well, that gave me something to work on. I took him by the arm and spun him round.

"Now, then," I said, "you just beggar off to the house, d'ye see? And wait for me there—and don't you say a word to a soul until I come back, get me?"

He seemed to, more or less, for he turned and went shambling off. I took the spade again, and did a little very necessary tidying up around John Horrocks. Then I cut down through the trees to the beach and made along it. I was going to have some chin-chin with friend doctor.

CHAPTER III

WHISKY JACK

IT WASN'T so easy, as that. Whisky Jack was still engaged as I approached him, and a mighty odd kind of an employment he'd got, I'm free to state.

He was delivering a lecture—a medical lecture, full of long words and general hifalutins—to an audience of big blue landcrabs. They sat in the mouths of their holes, for all the world like a bunch of professors, and waved their claws at him by way of applause, I guess. And this Whisky Jack, his arms waving and his high-pitched, cultivated voice rising and falling, strode up and down in front of them, orating. He was drunk as Davy's sow, of course; but the liquor didn't seem to have touched his legs or his talk. Only his eyes were bloodshot, and his craggy face red under a shock of iron-gray hair. Of me he took no notice whatever.

I stood taking it in for quite a time, and then I coughed, loudly and with intention, so that he whipped round, peering.

"The devil!" he said.

From his pocket—he was in jacket and pants, barefoot—he dragged out a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez and stuck them on his noose.

"Steve Harkness, Doc," I said. "Walsh's new man up yonder. Asking the privilege of a word with you."

Something about my tone seemed to take his attention, for he stepped back a pace.

"H'm!" he said, as if talking to himself. "Young jackanapes, eh? What's he doing here?" He seemed to think that one over, and then roared at me suddenly, "D'you know you're interrupting me, sir?"

Well, it seemed to me just possible that this might be bluff—acting, to gain time; but if it was acting, it was pretty good. I shifted the gun from one hand to the other and saw his congested eyes follow it.

"Sorry," I said. "I'll wait, if you like—"

He shot out a long, powerful finger. "What's that blasted affair you've got there?" he ripped out. "Put it away, sir—put it away, d'ye hear? Damme, this is a theatre, not an armory!"

I thought to myself, oh, yeah? You overplayed the hand there, Doc; you're acting all right. If it hadn't been for dragging in that bit of medical flapdoodle, he might have got away with it. But he tried it and it didn't work—not with me. Besides, I'd been watching his eyes, and they were sober now. I'd given him one hell of a jolt.

"Come on, Doctor!" I said, and thrust the gun away. "This is serious—damned serious. Do we talk here or up at the house?"

That got him all right, though he did try and bluster a bit and keep up the show of drunkenness. He tapped me on the shoulder.

"This way, young feller!" he said. "I'll give you a drink, anyhow."

He led the way, and I got another look at him. He was the kind that no amount of booze or rackety living could spoil altogether—the lean, brainy type that makes great artists and so on, they say. The late Horrocks had been a queer article to find tucked away here in this nook of the Pacific; but Whisky Jack was even queerer. I took in the stooped shoulders going up the path ahead of me, the big lump of a head with its tousled gray hair, the big-boned, clever hands—and I thought, if this hasn't been somebody, somebody fine and large, my name's Dennis.

And his house wasn't the usual, either. Its build was ordinary enough, for these seas—tin roof, two-sided veranda and so on; but I'd not set foot in it before I knew a couple of things. One, that this Whisky Jack was well-fixed financially; you could tell that by the furniture and fittings. And two, that he'd a woman somewhere handy.

He put me in a deep chair and fixed drinks with hands that still shook more than a little. Then he looked at me over the rim of his glass.

"Well?" he said. "What is it?"

I'd made up my mind I was going right at him, bald-headed. "It's plenty, Doc," I said. "You remember the guy that was here before me?"

He set his drink down and rubbed his chin. "Horrocks, d'ye mean?" he asked. "Yes, I remember him. What about him—not turned up, has he?"

Well, it was beautifully done again, without the flicker of an eyelid, and I almost grinned in his face.

"Yeah," I said. "He's turned up all right. He's dead and buried, and I dug him up, twenty minutes ago."

That was telling him, of course, and he sat straight up in his chair, blinking.

"By gad!" he said. "What was that again?"

"I've just found Horrocks," I repeated. "Someone pretty near blew his head off. Murder, Doc. I wonder if you'd any angle on the thing—"

He continued to blink at me over those damned gig-lamps of his, and I could see him recovering himself, getting a grip.

"Me?" he said after a moment. "My good ass, how in blazes should I have any angle on it? I don't suppose I saw the man five times— But look here; I thought he was supposed to have got out in a hurry. Some money fuss or other."

"Sure," I said. "That's the tale they gave me. Doesn't look much like it now, though, does it?"

I was watching him all the time, to see if he'd give himself away at all; but no, there wasn't anything out of the ordinary. He took another pull at his glass.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said. "No, you're right, Harkness—that is something new. You're sure it's Horrocks, by the way?"

"Pretty sure," I said. "Would this be him?" And I described what lay under the shallow earth up yonder. Whisky Jack nodded.

"That's Horrocks right enough," he said. "But—I don't know—" He seemed to be thinking hard, and then he let drive at me with a question. "I suppose," he said slowly, "you wouldn't be telling me what set you digging in the first place?"

Slap! Just like that. He knew what I was driving at all right, and I'd underrated him. But there wasn't any sense in hide-and-seek just now.

"Why sure," I said. "I don't mind telling you, Doc. It's a funny business."

And I went into the thing in detail, from Mannie Silberstein onwards. After all, if this jasper was mixed up in things, he knew it all already, probably enough. He listened to me carefully, pursing his lips.

"Ah?" he said at the end of it. "A nasty business, eh? Question is, of course, what's to be done about it?"

"I was wondering myself," I said. "The police, maybe—"

He grinned at me. "They're rare birds just here," he said. "Nothing at all much closer than a hundred miles, anyway; and even then—well, we're rather at the back of beyond."

He was right enough. Andries had told me the same tale. Up in these islands, John Law didn't run very much—a gun-boat now and again, British or French, nosing about after blackbirders, and a few not so enthusiastic gendarmes in a station away to the south of us. That was what it amounted to, and here in Buwi it was a question of looking after oneself. Which was one of the things Steve Harkness had made up his mind to do.

And then something happened that put a new color on the whole messy business. The door of the house opened, and a girl come out.

Well, right along I'd been figuring that Whisky Jack had a woman somewhere or other on the premises; but my idea had been it was probably one of these native girls, promoted *pro tem.* That's the usual lay-out, all right; but this slim, dark-haired thing in the doorway wasn't any native. Not by a jugful.

And there was something else that hit me smack-dab between the eyes at once. The kid was scared—scared out of her seven senses, right there in that doorway. A blind man couldn't have missed it.

Whisky Jack had swung around in his chair and half-risen.

"Mary!" he said sharply.

She stood quite still, looking at me, her lips parted and her face like paper. Of all the shocks I'd had since the morning, I think

this one was the worst. She was like a cornered rabbit, except that a rabbit's a fool. This one wasn't any fool; she was afraid, and she knew what she was afraid of, good and plenty.

Whisky Jack pulled things together with a jerk. "Harkness," he said pleasantly, "this is my daughter. Mary Shirriff, in case," he twinkled at me," you may have heard other —um, local versions of the name. Alexander Shirriff is my correct style and entitlements, although," and he snickered once more, "it's been quite some time since I used 'em regularly. Of London, oddly enough, at once point in a curious career—"

He ran on with a lot of stuff I didn't listen to worth a hoot. Mary Shirriff and I were still taking one another in, and I felt she was sizing me up. In that particular jam she was in just then, there's no wonder either. Anyone with a pair of shoulders and two hands on them must have been a marvelous possibility.

FINALLY, Whisky Jack quit the great-I-am lay, and seemed to remember where he was. He fairly hustled the girl into the house on some excuse or other—she went unwillingly enough—and turned back to me.

"No," he said, as if there'd been no interruption, "you won't get much out of the police, my boy. Notify 'em, if you like—Andries and the *Van Dam'll* be back in a week or so. But in the meantime," and he cocked his big head on one side at me, "there's just one tip I'll give you about this place, and it's a useful one. Go slow."

"Yeah?" I queried. "Meaning?"

He stared bleakly at me down his nose. "Meaning just that, of course," he said. "Damn it, d'you want me to spell it for you?"

"Devil a bit!" I said. "I guess I'm as quick as the next one. Watch my step, eh? Sure, but I don't know about this particular rannygazoo. It's murder, murder, after all—"

"Yes?" he said sarcastically. "Well, suppose it is. Who did it? Me, for instance? If that's what you're thinking just now, my young friend, think again. If I wanted to put anyone out of the way, I'd do it a lot neater than that. There'd be no twopenny counter-jumping Sherlock Holmes's on my trail. I can tell you—"

He took a snort from his glass and glared at me in his high-nosed, you-be-damned fashion. I hesitated; that kind of talk didn't worry me worth a nickel, but after all, there was something in what he said. This bird was clever, a whole lot too clever to have engineered that clumsy butchery and clumsier burying over there by the store. But all the same, I'd to put myself right with him.

"Look," I said. "I don't know who in thunder you are—the Earl of Hell, for all I care—but just get this. Nobody's talking to me that way and getting away with it, Sydney or here!"

Well, I thought he'd come back with something snappy, and I was all ready for him; but he wasn't paying any attention to me. Something down on the water had caught his eye, and I followed it.

There was a canoe coming along a hundred yards or so offshore, and in the stern of it were two people, whites. One of them was a woman, and even from here I could see the flaring mop of her red hair.

Whisky Jack chuckled. "Better be getting back to that store of yours, me lad," he said. "You've got customers already!"

I'd risen, as a matter of fact, for an idea had hit me all at once, slap-bang.

"Yeah!" I said. "And that'll be Ginger there, I suppose?"

He pulled a quaint grimace at me, the glass still in his hand. "Dear me!" he said. "Is there anything you *don't* know about us, young feller? Yes, that's the fair Ginger right enough."

But I'd left him by that, and was going hop-skip-and-a-jump down to the beach. I'd a pressing engagement all right—to get back to that store, it was, too. Before this Ginger and the man with her got there and put the bee on poor old Jim.

CHAPTER IV

MR. LINDQUIST AND PARTNER

AS IT turned out, I needn't have worried. I'd not set foot on that strip of shining sand before the canoe had stopped, and the pair were looking at me under their hands. Then the paddles splashed again, and the

outfit came boiling towards me, while I waited, my heart going thump-athump. It had been a narrow squeak, I figured.

The man, and he was a huge creature with a perfect forest of black whiskers, stood up in the stern and hailed me.

"Ahoy, there! What name?

I let the canoe ground before I answered, and noted that this whoever-it-was spoke with some kind of a Swede's accent.

"Harkness," I said. "Walsh's new man. Want anything from the store?"

They sat there, the pair of them, summing me up much as Mary Shirriff had done, and I don't know whether they found me interesting, but I certainly did them. And it was mostly the woman who took me.

She was a big buxom creature, flaunting as a peony, and dressed in a fashion one only sees in one place—the side-streets off the docks all over the world. There wasn't any mistaking her at all, from the frowsy silks and satins to the raddled cheeks and hungry eyes, with the flaming red head bare to the breeze. I'd seen her type before, plenty of times, in Sydney and elsewhere; but what she was doing in Buwi was another of those mysteries this place seemed to specialize in.

The man had hauled himself ashore before either of them answered me. He stood in the inch-deep water, surveying me doubtfully.

"Lindquist," he said, and I recognized another of Jim's gabbled names. "You got gin, eh?"

"Sure," I said, "but I'm not unpacked yet. Come on up, and we'll break out a case, if you like."

He grinned through those whiskers of his, reached back into the canoe, and grabbed the woman under one of his immense arms.

"Yah!" he said. "Let's go—Ginger here's dry!"

She stood smoothing her ruffled plumes down, and at the same time giving me the eye.

"You're Sydney, eh?" she said. "Must be, I reckon."

"You bet!" I said. "I know Sydney. Good town, huh?"

"Like hell it is!" she snapped. "Never did me no good, the dirty dump! Say, you ain't any Aussie, though—don't tell me!"

"Yank," I grinned. "On the loose."

That crack seemed to amuse her, for she laughed huskily. "On the loose—that's a good one. You look a real little— Hey, you Jake! Where you goin', slidin' off damn you?"

The big Lindquist was drifting idly away from us towards the doctor's house. He turned, and he was scowling now.

"Skip on an' get dot gin!" he commanded. "I gotta wisit—"

Well, you never saw anything like it. She dropped me, and flew at him like a wildcat, yelling.

"You come away out o' that! I know what you're after, you big stiff! I'll cut your lights out if you don't let that little cat alone—"

SHE fairly tore into him, tooth and nail, and Lindquist had his troubles keeping her off. There didn't seem to be much of what they call chivalry about him, either, for in a moment he'd uncorked a round-house swing that knocked her flying in a heap on the sand.

"Damn red-head!" he growled. "I fix you, sometime!"

He was shambling off up the beach again, but this Ginger had other notions, and plenty of them. I was just in time—she'd gone down somewhere among the frills and furbelows, and come up with it in her hand; a nasty-looking little business with a mother-of-pearl handle. I jerked it away from her and stood back.

"That'll be all!" I said. "Quit, the two of you, and come on. We'll kill a bottle and say no more about it."

Well, that seemed to quiet them down a bit, although they were still snapping and snarling for quite a while as we walked along the beach. I wasn't happy, I give you my word. Ginger's tongue had run away with her, and I thought I knew now what that trapped-rabbit look of Mary Shirriff's meant. And another thing—I'd my notions, taking everything by and large, who'd killed friend Horrocks.

So that I was in considerable of a stew as I walked the pair of them into the store and set out bottle and glass.

Lindquist had fallen silent, and now he sat across in a chair, looking at me again.

"Sydney, eh?" he said all at once. "You know dis game, maybe?"

He waved his arm around the store and I shrugged. "Oh, sure," I said. "Not up here, though. Down the islands—Tonga-way, mostly."

Lindquist spat. "Yah, and this ain't Tonga," he said. "You gotta watch out here. Plenty bums around—"

He was sounding me out, and I felt Ginger watching me as well. I grinned over my glass.

"Plenty bums anywhere," I said.

Well, I could see him mulling that one over, and not getting much out of it. There was something the two of them wanted to find out from me, or about me, and I didn't feel like accommodating them just yet. Anyway, right then I was a good deal too worried over Jim the blackfellow, and where he was.

He'd done his vanishing act again, it looked like; but I'd no manner of guarantee he wouldn't bob up any minute, with that tell-tale, scared-stiff mug that'd give the whole works away in ten seconds.

No, it wasn't comfortable, sitting there, fencing. I thought I'd try a bit of the pump-handle myself.

"This guy Horrocks," I said. "How'd he go wrong, eh?"

They'd been waiting for that. Ginger laughed, and Lindquist showed his yellow teeth.

"Him?" he said. "No good, he was. No good all the time. This, see?" and he tapped his glass. "And this." He made a raking, grabbing movement with crooked fingers, as if hauling in coin. "No good, yah!"

"Uh-huh?" I said. "Cashed in and bolted, was that it?"

"Yah!" he agreed. "Bolted. They tell you so in Sydney, no?"

"Sure," I nodded. "That's the story there. He's supposed to have cleared out north some place, into the Dutch islands."

That last was pure invention, of course, but it was comic to see the relief in both their faces. I guess they'd been having some nasty moments, with idea of a police investigation hereabouts.

"Damn fool!" Lindquist muttered. "They get him, sure—"

"Oh, I guess so," I said, and conversation languished.

IT WAS Ginger that started it off again. She'd been slumped in her chair, guzzling the liquor, and looking alternately at Lindquist and me.

"Well, you seem a nice boy, sure enough," she said. "Not much fear of your skipping out, eh?"

I laughed. "Oh, I'm all right,," I said. "Give and take, that's my motto. I'm broad-minded enough, I reckon."

I thought for a minute they'd swallow the bait and come across with whatever it was—proposition, hint, or what not—they had simmering in their minds all the time. But no, they were more cagey than that. Ginger hoisted herself to her feet with a great flouncing of draperies.

"We'll go, Jake," she said. "It's dark, and those damned natives ain't worth a damn. Come on—drink up an' get a case; he'll let you have one."

I began to see, a little, some of the reasons for Horrocks' dicky balances. Ginger was airily certain about that case of gin—so certain that I knew the trick had been pulled before. Still, I handed over gladly enough, as an investment, and Lindquist shouldered it down to the beach.

"We'll be seein' you some more," he said in his great growling bass. "Be good, yah!"

He grinned again, and with Ginger throwing me one of her Sydney honky-tonk smiles they pushed out into the dark lagoon. For quite a while afterwards I could hear the two of them talking; they were in a squabble again, and very well I knew what it was they were squabbling over. Mary Shirriff was in this, the poor kid, and I made up my mind then and there that I'd have to look into all that business, and pretty soon, too.

But in the meantime, there was this Jim, and I was wondering still where he might be. I went back to the store, and got my answer right away, for he came crawling out of some hidie-hole or other under the veranda, looking like a private view of the devil and fairly sweating with terror.

"Him gone?" he croaked, pawing at my arm.

"You bet!" I said. "Him gone. You glad, eh?"

Well, he was glad all right, that poor lummox was. He drew a kind of a deep breath, and was hobbling off to the kitchen again, when I stopped him.

"Hey!" I said. "You tell me true, eh? Him kill Horrocks?"

He stared at me, as if he thought I was a lunatic. "You no believe?" he said. "Kill Horrocks—kill you too, sometime."

Says you, I thought to myself. "Why him kill Horrocks?" I went on.

But there again I hit my head against that stone wall of his. He didn't know, or he wouldn't tell—and the chances were a million to one it was the last. He knew, but he was scared to talk. I tried another line.

"You no walk good," I said, pointing to his legs. "Some fella him bust you, maybe—"

It was a mistake, for at that he pretty well passed out altogether. If I'd wanted any more evidence that he'd once been readied for the pot in some hell's kitchen of the maneaters, I needn't have gone any further. All he could do was sit and shiver and make strangling noises in his throat, as if the bare recollection of that experience choked him; and at last, out of sheer pity, I had to let him alone.

I scratched up another tins-and-gin apology for a meal, and sat over it a long while, thinking. In a sense there wasn't any real problem any more, for I'd enough stuff anyway on Mr. Jake Lindquist to hang him and probably Ginger as well, and I'd also a very fair notion of what might have been his motives for removing Horrocks.

But it was some of the side-issues that had me guessing. This Jim, for instance; it still had to be explained why he'd gone off to cover up that grave, or try to. Was he in cahoots with someone, and if so, with whom? Blind alley number one.

Then Whisky Jack. Where did that very-far-from-crazy doctor fit in? Somewhere, sure—like Jim, he knew lots and wouldn't talk. And he was smart, too. Beside him Jake Lindquist and his Ginger stood out for what they were, a pair of clumsy, murderous hicks.

And then Mary Shirriff—I came back to her with a jerk and a curse. Lindquist was after her—but did Whisky Jack know? And if he knew, and said nothing, then what? There were certainly some smelly alleys to nose into thereabouts.

And meanwhile and lastly, there was the case of Steve Harkness himself. Poor twisted, half-cooked Jim had hit it right enough; I'd be the next on Jake Lindquist's little list. If I didn't watch out.

CHAPTER V

THE POT-PIE BOYS

I GUESS I must have sat there for more than an hour, turning over the situation and getting nowhere with it. It was black dark outside now, with only the line of the reef showing across the veranda rail. The surf was one glimmer of phosphorus, and outside it the rock-ledges gave off a sullen, smoky haze of light. Away in the distance, that volcano, whatever its name was, glowed like a huge cigar-tip. It was peaceful enough, and by and by I pretty nearly dropped asleep.

And then, all at once, I was sitting up, staring. There was something out there in the murk, something that moved; slowly and with a trail of radiance behind it, it came across my front from right to left, on the water and just inside the reef. At that distance, it might have been a terrific water-snake.

I'd seen such things before, though, down among the southern groups—canoes moving in file at night, an ordinary spectacle almost anywhere. But this place wasn't ordinary, and I put out my pipe and went down the garden again for a closer look.

It was worth it. Out there, maybe half a mile away, they came along—I counted eight of them, their paddles flashing like great silver legs and their combined wake a pool of liquid fire. There must have been, I figured, thirty or forty men in each of them, and they were the big sailing outriggers that can, if they're put to it, do twelve or fourteen knots under sail.

I was to remember that little fact later, and be sorry I had.

But just now I was more interested in what all this outfit was doing this hot black night. They were dead quiet, for one thing,

and that's odd with Papuans, or Kanakas either, in a boat. Generally they'll sing and cut up more monkeyshines than a circus. But these birds here never made a sound. There was only the thud and swish of the paddles, and the clucking ripples of their bow waves. You could hear it plainly across the flat, invisible water.

"Christmas!" I said. "Now what, huh?"

A voice answered me, so close that I jumped a foot in spite of myself.

"Rum crowd, eh?"

It was Whisky Jack, and he was standing not twenty feet from me. He'd come up along the beach while I was rubbering at those canoes, and I could have kicked myself at letting him, or anyone else, catch me that way.

"Hello there!" I said. "Didn't see you, Doc."

He chuckled in that easy-going, devil-may-care manner of his.

"Oh, you'll learn all right," he said, and left me to find out the meaning while he strolled over to me. "Yes," he said, squinting out at the lagoon. "Quite a procession, eh?"

"For Pete's sake," I said, "what's all the celebration?"

He was silent for a moment. "You're a stranger up here, of course," he said finally. "Yes, you are, or you wouldn't be asking that question. What d'you suppose they're after, Harkness?"

"Damned if I know," I lied. "What is it, Doc?"

He thought again for a minute and then shot another one at me.

"What d'you make of Ginger and friend Jake?" he asked.

"Mighty little," I said shortly, and steered him back to the point. "What are those guys playing at out there?"

He said, "No. On the whole we'll let you find that out, my boy. It won't hurt you to stub your toes a bit. You're too *zubberdusty*, my boy—too damned sharp about the edges. Want a trifle of toning down."

I shrugged. "Suits me, Doc," I said. "You don't have to tell me a single thing you don't want to. Anyway, I know already. I'm not a fool."

He was silent again, and I could feel him studying me in the dark. "D'ye know, I

wouldn't count too much on that, either," he said finally. "Just listen here a minute, and try to forget you're the bright young man, will you? Remember what I said up at the house?"

"About going slow, eh?" I said. "Well?"

"I say it again," he almost whispered. "Not offended, are you?"

"Hell, no!" I laughed. "The beach is free for all, I guess. I can't stop you talking, Doc."

Again he was silent for a moment. "A friendly tip," he said slowly. "You won't take it, eh?"

"Yeah, I might, at that," I said. "If I was sure it was friendly. If I was sure of any damned thing, in fact. But I'm not—"

"You are a fool," he said.

"Nix!" I said. "We had that angle out before. I'm not a fool. And it seems to me we're wasting time, running in circles. If you're aiming to scare me, quit. I don't scare that easy."

He made a queer little noise, between a snort and a laugh. "Oh, all right," he said. "If that's the way you feel about it, of course—"

And with that he turned on his heel and went marching away; I could see his white shoulders glimmering against the ink-black sand. What's more, he was walking straight now. He was sober as a judge.

WELL, no fooling, the situation lacked clarity, as I've heard it put. It was one hell of a crazy jigsaw puzzle, as a matter of fact, and getting worse every minute. I didn't even try and figure out what Whisky Jack had been up to, coming along like this. Only I was sure of one thing now; he was up to the neck in whatever this cockeyed proposition was here—and he was dead set on getting me out of it.

Well, I thought, to hell with you! I'm staying put, just for that.

I turned round to have another look at those canoes. They'd gone swinging and glittering past long ago, and now they were just a crawling blob of light, a couple of miles or more along the inside of the reef. But as I watched them they turned—turned shorewards, and vanished behind a spit of land that jutted out into the lagoon.

Plenty of times one makes one's mind up on a whimsy, a passing flash of wilfulness one's sorry for afterwards. That kind of affair hit me now—I said, I'll see what that outfit are about before I sleep, or know why. I began to move, quietly and cautiously, along shore.

Things were dead still again now. Even the lapping of the water on the sand seemed to be hushed. A sliver of moon, yellow and sickly-looking, away over the sea, only made things worse. In that first shadowy half-mile I stopped, I daresay, a dozen times, my heart hammering at the back of my teeth. Steve Harkness, Esquire, was mighty near jitters just then, I give you my word.

And then, all at once, something cut loose that really did bring me up with a round turn.

Ahead, out of sight round the point there, a racket had started—the kind of nerve-busting yellyhoo one hears once in a lifetime and doesn't forget. I stood holding my breath and listening to it, because I knew what it was.

Long Pig Lagoon! That name jumped into my head. And here it was, and here were Jim's friends, pulling one of their parties. I'd never seen one, naturally, and I didn't want to—much. My knees knocked together, and my tongue stuck. For a nickel I'd have turned and bolted.

And yet, I had to see. I had to get a squint at all this. There was Horrocks to be thought of—and Mary Shirriff. I went, shivering a little, up into the woods.

I needn't have worried. The boys were on the job right enough. From the branches of a big tree, not a hundred yards away, I got an eyeful.

The whole expanse of sand—it was still the same gleaming black beach—was lit up and blazing with a dozen great fires. In their flickering light, against the dim background of the sea, these fellows were dancing; a-shouting, stamping routine in lines, in and out and around, to the accompaniment of the thump and clash of hollow bamboo-stems, shell-filled, beaten on the ground, and a kind of fee-fo-fum chanty whose savage harmonies chilled my blood and started my neck-hairs crawling again.

You could see what they were; naked, fierce-hearted aborigines, out on the spree. The kind of thing pious missionaries and

tomfool governments had turned the blind eye to for years. The kind of thing that in its way ended the careers of Captain Cook and La Peyrouse and all the rest of the early guys out here—the people who ran across primordial man and thought he was a curiosity, something to be played with.

Up in my tree, I didn't think these dancing lunatics were to be played with, you can bet your shirt.

Because I could see other things than the fires and the dance. They'd the makings of their party with them, all handy. Clear in the light of the fires you could see them—a couple of trussed bundles, under guard. I could have sworn I saw their staring, hopeless eyes, heard their panic-stricken, gasping breath.

But I was too far for that; it was just my white man's imagination, kindled by the kind of spectacle one sees at the crisis of a bad dream.

What I did see, though, and this wasn't any imagination, was something else—a pile of gear to the landward side of the row of fires, and half a dozen tall buckos stalking to and fro by it. I began to consider this and wonder what it was; and then I saw a party come up from one of the canoes, and knew.

There were four of them, and between them they carried an oblong affair—heavy, by the way they staggered and wavered under its weight. They set it down with the rest of the pile, and I swore to myself in delighted realization. If that object wasn't a trader's kist, one of the wooden boxes you'll find all over the Pacific, then, I said, Joe was dead and Sal a widder. I'd seen far too many of them before.

Well, and then? Trader's kists spelt trade goods—the produce of these islands. Shell and coral and such, the more precious things a trader loves to deal in. The things, I said again, Horrocks hadn't been able to get his hooks on—

And with that I was down out of my tree. Once more the whimsy, the wild notion hit me. I had to see, to be certain. Because if this stuff was trade goods, here in the middle of a barbecue, I saw a ray of light on my mystery. And in that instant, crouched flat to the ground among the tree-roots, I had another vision.

No, nothing spooky now, nothing about which there was any doubt at all. Only a monstrous bearded figure, striding and straddling among those buckos and chiefs there with the masks, his huge head outlined against the firelight. Lindquist—as I lived by bread, Jake Lindquist!

That finished it, for me. Now I *had* to be sure, to complete the final link in my half-guessed-at chain of supposings that were turning into facts. I hugged the ground like a worm, and with my nose in the muddy leaves wriggled and squirmed along the edge of the trees.

AS I went, I was watching the big fellow. He was pretty busy, it seemed, in some sort of corroboree with another enormous figure, crowned with a parrot's-head mask and ring-striped with all manner of fancy tattoo and clay markings. The big noise, I figured, the high chief of these long pig merchants; judging by the way he gestured and waved his arms, Jake Lindquist wasn't doing all the talking in that trade, either. There were ten or a dozen others in the group, every one of them topped off with some kind of a fantastic head-gear. But Parrot's-head was the big boy, the spokesman, and friend Jake was dealing only with him.

They drifted up and down the beach there, in furious argument, and it gave me my chance to slip closer. I hadn't to get very close, at that, to see what I wanted to see; for Jake Lindquist himself gave me the office. He turned suddenly and strode over to the heap of gear on the sand, and flung open the lid of one of the kists. Next minute he was standing there with his hands full of stuff that years of trading had taught me to recognize.

I nearly gave myself away by whistling, too. For this stuff was the real goods, the kind of thing traders dream about, nights—coral and shell by the handful, and if there weren't pearls some place mighty handy, I was a Dutchman. I'd got my answer now to why John Horrocks' pitiful little ledger had been a tale of failure all those months—and moreover, I figured, why he'd been wiped out. Yes, and who'd done it, too.

Well, I went away from there. There didn't seem to me to be any sense in my

staying to see the barbecue. I'd to get back to that store again, too, it occurred to me. Chances were I'd been spied on, anyway—watched. They wouldn't miss many tricks, this lot.

GOING back, I fairly hustled; down through the trees, and on to the dark beach again. Once there I took to my heels and ran, as I'd never run before. I was in good trim, all right, but I was panting when I pulled up, a quarter-mile short of the store, and began to consider. Maybe one or other of them, Whisky Jack or even Ginger, was waiting for me there. It wasn't beyond that red-headed lady of joy to plug a bullet into one, I was sure enough.

I reconnoitered the place carefully, and in five minutes I was glad I had. I'd got company, all right.

From the scrub at the sand's edge I could look up the little garden at the blank face of the house, just visible in the light of that sickly, dying moon. And as I watched it, someone moved—the merest flick of a shadow, but a movement. A woman, too, I said to myself. There was the distinct flutter of draperies.

Well, I got out my pistol. If this was Ginger on the lookout for me, two could play at that game. I don't think I'd any particular regrets or chivalry just at that instant. After what I'd seen and heard of the lady, she didn't rate much more consideration than a wildcat. If it was to be her or me, I knew which was going back to Sydney.

And then, from my hiding-place, I heard a sound that brought me up all standing again. With straining ears I caught it again, clear and distinct—and next instant I was up that garden in twenty rushing strides and had grabbed her in my arms.

"What in thunder are you doing here?" I demanded, and almost shook her in the intensity of my relief.

CHAPTER VI

MIDNIGHT PARADE

SHE clung to me, shivering and shaking. "T-take me away from here!" she whispered. "Take me away!"

And that was strictly all I could get out of her for the best part of a minute. Somehow or other I half-dragged, half-led her up the veranda steps and into the dark storeroom. My chair was still there, and I set her down in it.

"Now," I said under my breath, "what's happened? Talk quick, sister— Where's your dad, first?"

"He's gone," she said. "Out in the canoe—"

Sure, I said to myself, and don't I know where he's gone to? Queer that I'd missed him, down there at the pot-pie beach. But he'd been there some place, certain.

"Yeah?" I said. "He often go off this way?"

I daresay I sounded a good deal more hard-boiled than I felt, but this wasn't any time for gush. I think Mary felt that, too; this cold-douche kind of stuff hit her, for her voice had stiffened a lot when she answered.

"Yes," she said. "Often—whenever there's a corroboree. Did you see the canoes?"

"I'll say I did," I chuckled, and told her the rest of it. She heard me out, and I think that tale hit her, too, for I didn't mince many words.

"But—" she said, and stopped. "Cannibals? There aren't such things any more."

"You're telling me," I said. "Say, how long have you been hereabouts, anyway? You're not just hep to things, for a native!"

At that she began to cry again. "It's only a month," she said. "I've—I've been in school in Australia since I was six."

Well, I don't know why it was, but that piece of information finally got my goat. I'd have wrung Whisky Jack's silly neck there and then, if I'd had him between my hands. As it was I managed to bite back some of the richest, sultriest language that had ever bubbled up in my throat.

"I see," I said dryly. "No wonder you're kind of out of touch. Well, so am I, a trifle, kid. But I won't be, so very much longer—"

She broke in on me with her first outcry again. "Take me away from here! I'm scared."

I reached out in the dark and gripped her hands. She'd be off in hysterics in a minute, I thought, and we couldn't have that.

"Easy, easy!" I whispered. "We'll get you out of this, safe and sound; sure we will, sister. Only, quit the panic stuff; we got to think, kid! Fast, too."

Well, we had. This was a spot, all right. Whisky Jack and Lindquist up at the party yonder, and Lord knew how long the goings-on there were going to hold them. Mary, here with me—

"See here!" I said, and I made it as gentle as I could and yet sound as if I meant it. "You've got just one thing to do, right now, and that's—go home!"

I felt her shudder again, and stiffen, and cut in with some more stuff, pitched in the key of orders rather than sweet reason. She'd have to be jolted, and hard, to get her back to that swell bungalow along the beach there.

"C'mon, sister!" I said, and dragged her to her feet. "At home and in bed for yours, pronto—before your dad comes home with the milk. If he catches you on the tiles at three in the morning, gal, it'll be just too bad—"

WITH a mixture of blarney, bluff, and bounce I got her out of the store and away. She didn't say much, but I could feel she was terrified clear through at the notion of more of what she'd already had plenty of, and I felt nine separate kinds of a heel. But there wasn't anything else to do, anyway. I couldn't take her under my wing right then and there. Much as I might have liked to do it.

Ten minutes hustling took us within hail of Whisky Jack's, and I stopped her.

"Now," I said, "off with you and no questions asked. You nip inside there, baby, and under the bedclothes quicker than wink, see? You've not been out of the house, see? Been asleep—never opened an eye.

"Don't know anything about anything. Just a plain silly mug of a girl from Australia. Got that, Mary?"

I reckon it was me using her given name like that—but she put some kind of a smile. Lopsided and watery enough, I daresay, but I think she'd begun to have a flicker of hope. Anyway, she knew I was for her, and I guess she may have thought I looked capable.

"Y-yes," she whispered. "All right—but you'll come back—"

I pushed her by the shoulder, and with that she was away, her white skirt showing like a ghost in the dark. As for me, I didn't stop to watch her. I turned and ran like all hell back along the beach towards the store. Here was another time I'd to get there first, by the Lord!

Well, I did—just. I'd no more than got my breath, lying between my blankets, when something out in the lagoon made me prick up my ears and listen. It was the sound of a paddle, creaking in its grommet; very faint, for whoever it was didn't choose to give himself away. But my senses were all at full cock for just this sort of thing, and I caught it. I grinned and huddled down under the covers.

By and by, there were footsteps in the garden, and a cautious kind of a hail. Whisky Jack, to be sure—I took no notice of it, but snored gently. He came on to the veranda and stood listening; I could hear him breathe.

"Harkness!" he called again.

I rolled over, with an almighty show of sleepiness. "Uh-huh?" I mumbled. "Whaz-zat? Who's there?"

It took him in all right, for he walked into the front room. "Shirriff, Harkness," he said. "Sorry to have to turn you out like this—but have you got any laudanum in those stores of yours? There's one of my fool boys down with a man-size bellyache, and I seem to have run myself out."

Well, that was a pretty snide excuse—for a doctor; but I let it go and tumbled out of bed.

"Sure," I said drowsily. "Just a second—there's a whole raft of it somewhere around."

I lit a lamp, yawning and dug him out a bottle of pain-killer, while he stood in the middle of the floor looking at me. I guess I must have seemed fairly convincing, for he gave me a smile as he took the bottle.

"Thanks," he said. "You better get back to bed. And, by the way—no ill-feelings, I hope."

"Devil a bit!" I said. "Anything I can do for you, Doc, just call on me."

He nodded. "Much obliged, I'm sure," he said. "Good-night, old man!"

And he walked out. I went to the window and took a look, to see if he'd the canoe with him still. But they weren't any fools, this lot. Whoever had come with him had paddled it away while we were talking, and Whisky Jack swung round on to the sand and away towards his house, natural as you please. I'd a little bet with myself, of course, that the other man was Lindquist; but he'd gone, and there was no sign of life on the lagoon. Buwi Island was quiet again now; only the surf still murmured out on the reef, and the volcano far away still glowed and faded, more like a big cigar-tip than ever.

Well, I wasn't anybody's fool either, and the way I crawled back into that bed was a masterpiece, although I say it. I was broad awake and ready for anything, as a matter of fact; but in two minutes I was lying there in a heap, and dead to the wide to any outsider. Just as well, too; I'd not had my last visitor yet.

It may have been twenty minutes or forty—I'd lost track of time—when there was another tiny sound. This time it was close to the house, and I knew what it was without puzzling over it at all. Someone else was coming up—outside my window this time.

THEY were moving stealthily, and they were pretty close by the time I heard them. I slipped a hand under my pillow, closed it on the pistol-butt, and watched the glimmering square of the panes. If this was going to be a second case of John Horrocks, well, two could play at that game. Nobody was going to bump me off without my knowing all about it.

I lay perfectly still, and in a minute I could hear the stranger breathing. The top of a head showed over the lower sill, and slowly, very slowly, a face.

It wasn't anyone I knew, that was certain right away—and it wasn't in any way beautiful. But it was a white man's face; a triangular, wolfish little face with a grin I could see even in that light. It stopped where it was, and I thought this was the time for some action.

"Stay where you are!" I said. "Or I'll blow your head off!"

Well, you might have figured that a man

getting that kind of a welcome would do something—drop down, or duck—but not this fellow. He grinned wider, and hoisted himself coolly on to the sill.

"Easy, cully!" he said under his breath. "Easy, there. I ain't a-goin' to eat yer—"

By this time I was sitting up, keeping him covered.

"Stop right there!" I said. "Where's your visiting-card?"

At that he cackled wickedly. "Why, s'welp me!" he said in his cockney's lingo. "If I ain't gone an' left it 'ome on the grand pianner! Well, well—ain't that somethin' now? Griggs is the nyme, cully—'Enery Griggs, an' glad ter myke yer acquaintance. You'll excoose me callin' on yer unceremonious-like, but I 'ad me reasons. Fact is, you're goin' to be *puckarowed*—murdered, that's to say—an' pretty quick too!"

This little guy took my fancy somehow. "You're telling me?" I said. "Well, climb in, Mr. Griggs, and let's have a look at you. And no funny business, either, or it won't be me that's murdered!"

He scrambled in through the window, moving like an eel. I could see, in the faint radiance from outside, that he was a small-built, wiry fellow, in a ragged singlet and pants, dirty as all hell, but with a kind of swagger about him I liked at once. A tough little egg, I thought, fumbling for a match.

But he stopped me right away. "Crimes, no!" he said under his breath. "This 'ere's strickly incog, this visit. Private an' confidential, if we don't want to 'ave 'em monkeydoodlin' with our intestines, or slittin' our gullets, the two of us. In the dark it is, mister, if yer please!"

I put the pistol down. "O. K.!" I said. "You'll find most of a bottle of gin on the table in there. Help yourself, and give me a snort."

AT THAT he sucked his breath in with a hiss. "Ker-rimes!" he said. "Now that's what I call sense, cocky! You Yanks, you got a mighty neat way o' handin' it out, s'trewth you have." There was a gurgle from the direction of the table, and he handed the bottle to me.

"Thanks," I said. "And now—what's all this about murder? Who's going to hurt a quiet, inoffensive gink like me? And why come in here, gum-shoe, at three in the morning?"

I was sounding him out, for I didn't know yet how much he was familiar with; but I might have saved myself the trouble. He chuckled softly.

"Yus, you're clever, ain't yer?" he said. "Look 'ere, Mister Yankee-doodle, you just turn off that tap with me, d'ye see? I s'pose yer don't think I knows a thing or two, an' chance it—what 'appened to 'Orrocks, f'r instance, an' 'oo dug 'im up, s'afternoon? You're shovin' yer conk into a whole lot of trouble, cully, that's wot, an' yer don't know it!"

"Says you?" I came back at him.

"Yus, says me!" he retorted. "An' that's that, young feller! About a week you'll last with this 'ere mob. They're on to you already."

"Who's they?" I asked. There was a poisonous snap and certainty about him I didn't altogether like. He knew a whole lot too much.

Now he laughed outright, secrecy or no. "'Oo d'ye s'pose?" he said. "John the Baptist an' the Queen of Sheba? Jake Lindquist an' Ginger, y'fool! They'll 'ave yer, sure as eggs, Mister Steve 'Arkness, an' you won't know nothin' about it, no more than 'Orrocks done. An' it ain't no use your pullin' faces, an' thinkin' about that little gel o' Whisky Jack's neither. You look after your own skin first, an' then mebbe we'll show this lot a bit o' somethin'. Two year I been 'ere, waitin' for someone to come along that 'as a bit o' stuff in 'im, which 'Orrocks there 'adn't.

"An' now when yer does turn up, wot 'appens? Why, yer goes a-grave-diggin' an' a-fossickin' around to beat fifty—with Jake an' that red-'aired wench of 'is watchin' yer right along!"

"To hell with that!" I said. "They weren't watching me."

Griggs grabbed the bottle and took another gulp at the gin. "'S'all *you* know, cully!" he said with a wink. "You ain't only 'alf born yet!"

"Cut that out!" I told him in a temper. "How d'you know they were watching me, anyway?"

He sniffed. "'Ow do I know?" he said scornfully. "'Cos I can't 'elp knowin',

Yank—that's why. I'm livin' with the two of 'em!"

CHAPTER VII

MR. LINDQUIST PAYS A CALL

WELL, I guess a good puff of wind just then would have blown me heels over apex.

"Wh-what's that?" I stammered. "Living with 'em?"

Griggs picked his teeth with a pin and nodded. "Yus," he said. "You 'eard what I said. I've been livin' with that glory-halleluja outfit, better part of a couple o' years."

"But why in thunder—" I began, and stopped. The thing had me buffaloed all right. Griggs let me stew for a minute and then chuckled in his scarecrow fashion.

"Never you mind, cully!" he said. "Never you mind! What's my business is my business, an' don't you fergit it. But there's this—an' that's why I'm 'ere a-visitin' you, 'stead o' keepin' compny wiv that Sydney-side, ginger-'aired you-know-what across there—you an' me, we're goin' to chum together, Yank, an' do some cleanin' up around these parts. There's things goin' on 'ere that ain't pretty, as mebbe you've seen—an' it's time they was stopped. You an' me, we're goin' to stop 'em—if you're game!"

"I'm game," I said, for I was beginning to get my balance again. "But how, what, when and so on?"

He got to his feet and finished the rest of the gin bottle noisily.

"I reckon that'll be enough for now," he said coolly. "This 'ere call's been a ruddy sight too long as it is. I'll be seein' yer again shortly, an' we'll fix up the strategy an' tactics—but just now it's gettin' too bloomin' near dawn for my likin'. I'm off, cocky, or I'll be 'avin' words with the copper at the corner—"

He wrung my hand, surprisingly, chuckled again, and was gone before I could say a word. I lay where I was, sleepless, and watched the sky lighten slowly. Wondered, too, what would be the next affair this island madhouse would throw up to me. Griggs was altogether beyond me; of all the off-line, out-of-true things to date, he was the king-pin. Try as I would, I couldn't make him render.

Except that, somehow, he impressed me. He'd all kinds of guts, to begin with; he was pure dynamite, right from the word 'go. Coming from anyone else, I'd have dismissed the tale he pitched me—what there was of it so far—as the merest hooey. But—I've used the word about him before, and it's the right one—there was a poisonous strength in this Henry Griggs, and a foul-tongued sincerity that made me wonder whether, after all, I hadn't got the partner I was looking for in what lay ahead.

Finally, with the sun bright in the sky, I quit figuring and got up. There was still no sign of friend Jim. He'd vanished, it seemed, since the evening before, and in a way I wasn't sorry. He was no ornament around the place, poor devil, with his shattered, crippled legs and helpless grin.

I scratched up a meal, lit a pipe, and began fixing the store again in a half-hearted kind of a fashion. Judging by Horrocks' note-book, I wasn't liable to get a great deal of trade coming in; but it was just as well to be ready, in case, and anyhow I had to have something to do, beyond chewing my fingers and mulling over puzzles that wouldn't work out.

Anyway, as I looked at it, I was due for some visitors, sometime in the day. They wouldn't let me alone here.

THEY did, all the morning. The mists rose off the sea, and the sun began to hit hard; but there was no sign of life anywhere on the lagoon or the tumbling sea outside it. Once I walked to the bottom of the garden again, to look right and left along the beach. It was deserted, a shining strip of blackness, and Whisky Jack's house, just visible there at the end of it, was deserted too. I found myself thinking of Mary Shirriff there, and her booze-fighting, brow-beating old scamp of a father.

Privately, I began to set him down on the books as probably the worst of the crowd. He might very well be the brains behind the whole scheme—the scheme I'd already pretty well doped out to explain things. This outfit, in cahoots with the man-eaters, the pot-pie boys; winking at their little

games, and steering the police away, and in return getting the natives' trade. If I wasn't mistaken, that was what I'd seen going on on the shore there, in the early morning hours.

Yes, that was it, I decided—and that was why John Horrocks went west the way he'd done. He lost his trade, and then his life, because he knew too much. Talked too much, too, probably. I didn't trouble to consider whether Mannie Silberstein was in on things too. It wouldn't be out of character with Mannie.

But this doctor—he was in it for sure, with the Lindquists and maybe old Andries as well. I ticked that off as a certainty, and sat there, mulling over the Griggs riddle, when here came my visitor. Jake Lindquist himself, alone in a canoe.

He came paddling along the lagoon and jumped ashore. I didn't run down and meet him, but waited until he was striding, gorilla-fashion, up the garden. Then I got up.

"Hello there!" I called.

He stopped, eyeing me. "Hello!" he said gruffly. "Gettin' fixed, eh? You sleep some pretty good, no?"

I think he was trying me out to see if I'd blink at the question. If he was, he didn't get any satisfaction. I got up, stretching.

"Sure!" I said. "Like a baby. Why not?"

That flabbergasted him a bit, for he said nothing for a moment, but came into the veranda and sat down.

"You see der canoes?" he asked all at once.

I grinned. "Yeah, I saw 'em," I said. "Lot o' monkey-work goin' on among the natives, eh? What was it—Christmas party or some such?"

He seemed ticked at the notion. "Yah, Christmas party!" he said, with an attempt at a chuckle. Then he fell silent again.

"Have a snort?" I said after a minute. "Dry work, paddling—"

He shook his big bull's head. "No," he said. "Listden, Harkness," he began suddenly. "I gotta talk to you."

"Talk away!" I said. "What's on your mind?"

It wasn't making it any easier for him, this back-and-forth, chop-logic stuff. I think he found me a good deal more difficult than he'd counted on, for there was a scowl on his big face and he got up.

"You sleep all night?" he shot out all at once.

I stared at him owlishly. "Why sure!" I said. "Told you so a minute ago—never stirred, but once when the Doc came in for a bottle of dope. He's a boy sick—"

He interrupted me with a kind of snarl. "Yah!" he said. "Und you hear nodings—see nodings?"

I pretended to fly off the handle, mildly. "Say, see here," I complained, "what *is* this, anyway? You tryin' to be funny, or what? What was there to hear or see?"

He was still doubtful, in two minds whether I was bluffing or a fool, and I let him go on so. A baby's behind wasn't any more innocent than my face just then, I'll bet a nickel. And it touched him off, finally and once for all. He stood over me.

"Can der four-flush!" he growled. "You aind't puttin' it over on me, Harkness. Liddle poys, dey tell der truth—"

He reached out a hand like a spade and caught me by the shoulder.

"Now," he said, "how much you know, eh?"

I let him alone; just looked up at him blankly. "What the hell are you playing at?" I grinned. I was enjoying myself fine.

He wasn't, though. His grip tightened until I'd hard work to keep my face. "Talk, liddel mans!" he said—he was growing more guttural every minute. "Talk—or I fix you!"

I slipped away from him and out of the chair. "Quit that, Lindquist!" I said. "Enough's enough and a joke's a joke. I don't know what in thunder you're driving at, and I don't much care, but you're not manhandling me. Drop it, d'ye hear?"

He stood looking at me, his head shoved forward and his great hairy hands swinging.

"Funny boy, yah!" he sneered. "So—you don't know nodings, eh?"

"Not a thing," I said cheerfully. "Not any more than John Horrocks did. So what d'you think of that?"

I slipped the name in more to see what he'd say to it than for any other reason, but it certainly worked wonders. He stopped his glowering and glaring, and I could see him thinking fast.

"So!" he said after a minute. "So-o-o!"

We were watching one another like a pair of cats by this time, and Jake Lindquist wasn't the only one whose think-box was doing overtime just then, I'll tell you. I'd my hand down in the chair by my side on the butt of my gun, for I wasn't going to have him jump me that way. What I was wondering at the moment was whether our friend the doctor had told him I'd found Horrocks—and just how much there was in Griggs' hint that I'd been watched, anyway. Plenty depended on either of those questions.

But Jake Lindquist—a good deal to my surprise—went off on another tack. He grinned, showing his big yellow dog-teeth behind his beard.

"You see Jim, eh?" he said.

It took the wind out of my sails for a moment, this sudden change of subject. I blinked at him.

"Jim?" I said. "No, he's gone. Where is he, d'ye know?"

Well, at that he roared with laughter—put his head back and fairly bayed like a hound. Something, my innocence maybe, seemed to amuse him so much it hurt, and he clutched his ribs and stamped about the veranda. The performance began to get under my skin.

"What the hell d'you think you're celebrating?" I snapped.

He went on with his song and dance. "Ho, ho, ho!" he roared. "Where's Jim, eh? Dot's a good one, dot iss!"

I stopped, staring at him, for all at once it had come to me—where Jim was. What they'd done to him, and why. That had been him I'd seen, trussed up there on the beach—

"You lousy skunk!" I yelled. And Lindquist whipped out a gun and fired at me at about five feet range. He'd been waiting for me, to get me off-balance.

Well, I felt a burning, searing sensation somewhere about my middle ribs, and the shock set me back on my heels. I don't know if Lindquist thought he'd got me for keeps or not, but he didn't fire again, but rushed me, roaring. Next moment we were locked together.

That was a fight. I knew in a second he hadn't hurt me—the slug skidded round my ribs, as a matter of fact—but I knew, too, he'd do things to me with his bare hands if I didn't watch out. Gorilla was right for Jake Lindquist. He was a humdinger, that Swede.

But as it happened, I knew something about rough-and-tumble as well. Across in California old Yoshio, the Jap, had put me through my paces, ten years before, when I was starting out to see the world—and he'd given me something to fit this case. Jiu-jutsu's clean fighting, of course; but the Japs have got angles on the other kind of stuff that'd surprise you.

I ducked suddenly forward in his arms, and butted him in the teeth with the top of my head. I heard them go, and the grunt of pain and fury as his head went back. Then I got the heels of my hands under his chin, deep in the shagginess of his beard, and began to press upwards with every ounce I'd got, one knee in his groin.

Properly done, there's only one answer to it. The attacker's got to shift his grip and get those hands away, or fall bodily over backwards, or end up with a dislocated neck. Yoshio had even shown me the particular twist that would displace the vertebrae, and as I put it on Jake Lindquist let out a spluttering yell that showed me I hadn't forgotten the art, at any rate. His arms slackened around my middle, and he staggered; I cut him across the eyes with the flat of one hand to confuse him, and the next moment I was free, and he was looking straight down the muzzle of my pistol.

"Yeah!" I said. "An' that's goin' to be about enough out of you! Turn round, or I'll drill you!"

He was looking at me in a kind of stupid daze, as if he'd had the shock of his life—I daresay he had, at that, for he fancied that gorilla strength of his a lot, and I don't imagine he'd been seriously tackled before. But he didn't like the pistol, and I daresay he didn't like the looks of me, either, and he did as he was told. I whipped his gun out of his pocket, and laughed.

"Now," I said, "quick march, fellow! There's your canoe—you hop into it and out of this. And the next time you're thinking of any rough stuff, big boy, you pick someone your own size, see? Clear out, or I'll pound hell out of you!"

CHAPTER VIII

WHISKY JACK PRESCRIBES

I STOOD on the beach watching Lindquist paddle away, his revolver in one of my fists and my own in the other, and I'd all I could manage to avoid plugging him in the back as he went.

I was mad, clear through. Not so much at what he'd tried to do to me, as at what he and his stinking crew had done to poor Jim. There wasn't the remotest doubt now who one of those trussed bundles on the beach had been last night. I must have been within twenty yards of him on his way to the horrid barbecue they'd made of him—and the notion, and what it meant, made me see red. I think I'd have taken a chance and finished off Lindquist there and then, if it hadn't been for Mary Shirriff.

It sounds odd, I know, because I'd have removed the one thing in the world she was most afraid of; but I'd other notions for her. To clean up the whole dirty business, and take her out of it—that was the scheme that was filling my mind, to the exclusion of most other things.

Meanwhile, there was the little matter of my ribs. They were beginning to pain me now—and while Jake Lindquist, never looking back, went paddling off along the smooth lagoon, I stripped my shirt and took stock.

As I'd figured, the thing was more of a graze than anything else. The bullet had ripped through the flesh, touched a bone, and that was about all; but Lindquist's clutching arms hadn't done it any particular good, and it was an angry-looking business right now and needed attention.

I figured I'd go back to the store and settle for myself—but then another thought struck me, and I grinned at the humor of it. We had, after all, a doctor handy hereabouts. I shucked myself into my shirt again and sat down to wait till Lindquist was out of sight. No particular sense in letting him see where I was going.

Anyway, I calculated, as his canoe grew smaller and smaller in the distance, I knew where I was with him now. He'd come back—tonight, in all probability—and this time he wouldn't be alone. He knew I knew about Horrocks, and he couldn't let me live, so. If I was going to do anything at all against this outfit, I was going to have to do it quick. I wished I'd got little Griggs handy just then, with some of the "strategy an' tattics" he'd talked about.

MY MIND was on Griggs as I went along the shore to Whisky Jack's, and it wasn't until I was right on top of him that I saw the doctor. He was back at his old game of lecturing to the land-crabs, and once again he was deceptively drunk.

This time I didn't wait for him. "Hey, Doc!" I called.

He swung round to me, blinking. "Oh, it's you?" he said thickly. "Now what's the trouble?"

His eye caught the stain of blood on my shirt, and he sobered visibly.

"Eh?" he queried. "Hello, what's all that? You been up to something?"

I laughed. "Sure," I said. "All kinds of little things. Take a squint at this one, will you? A rat bit me."

He came unsteadily across and fingered around, pulling up my shirt to do it. I heard his hoarse, drink-laden breathing check, and he gave a kind of a suppressed little whistle.

"Bullet, eh?" he said. "Well, I daresay you asked for it. You're a brassy young whelp, anyhow. Where's Jake?"

"Home by now," I said shortly. "With a crick in his neck and some busted teeth. Here's his gun."

Whisky Jack looked at me for a minute under his eyebrows, and I was good and sure that most of this booze business of his was a fake. He wasn't any more drunk, really, than I was.

"You certainly don't waste time," he said dryly. "Come on up and I'll strap that for you."

Well, we went up to the house—no sign of Mary—and he took me into what had once been his surgery—swabbed me out with iodine and stuff, whistling under his breath all the time, and put a Harley Street bandage on. You could tell by the way those quick, unsteady fingers of his moved that he'd been someone at this game; but just now I wouldn't have trusted him very far with his knife.

When he'd done he stepped back.

"Well?" he said. "And now, what's it all about? What put you across Jake Lindquist?"

I wasn't telling him—not then. Anyway, he was liable to know all about it, I reckoned; he and Jake might well have doped the whole affair out between them last night. I looked him in the eye.

"It's time we had a talk," I said.

He was standing there, playing with some kind of a rusty scalpel or other, with his forehead wrinkled and his shock of gray hair all ways at once.

"All right," he said. "If you like. Looks to me as if you wanted talking to badly enough. Come on!" He led the way into his veranda and sat down. There were the usual bottles and glasses on the table, but he didn't offer me a drink or take one himself. It was gloves off now, I felt.

"Well?" he said, gouging me with his eye. "What is it, Harkness?"

I made a great show of being puzzled. "I don't get this," I said. "This guy Lindquist—what's he got against me?"

Whisky Jack shrugged. "That's rather a question," he said. "D'you expect me to dot your i's for you? Ought to be obvious enough, I'd say—"

"You mean Horrocks?"

But he wasn't being cornered that way. He just chuckled.

"Oh, here!" he said. "You can't have me saying yes or no to that one. Officially, I don't know a single thing about Horrocks—except that he's supposed to have cleared out. You did tell me some other yarn, I believe; but after all, it's your yarn. And as for Jake Lindquist, if you've been treading on his corns, it's not much use coming to ask me about it. Is it now?"

WELL, we were headed in for another bout of hit-or-miss stuff and that didn't suit me. I let him have it, fair and square.

"No," I said. "I don't figure it's a damned bit of use, doctor. All things considered."

Now that was putting it straight to him, of course. I saw him blink once, and there was the recognizable old cock of his head again.

"And I wonder," he said very quietly, "just what in hell you mean by that, young man?"

I thought, damn you, we'll see how far you'll go. So I soaked it to him again, and about as directly as I could.

"I mean what I say," I told him. "Lindquist's a friend of yours, isn't he? Maybe a bit more than a friend. Sure you're not giving him away any!"

I'd expected him to blow up at that—fly into a tear, or get a fit of the dignities, maybe. But no; it didn't hit him that way at all. He was sitting deep in his chair, still with his head on one side, looking at me. The smile had gone now.

"You're a clever pup," he said slowly. "I thought once you were like the rest of 'em—smart and noisy and so on; but you've more than that. I'll grant you so much. But you won't take my advice, my boy, and that's going to be fatal, I'm afraid. I told you once—no, twice—to keep your pup's nose out of the dirt. Well, you haven't, and it's just too bad—"

"Fair warning?" I snapped at him.

"Fair warning," he said and sighed. "Not that warning's much good in your case. You don't know Jake Lindquist, you see."

"He knows me, anyway!" I said. "He won't try any of his tricks again."

Whisky Jack said nothing, only clucked with his tongue, and that finally put me in a rage. I jumped up, pulling out my wallet.

"Thanks for the strapping," I said. What's your fee?"

That got him. He was out of his chair like a rocket.

"Keep your damned fee," he said. "I'm not taking money from any lunatic with one foot in the grave already. I've warned you, young Harkness, and don't you ever say I didn't. You're for the high jump, my hearty. This is once where you can't beat the game!"

Well, that was about enough, I thought. There wasn't any kind of sense wasting time over this type of stuff. I'd not found out very much from my visit, but it seemed to be plenty of confirmation of my original ideas. He was up to the neck in it, this fellow.

"Very good," I said. "I'll say good-morning."

I grinned at him irritatingly, turned—and

then stopped. Mary was in the doorway, looking at us.

We'd neither of us seen her, for there was some kind of a screen affair there, and anyway both of us had been too intent on one another in these last minutes to pay much attention to anything else. So that there was no telling how long she'd been there.

Except that it had been long enough. Her face told that as she stared at me. But it was her father that spoke.

"Well?" he said testily. "What is it now?"

I think Mary would have liked to ask some sort of similar question herself. She'd her mouth open to do it, too, when there was a sound down the beach path that made us all look round. Someone was coming up it, and in the devil's own hurry. You could hear their panting breath.

Whisky Jack, it seemed, had heard that breathing before, for he said something rich to himself as he stepped to the veranda rail. He might well, too, for the visitor was nobody but Ginger, and she was a sight for the gods if ever there was one.

SHE was still in the tawdry finery I'd seen her wearing yesterday—what was left of it, that is. It was mostly in rags and tatters, and she was bleeding from a cut on the mouth that matched the beginnings of a glorious black eye. She limped, too, as if she was sore all over, and some of the things she was ripping out would have curdled the milk. Mary took a single look at her and fled into the house.

Ginger came staggering up the steps and almost fell into Whisky Jack's arms.

"Fix me up, Doc!" she gasped. "The damn hound's been at me—"

Whisky Jack steadied her, and he wasn't particularly sympathetic in his handling either.

"What—again!" he said. "Making rather a habit of it, isn't he, me dear? You been deviling him some more, eh?"

She cut loose with a terrific flood of cold-drawn cursing and flopped into Whisky Jack's chair. Certainly Jake Lindquist had made a good job of her while he was about it.

"It's that so-and-so of a so-and-so of a little biter there!" she yelped, pointing at

me. "What's he want, interferin' with Jake, I'd like to know? I'll cut his liver out, so I will!"

Whisky Jack was looking her over, half-professional, half-amused. He grinned at me.

"Better make a note of that," he said sarcastically. "After all, the lady might keep her word!"

"I'll remember," I said, and walked off.

As I went, I heard Ginger behind me, spitting for all the world like a big, angry cat. I didn't envy Whisky Jack his job with her at that minute, and I was still chuckling over that when I came out on the beach.

Then I stopped in a hurry.

Sitting in a canoe, with the general expression of the devil, and a leer you could have hung your hat on, was my friend, Mr. Henry Griggs.

He spoke first, after spitting overside. "Well, cully," he said drawlingly, "you're a nice 'un, you are!"

"What d'ye mean?" I said.

He glanced round him cautiously and talked out of the side of his mouth.

"Mean?" he said. "You know damn well wot I mean. D'ye think Jake Lindquist's goin' to 'ave his neck bloomin' near bust by a squirt the likes o' you," he pulled a comical grimace, "an' do nothin' about it? Cripes, you gotta nerve!"

"The son of a gun plugged me first," I said furiously. "I'll fix him for keeps, yet!"

Griggs said nothing for a moment. His beady little rat's eyes were all over me, and up into the pandanus-thicket behind us as well.

"Yus!" he said finally. "Shouldn't be s-prised, either. You an' Jake don't mix. Nor me an' Jake, by cripes! Now look 'ere—" he dropped his voice to a whisper, "we gotta move, savvy? Move like ruddy 'ell, too. There's things goin' to 'appen 'ere tonight, an' it's our chance, d'ye see? You stand by, after dark—"

He broke off, with another of his horrible faces. There were footsteps and voices from up the path.

I nodded understanding, slipped back from him into the edge of the trees, and began to hurry homeward.

CHAPTER IX

THE BIRD'S NEST

ALL the same, I was very far from understanding. Griggs was difficult enough to fit in to things, anyway; but this last whispered, urgent hint of his—well, I'd little shivers suddenly running down the backs of my legs. Up to now, I'd been heartily angry with the whole lot of them, from Mannie Silberstein on, and perfectly ready to tangle with any or all of them. But there was something about Griggs—a kind of mocking, devil-may-care acceptance of danger—that made me stop and think. And there was also the mystery of him.

What in thunder was that little swipe doing here? Was he to be trusted, alone out of all of them?

I'd no answer to either question. But there was one thing he'd said in which I agreed with him. Things were due to happen here tonight. Whisky Jack had as much as told me my number was up. And that was just one statement of that very odd doctor's in which I'd some confidence.

Tonight—in four hours' time it was going to be dark.

I stood for a minute at the foot of the store garden, looking round me. The place was still as I'd left it, and as it had been for dear knows how long; deserted, neglected, all-alone. There wasn't even limping Jim hereabouts now. He'd gone down the dark gullets of his own outfit last night.

I wondered if I was going to follow him before another dawn.

A big bird flew squawking out of the high trees by the house, and its dark shape gave me a sudden notion. I went in, pulled out a telescope from my kit, and took a look at the trees. I'd got to have some notion of how the land lay, and from aloft there one might get a view.

Five minutes later, panting, scratched, and covered with moss and lichen, I was lying out on a branch, seventy feet above ground, the glass at my eye. Certainly one got a panorama from that perch.

You could see what I'd not seen before—the shores of Buwi Island, away beyond the doctor's place. And right there I knew something that made a difference. I could see

what must be the Lindquist roost; see it clear, away across Long-Pig Lagoon.

It was on a second island, with maybe a mile of water between it and Buwi. There were a couple of frowsy-looking buildings there—it was all as plain as print through the telescope—and several canoes drawn up on the beach. A bit this side of it, like a water-beetle on the smooth surface, Griggs was paddling his lady-friend homeward, and if I'd wanted any other evidence, there was Lindquist himself, parading up and down on the sand waiting for them. Presumably, I thought with a wry chuckle, to undo some of the good work Whisky Jack had done for Ginger. Well, let him—

But the thing that attracted me and made me swear to myself delightedly, was this. Just off-shore there was a cutter moored; a seven- or eight-ton affair, with her mainsail furled and a jib still set and roughly huddled round the forestay.

That altered matters. This was the first indication I'd had that there was anything better than a canoe about, to make a get-away in. And taking another squint at the cutter, it seemed to me that there was a little daylight on Grigg's scheme. Those sails, clumsily furled and bundled up, were *set;* it wouldn't take more than a yank or two to have them full and drawing.

I wondered again, up in that bird's nest.

And then I got something else that startled me. There was another craft in sight—in fact, three of them. They were coming in to Lindquist's from the sea, and I'd seen their kind before, too.

Outriggers; the big forty-foot canoes these natives used. The same as I'd seen being paddled the night before on the way to the barbecue. But this time they weren't being paddled. They were under sail, and with a nice breeze on their quarter they came along at a lick that made me whistle. Even with their crews aboard, they don't draw a foot, these spidery concerns, and in light airs especially they're something to watch go.

I watched them, all right, and so did Jake Lindquist. He'd turned round on the beach there and was standing looking at them under his hand. As they came swinging in to his place he went to meet them, leaving Griggs and Ginger to land as they liked. I saw him at the water's edge, with a dozen of the long black fellows clustered round him.

Well, there was confirmation, if any was needed, of what Griggs had said. They were up to something, this lot, and I figured by now I knew what it was. They don't, as a rule, sample white men, these pot-pie boys, and Chinese they won't touch at all—claim white men taste of tobacco, I'm told, and Chinese have a flavor all their own and not so tasty—but it looked suspiciously to me as if here was one time they might make an exception. Jake Lindquist cut a lot of ice with them; I'd seen that the night before. And it would be just exactly like him to engineer a regrettable accident in my case.

I stayed up there for quite a while, thinking all this over and wondering about Griggs. Over the lagoon yonder Jake Lindquist was still in a palaver with his pot-pie friends, and Ginger had vanished into the house. Griggs took the canoe and sculled it out to the cutter; I could see him working on her decks, idly to all appearances, but I'd my ideas about that.

The more I mulled that little man over in my mind, the better he tasted. Maybe it was just a matter of comparison with the others, but whatever it was he rang increasingly true.

I slipped down from the tree, and began to wait for the dark.

CHAPTER X

GRIGGS TAKES A HAND

IT CAME soon enough, dropping down over Buwi like a rushing black cloak.

There was wind in it, I saw with relief, for wind one would have to have if we were after all going to get away in that cutter of Jake Lindquist's. Heavy clouds began to steal up from the southward; we might even have a lot of wind, I figured, sitting in the gloom on the veranda there. Well, so much the better; the cutter would handle in a blow where those racing outriggers would sail themselves under—

I got up and moved into the house. There was no sense, after all, in giving anyone a cockshy at me. My pistol was in my pocket, along with John Horrocks' note-book; I wanted to show that to Mannie Silberstein

before I kicked him into Sydney Harbor. But otherwise I was leaving everything as it stood.

I sat fingering my pistol and waiting. An hour passed with nothing but the rustle of the wind in the trees and the steady undertone of the surf a mile away.

Fidgets overtook me. I wondered where and how Griggs would manifest himself—I don't believe I doubted for an instant that he'd turn up—and as the minutes slipped away my nerves began to fray. That dark, lonely storeroom oppressed me. I got up and went to the window. For sixty seconds I stood staring out of it.

Then I was down the steps and running like a fiend among the wind-tossed branches, unmindful of who might be lurking among them. There was a fire reflected on the smooth, twisted tree-trunks.

Whisky Jack's place, unless I was a Dutchman!

Fifty yards, and it was Whisky Jack's place; just getting well alight. I cursed helplessly and pounded on. No wonder there hadn't been any sign of Griggs, I thought. No wonder—

I went floundering flat on my face, all the breath jerked out of me. Something had grabbed me low round the feet, and that something wasn't any root or creeper either. Desperatey I clutched at my pistol.

A voice hissed in my ear. "Quiet, yer blasted fool!" it said.

I gasped, as if someone had douched me with the coldest of cold showers. Once again my blood, that had almost stopped running with surprise, began hammering at my temples.

"Griggs!" I muttered.

He dragged me to my feet. "Come on!" he said. "Now's our time—"

Matters started to dawn on me, with particular reference to the fire in front. I grabbed him by the arm.

"Did you do that?

He chuckled. "Watcher think, cully? I ain't—"

I shook him furiously. "Where are they?" I snarled. "Where's the girl, you little swine?"

He wriggled out of my grasp like an eel, still chuckling. There was a slight sound close to me somewhere. I stopped, frozen. Mary Shirriff was standing there in the dark; I could faintly see the outline of her head against the glimmer of the lagoon.

"Holy smoke!"

Griggs had me by the wrist now. "Stow the cackle!" he said in his raucous whisper. "We gotta move, I tell yer. Shake a leg an' come on!"

Together, hand in hand, the three of us bolted down among the trees to that black and shiny beach. A hundred yards along it a canoe was nosing the sand. We tumbled into it, anyhow, and Griggs thrust a paddle into my hand.

"Dig in!" he said. "An' if yer make a single sound, I'll guttle yer, so help me!"

He thrust the canoe out into the wind-ruffled water and yanked its head round cleverly. For minutes we paddled cautiously, blades under water, while I tried to catch up with affairs, and Whisky Jack's place burnt steadily up there among the trees. We were paddling wide of it, out towards the reef, and I began to get a glint of Griggs' scheme as the Lindquist island and beach came into view.

The place was in a boil of excitement, with torches moving to and fro on the beach like fireflies. Down wind, you could hear the racket they were making, plain. Griggs stopped paddling all at once.

"Quiet!" he growled.

From somewhere or other there was a quick, slashing beat I'd heard before. In a moment you could see—a hundred yards away, between us and the land. One of the outriggers was being driven full speed, its sides outlined in glittering foam. I could hear the grunt of its straining crew.

Whisky Jack, I thought, going hell-for-leather to see the damage. Mary had the same idea, I think; I heard her catch her breath behind me.

But it was Griggs, as usual, that had the hard common-sense.

"Still!" he breathed. "Not a move!"

We froze, both of us, while the canoe swung broadside to the wind. The outrigger passed us—I thought I could even see Whisky Jack's figure on its stern platform—and then Griggs swung his paddle again.

"Nah then!" he said under his breath. "Easy does it, all hands!"

WE BEGAN to creep forward over the half mile of dusky water that lay between us and the cutter.

There was still an almighty shindy going on over there, though in the blackness one could see no details. But the torches and general running-about were enough; they'd come bobbery in hand. Griggs, behind me, was grimly silent, though, and pulled me up savagely when I tried to ask questions.

"Stow it blast yer!" he spat out, across Mary's head amidships. "Wodjer think this is—Piccadilly?"

I fell obediently silent, but I'd have given plenty just then to have known what was going on inside Griggs' little skull. He seemed to have taken command completely, and after all, I'd only my own judgment of him to trust to. He might be straight—probably was, I figured—but if he wasn't, it was going to be a poor lookout for Mary and me.

We crept ahead. I thought I could see the cutter's mast against the sky. I wondered how in thunder Griggs proposed to sail her out of this lagoon in the dark.

As it turned out, there were plenty of things to occupy one's mind before that one came up. Griggs suddenly backed water hard, and made a sucking sound between his teeth.

We stopped again, while I strained eyes and ears to see what it was that had surprised him.

At first I saw nothing; the blaze of Whisky Jack's place behind us, and the shifting glare of the torches in front made everything doubtful and vague, a mass of wavering shadows. There might have been a dozen craft on that glinting water without my seeing one of them.

But Griggs had eyes like a cat, it seemed; lightning fast action, too.

"Down!" he mouthed. "The two of yer—down in the bottom, flat!"

There was no asking questions on that one. Duck was the word, and duck it was. I hugged the canoe's floor, and Mary aft of me. Griggs sat up astern and began to sing, of all things in the world—some husky, ribald tune of his, as if he were alone and about his own concerns.

Then I heard him hail someone. "That you, Jackwo?" he called.

There was the sound of a paddle close at hand, and a hoarse native voice answered in Papuan. Griggs was working his own paddle now, keeping us away from whoever it was.

"Wodjer doin', yer black scutt?" he inquired cheerfully.

Jackwo—apparently one of Jake Lindquist's men—gabbled something, and Griggs laughed. He stopped paddling and I could hear the water clucking under the sides of the other canoe as it approached.

"Out watchin' for 'Arkness, eh?" he said. "Well, damn me if that ain't a queer old rig, an' chance it! Boss' orders, huh?"

"Yi-yi, sah!" said Jackwo, and I could almost see him grin. Griggs drifted closer.

"Yus!" he said suddenly. "Well, me stove-polish beauty, there's somethin' for yer to chew on—"

It was done in a flash. Our canoe lurched wildly, shipping water; then it righted, and there was a choked groan and a gurgle. Something splashed and threshed a bit overside, and Mary screamed faintly. Griggs drove his paddle deep and we surged ahead.

"C'mon, cully!" he snapped to me. "Let 'er 'ave it, fer Gawd's sake. I was just watchin' fer that cove—Jake, 'e's got 'alf a dozen of 'em out, scoutin' round lookin' fer you. 'E thinks," he chuckled, "I'm one of 'em. But that there bonfire back yonder's got 'im guessin', I'll bet a shillin'. Cripes, I'd like to see 'is fyce—"

He was driving the canoe along now like a fury, making it fairly leap across the water. I gripped my paddle and swept it behind me in a kind of daze. I'd seen killing before, but this little biter licked anything that had come my way so far. He was a terror, if ever I saw one.

But just now he was on deck, and I was following orders blindly. Anyway, without him neither Mary nor I had a Chinaman's chance of getting out of this mess, and with him—well, it was that or nothing. I went on paddling grimly, my eyes ahead.

There was another affair there now that looked interesting. Down on the island beach, away beyond Lindquist's house in the dark, another fire had sprung up. Its flames licked higher as I watched, and I thought I could see figures moving about it. I'd seen the same thing before, too—four-and-

twenty hours back, away yonder on the other beach.

There wasn't any doubt about it. The pot-pie boys were staging another celebration. I remembered Whisky Jack's last words to me—that I was for the high-jump. A cold sensation took me by the back of the neck again.

I wondered how much he'd known when he said that.

But I'd little time for such thoughts. Griggs was behind me, and he was muttering luridly under his breath. The gist of his vicious talk was hurry, and for once I agreed with him whole-heartedly. We went surging along towards that cutter.

CHAPTER XI

THE CUTTER

I'VE tackled some nervous assignments in my time, and in that last twenty-four hours I'd been keyed up to concert pitch and a bit beyond anyway.

But this swift dash for Jake Lindquist's boat, with Mary Shirriff close enough to me to touch, and the fires blazing to right and left, took the cake. It was maybe four or five minutes before the cutter's mast showed, faint against the red-lit sky, but in that time I'd gone through plenty to last me half a lifetime. Griggs swirled the canoe up under the little vessel's counter and I breathed again.

" 'Op aboard, cully!" he whispered. "An' duck below—you an' the gal!"

There didn't seem to be much sense in arguing with him at that instant, though I didn't see his point at all. I hauled Mary bodily out of her concealment—she was still shivering and shaking, and not much wonder—and down into the little cockpit. The cabin door was open and I thrust her inside, in the dark.

Then I turned to Griggs. He'd slung himself aboard like a cat and hooked the canoe close alongside. He was crouched on deck, peering about him and listening.

"What's doing?" I muttered.

He turned his head. "Thought I told yer to get below," he said in the same undertone, but with a note of irritation in it. "You do as you're bid, d'ye see, mister? This ain't no shemozzle for the likes o' you!"

Well, that would never do, of course; I wasn't being bossed by all the cockneys out of Limehouse. I told Griggs so, in a few nicely chosen, even if noiseless words. I could hear him shaking with some emotion in the dark—amusement, it seemed, for his grim chuckle was in evidence, somewhere under the surface.

"All right!" he mouthed. "Stay where yer are, then, yer Yank perisher! An' use them damn mule's ears o' yours. D'ye hear anythin?"

That question was a crazy one, for we were surrounded by noise on all sides of us. Aft, there were the pot-pie boys on the beach there, round their fires—three blazes had sprung up now, and I could catch the beginnings of the stamp-and-go dance business I'd heard away on the other beach before. Then there was some kind of a confused racket from Lindquist's place, a couple of hundred yards away across the water; what it was was hard to make out. And finally, from the other direction—forward as we lay—Whisky Jack's house was still burning fiercely. It was in its direction that Griggs had his ear cocked.

"Listen!" he breathed. "That outrigger!"

Sure enough, in a moment it came to me—the steady splashing beat of the paddles. I could see, across the lagoon, the blur of phosphorescent light that marked the foam of her passage. Griggs clicked his tongue.

"Comin' back, eh?" he said. "Found there wasn't nobody there, an' wants ter know what the 'ell! Now we got to sit tight, cully, an' pray 'ard 'e don't start gettin' curious about this 'ere cutter. If 'e does—"

He broke off with another expressive smack of the lips, although he'd no need to underline things for me. My mouth was dry and I'd gooseflesh in pimples all over me as I hugged the coaming of that cockpit and the slashing paddle-beat drew near.

They were coming dead for us, it seemed. The long outrigger with its heavy sidewings slicing the water and its paddles churning froth was a mere blob of luminosity. Only it grew larger and larger every second.

"Ker-rimes!" Griggs murmured. " 'E'll

run us down, the silly *barnshoot!* Still, cocky—you keep still, if yer don't want ter find out what the first said to the pork chop."

Well, at any other time I might have managed some kind of a grin at his idea of humor, but not just now. It was too all-fired pointed under the circumstances. I lay and watched the outrigger apparently aiming to knock us out of the water—and trembled.

Then—it happened in a flash—the outrigger swung. She swung almost broadside to us, in a smother of blue fire, and a chorus of yells broke loose from her. She stopped and lay there, just visible maybe a hundred yards from us.

Griggs whistled softly.

"Jumpin' Judas!" I heard him soliloquize. "Now what kind of a bloomin' bee-'ive's broke loose?"

It was a puzzle, for the gabble still continued, and the long glimmering bar of the vessel's waterline remained motionless. Griggs suddenly let a smothered yelp out of him.

"The canoe!" he wailed. "Jackwo's blarsted canoe! I ought to've sunk it with 'im, an' damme I didn't. Now they've run it down, the silly swine!"

Something like that had happened, by the sound of it. You could hear them yelling like a pack of fiends across the water there—and then there was a kind of a silence. A booming voice roared something. This time there wasn't any doubt who it was; I'd heard those guttural tones before.

"Lindquist!" I muttered.

Griggs was sucking his teeth agonizingly. " 'Imself! "he agreed. "You said it, cully—an' now you better be sayin' them pretty little prayers o' yours, 'cos you're next door to blazes, an' that's a fact!"

He was staring at the outrigger. Lindquist was still shouting in Papuan, and there seemed to be an argument going on. Then there was the dip of paddles again and the long craft moved slowly ahead. She was passing us, pointed for the beach and the fires, and Griggs expelled his breath in a sigh of relief.

"Strewth!" he observed, and I felt inclined to agree with him.

In a spellbound daze I watched Lind-

quist and his crew of wildcats go slowly past our beam. They were too far away to distinguish figures now, and I wondered whether, after all, Whisky Jack was with them. Likely, I figured; he'd not see his house in flames, with—presumably—Mary inside it without investigating. And that brought me back with a jerk to Mary herself. I dived into the cabin again.

She was sitting huddled on the locker-cushions in the dark, but I heard the sudden catch of her breath.

"All right," I said. "Only me, sister!"

She jumped up and clutched at me passionately, and the next thing she said pretty well took the wind out of my sails.

"Dad!" she whispered. "Father—where's he?"

Well, I'd heard of loyalty, and the queer workings of the feminine mind, and so forth, but this was a bit too rich. One'd have thought, I figured—knowing what I knew of that smooth old ruffian and his doings, and above all of what he'd got planned up with Jake Lindquist about this same Mary—one'd have thought she'd have wanted nothing better than to put the Pacific between herself and him. But I'd been wrong.

"Where is he?" she repeated huskily. "You're not—we're not leaving him here?"

I saw it was time for a first-class lie. "You just bet we're not," I said brazenly.

"Give us time to up anchor and get in the clear, and we'll have him aboard in a brace of shakes."

I heard her released breath, and had the grace to be ashamed a bit, though it wasn't any place for the finer sentiments, Lord knows. I patted her on the shoulder and made her sit down again.

"Easy, now, easy!" I said. "We're not in the clear just yet. There's plenty funny business—"

I was interrupted. Griggs on deck called out to me, and there was an edge in his voice that told of trouble.

"'Ere, Yank!" he called. "Come on up—I wants yer!"

I tumbled out into the cockpit. Griggs was hunched out on the after-deck, looking out over the dark water. Instinctively I followed his gaze—and almost collapsed, there outside the cabin door.

The outrigger was coming back. Straight towards us again, and paddling hell-for-leather.

"For Pete's sake—" I began helplessly.

Griggs laughed aloud, a saw-edged cackle. "Better syve yer breath, cully!" he said. "You'll be needin' it!"

He made no other comment, and nor did I. There didn't seem to be anything to say; but I pulled out my little pistol, in this fix just about as useful as a squirt, and went through the motions of preparing to sell my life as dearly as might be. At least, I guess that's what it amounted to; but as a matter of cold fact I felt much more like a cornered rat, turning for its final bite. I believe Griggs thought pretty much the same, for he let loose another of his sardonic chuckles of mirth.

"Chuck it, cully!" he said. "You ain't got an earthly!"

And Lindquist's bellow underlined him. "Harkness!" it roared. "I see you! Gif up dot girl, or I kill you, by damn!"

I felt Mary behind me—felt her shudder too—and had the presence of mind to shove her down again into the cabin.

"You go to hell!" I yelled back at Lindquist. "Just come here a bit, and I'll send you there!"

It was mere pot-valiant bluff, and worth nothing anyway. But it had one result I hadn't foreseen. Lindquist was on the outrigger's platform, maybe fifty or sixty feet away, and he started shooting with a heavy automatic.

He was either unsteadily poised or crazy with temper, for that automatic sprinkled lead all aruond like a machine-gun in a fit. Slugs sang like bees all round me, splatting into the cutter's sides and humming through the rigging; and Griggs, out on the stern, gave a sudden choked curse of agony. Next second and there was a splash; he had rolled bodily over into the shark-ridden waters of the lagoon.

Well, that finished it, for me. I went whole-heartedly berserk and let Lindquist and his lot have it with the .38. It was pretty much like peppering away at an army corps, and had about as much effect. Lindquist howled something in his lingo, the paddles dashed home once more, and the big craft was alongside us. I threw my empty toy overside and made to follow it—

but the pot-pie boys knew a trick worth a dozen of that. They were all over the cutter in an instant, swarming like black, slippery snakes. Half a dozen of them grabbed me at once, and Jake Lindquist, leaping on to the cutter's deck, showed me how matters were with him by a kick in the mouth that left me half-stunned and bleeding.

"Damn Yankee!" he yelled. "Where's dot girl?"

But someone else had pushed past him—Whisky Jack, in a fuming hurry. He had plunged into the cabin and in a moment he emerged with Mary. She was perfectly silent now, holding on to his arm. He took a single look at me as I lay on the deck.

"Ah?" he said. "I warned you, my hearty!"

CHAPTER XII

MR. LINDQUIST PROPOSES

WELL, there wasn't any getting away from it. Whisky Jack had warned me, and not once either—and here I was, neatly and completely in the mulligan. I couldn't complain that I'd gone in with my eyes shut, anyway.

But what I was wondering mainly, as the outrigger turned and headed for shore, was Mary. There was something mighty odd about that girl's attitude, back there in the cabin. It didn't render at all—I remember getting quite steamed up about it, in the incurious way a man will sometimes, when everything else has fallen to pieces all round him. Damn that kid, I was saying to myself; I thought I'd got her sized up—

Well, I hadn't, it seemed, and pretty soon I'd other matters to occupy my attention. The outrigger grounded and its jabbering crew leapt ashore. Four of them bore me, a helpless bundle, high on their shoulders. For a moment I imagined that I was to be taken down the beach to where their fires burned half a mile away. But no—Lindquist growled something in the darkness and they took me up towards his house.

There was a light burning in the veranda, screened off from the insects; but that and its shelter were about the only points of resemblance between that place and Whisky Jack's. It was the merest dirty litter of old bottles, discarded rags, and crazy, creaking furniture. There wasn't a great deal of doubt whose feminine hand had been responsible for the ordering of this place.

Jake Lindquist had me flung down on the floor among the bottles.

"Now, *Misder* Steve Harkness," he said, and his voice fairly crackled and rasped with fury, "we have a liddle talk, no?"

I said nothing to that one. It wasn't any good wasting my breath, as the late Griggs had said. I'd need all I'd got pretty soon. Jake Lindquist seemed to think so, too, for he dropped into a chair and grinned at me.

"You don't do no talkin', eh?" he sneered. "Aind't dot too bad, now?"

With that, Ginger came quickly out of the house, and if Jake himself wasn't any answer to a maiden's prayer, his consort matched him. She looked like a red-headed cockatoo in the dim lamplight—and she was in a regular cockatoo's screaming passion.

"You Jake!" she shrieked. "There's that milk-faced Shirriff hussy a-settin' in my parlor. An' what's more you know it, you—"

She went off into a perfect stream of Sydney curses, so that even Jake Lindquist had to pay attention. He swung round on her.

"Quiedt!" he snarled. "You be quiedt, hear me! Dot aind't no business of yours—"

But Ginger wasn't to be set aside thus, not even by Jake Lindquist in his present mood. She dashed in at him, just as she had done once before on Whisky Jack's beach—and took the same punishment. Jake heaved himself all in one piece out of his chair and knocked her colder than a skate. Ginger went down in the corner, a huddled heap of finery, and stayed there. Jake glanced at her, snorted, and turned back to me.

"So you don't talk, huh?" he continued.

"Devil a talk!" I said, and left it at that. He dropped his great hairy head into his hands and stared at me moodily.

"Hoomph!" he said after a minute. "Well, after all it does not matter. Doctor!" He raised his voice into a bellow. "Come here a minude, eh?"

Whisky Jack must have been listening somewhere behind the house door, for he came into the circle of the lamplight at once. He was much as usual, except that this time there was no doubt about his

being sober. He seemed quite unperturbed by the burning of his house.

"Well?" he said, smiling after his half-amused fashion. "What's the game now?"

Jake indicated me. "He don't talk," he said.

Whisky Jack cocked an eye at me. "Why should he?" he asked. "He won't get anything out of it if he does. He knows that. He's a young fool, and I've told him so a couple of times already; but he's not such a fool as that. I suppose you're trying to find out how much he knew when he came here—about Horrocks, for instance. Well, I think that's an easy one. He didn't know anything."

Jake Lindquist shook his head. "Yah!" he said obstinately. "He knew—und he iss a spy. Der police—"

Whisky Jack suddenly began to laugh uproariously. "Police, my eye!" he chuckled. "Not this young gentleman! I'd tell a policeman ten miles away, Jake, and he's not the stuff. He's too damned curious, for one thing. Shoves his nose in too far."

"Mannie Silberstein—" Jake began, and the doctor cut him short with a polite guffaw.

"Mannie Silberstein sent him," he said. "Well—d'you think Mannie's not made damned sure of his material before he touched it. He'd had one lesson, over Horrocks, remember. He wasn't exactly anxious to have another—er, removal on his already occupied hands."

PERFECTLY cool and composed as if he were discussing some bit of his old-time surgery, instead of the hell's doings that had been going on on this Buwi island. The grand manner, too; once again I saw what a fat-gutted, lumbering affair this Lindquist was beside him. He talked like a scholar and a gentleman about things that only a crook, and a black-hearted one at that, would have laid his tongue to.

He continued to look at me, while Lindquist growled. "Yes," he went on. "This fellow isn't difficult, Jake. I think I got to the bottom of him all right, in one or two talks we had, and conceit's his main trouble. Anyhow, it won't matter one way or the other in an hour or so. Old Bully-Boy's cooks don't leave many odds and ends, and it'll all be written off as a regrettable incident. Hello, who in the devil's this?"

He'd glanced round at a sudden noise from the corner. Ginger had come to her senses and was crawling slowly across the floor towards the door. She looked more than ever like a bedraggled and battered fowl of some kind, and Jake Lindquist had apparently forgotten her.

He grinned now. "She give me lip," was all he said. Whisky Jack clicked with his tongue.

"You've a certain directness in your affairs now and again, Jake," he said humorously, "that pleases me. I take it this wasn't anything more than the usual poke in the jaw, eh? All the same," as Lindquist grunted assent, "I'd be careful a little. That lady's got a temper."

"A cow," said Lindquist, and added a few highly-spiced adjectives to the noun. "One day I get shut of her. Then I marry, eh?"

I was lying on my side on the floor, with a rope twisted about elbows and ankles, and I could see Whisky Jack's face very plainly in the lamplight. He had been fingering nose and chin in that sniffy, half-contemptuous manner he had—but now he suddenly stopped. It was as if a new notion had suddenly been introduced to him.

"Marry?" he said in a queer voice. "That's something new, Jake, what? One never exacty cottoned to you as the marrying kind. Who—er, who's the lucky lady?"

Well, and there went one of my illusions. Whisky Jack, after all, did *not* know of Jake's designs on his daughter. Or rather, he hadn't until this instant. Jake leered at him pleasantly.

"Dot girl of yours," he said. "Suits me dandy, dot one!"

I had, at that instant, Whisky Jack's crag of a Roman-Emperor profile right against the lamp, and from where I was I could see it harden and tauten, as if every underlying sinew and muscle had been given a quick yank. There wasn't any mistaking those signs—but his tone was perfectly ordinary again, rather more amused than usual, if anything.

"My dear fellow!" it was all he said.

But there was a little bow that went with it—an ironical inclination of the

body from the waist—that might have told anyone but Jake Lindquist that something like a bombshell had been suddenly exploded in behind those bloodshot, clever blue eyes. I began to feel the first faint stirrings of hope, there on the ground.

But Jake Lindquist put a crimp in any such musings for me. He grinned at Whisky Jack.

"Later we talk aboudt dot, eh?" he said. "Und now, this fellow here. You come watch der fun, no?"

The doctor pulled a little, quick grimace. "Maybe not," he said. "There are limits, after all, Jake my boy. But you go ahead—by all means go ahead. If it amuses you, that is."

AND there was a scream from right behind him that pretty well froze my blood as I lay.

There wasn't any doubt who it was, or where it came from. Whisky Jack and Jake Lindquist both of them whirled about and sprang for the door, spouting curses; but before either of them had taken more than a step it flew open, and a couple of struggling, frantic figures had tumbled out.

Ginger seemed to have crept up on Mary with the most definite of intentions, for she'd a nine-inch knife in her hand, and an expression that'd sour the milk. She'd hold of Mary by the shoulder, and was trying to get organized for a stab, while Mary cowered and dodged and twisted away from her.

"Damnation!"

Whisky Jack snatched Mary to him, and fended Ginger off with his free hand. She struck at him, squalling like a termagant—slashed him in the forearm, too—and then Jake Lindquist took hold.

He grabbed her bodily round the waist, his immense arms locked cable-fashion. Ginger yelled and bit, and pecked at him desperately with the knife-blade; but he took no manner of notice of any of it. He simply walked into the house with her—and there was a silence.

A complete, nerve-shattering silence. I could hear Whisky Jack's breath coming and going, and the flutter of my own heart. Outside, the song-and-dance came faintly. But that was all. Nothing else. Ginger's frantic uproar was cut off, sharply as if at the turn of a tap.

For maybe two minutes we stayed so, staring and listening, and then Whisky Jack seemed to recover himself. He set Mary down in a chair—she'd fainted in good earnest now—and started for the door, muttering under his breath. As he reached it, it opened, and Jake Lindquist stood in it.

He was grinning all over his big moon face, and rubbing his hands together—enormous hands, like steel spades.

"So!" he grunted. "Dot's for dot damn cow! Und now, maybe, we fix dis liddle fellow here—und then, talk, eh? You and me!"

He rolled his eyes on Mary, and the leer ran from ear to ear of him. Whisky Jack stood there, his back to me, and his hands hanging at his sides. I saw their fingers crisp once, clench and unclench spasmodically. Then they relaxed.

"You kill her?" he asked in a dry voice.

Jake Lindquist nodded, flexing his mighty arms. "Yah!" he said with satisfaction. "In der way, eh? No good, dot one! Me, I get

married pretty quick now, I t'ink. Plenty goot, too—"

He strode off down the veranda steps and began bellowing for my late bearers. Whisky Jack remained standing where he was; but even in my extremity I could see the expression on his face. He looked at Mary, and then at me, and then at Mary again—and I could see a congested little vein going pump-pump-pump on his forehead, as if he weren't any too far from apoplexy at that minute.

I wondered what might be going on inside the head of Whisky Jack, M. D.

CHAPTER XIII

BARBECUE BEACH

WELL, I hadn't much time to worry over Whisky Jack just then. My own troubles began to occupy my attention again, almost at once.

Old Bully-Boy's fellows—I took it he was the chief I'd seen figged out with the parrot's head—picked me up again like a bundle of straw, and went marching out into the dark with me. It was still black, except for the light of the fires; but there wasn't much doubt about those now. They lit up the whole scenery for miles, it seemed to me. If I'd been a humorist just then I might have grinned at the celebration that was bein gput on for my benefit.

Not that I'd much grin left. Somehow or other, the finish-up of that little cockney, Griggs, had taken most of the snap out of me. When I'd seen him pitch into the lagoon off the cutter's stern, it had meant curtains, I felt. And Jake Lindquist's recent exploit, behind closed doors in the house there, didn't make for cheerfulness.

He went stalking along at my side, from time to time getting in a dig at my personal appearance, or my coming end. He was alone now, for there was no sign of Whisky Jack—I took it he'd stayed with Mary—and his mouth was full of crackling insult. It wasn't until they'd ducked me down in what seemed to be sand that he let up.

"Yah!" he said finally. "Dot's comfortable, so, eh, misder? Choost a minute, and we see if der cookments iss ready—"

He went off, and out of the tail of my eye I could see him in confabulation with Parrot's-head again, down by one of the fires. They had something there that looked to me like a whaler's disused try-pot, and I began to laugh in spite of myself. This was altogether too like the comic pictures one had seen from time to time—fat missionaries being rendered down into gravy, pot-hats and all, and so forth. It wasn't very steady laughter, I guess, but I like to remember it, all the same.

Then, while I was still cackling, I saw something else. Whisky Jack had come down the sand, and was talking to Lindquist. It was a private matter, too, for he had drawn the big fellow aside from the chief and his band of dancing, howling dervishes.

Now what, I wondered. Had he left Mary alone there in that house, with what was left of Ginger?

Whatever it was, it was important. I could see Lindquist with his hands on his hips and his big head thrown back. Whisky Jack was close up to him, poised and dignified—but one arm was behind his back, and by the piper that played before Moses, if there wasn't the glint of a gun.

Well, I nearly broke my neck squinting at this queer business. I knew now what it meant. Whisky Jack hadn't wasted any time having his showdown over Mary. Jake Lindquist was, for once, getting put in his place.

It remained to see how he'd take it. Hardly well, I figured. He wasn't the kind to accept the type of stuff that bitter-tongued doctor was diving him. In fact, I could see the dark cloud gather on his face, and his mouth open for a bellow of fury.

Bad business, I thought. Here's where I get company in the stew-pot. It's all set up and fixed now, for both of us—

And then it happened. I saw Lindquist leap at Whisky Jack; I saw the firelight flash on Whisky Jack's gun. But I saw nothing else for a while.

From somewhere behind me, the whole affair was wiped out, obliterated under a blinding white flare. Canceled into shimmering darkness and shreds and tatters of sound by the shock of an explosion you might have heard halfway or more to Sydney Heads.

The roar and blast of the thing deafened me. For an instant there was total stillness, and the firelight shone murkily after the brilliance of that spout of flame. Then pandemonium broke loose on that beach—such an uproar as even Parrot's-head had never engineered, even in his most noisy moments.

They ran, howling. In troops and clusters they fled away into the darkness, while the fires burned steadily and Parrot's-head—he'd at least courage—stood his ground, glaring about him stupidly. Of Lindquist and the doctor there was no sign. They'd vanished, it appeared, off the face of the earth.

NOW I wasn't anybody's fool, and I knew as well as the next man what that bust-up had been. Dynamite, and a lot of it; and it had come from the house. Wriggling round like a worm in the sand I got my eye on the place. It was still a mass of smouldering timbers, and there were splinters and fragments of burning stuff hanging in the trees all about it.

I cursed, at the thought of Mary, long before I'd started wondering who'd contrived the smash. But I was saved puzzling my brains on that score, for there was a hot, gin-laden breath in my ear, a knife at my wrists, and a voice that hissed hurry, staggeringly.

"Crimes, cully!" it said. "C'mon out of 'ere! We'll diddle 'em yet, the bloomin' *barnshoots!*"

Well, there wasn't any time to ask questions or raise objections. Griggs, returned from the dead and the lagoon, was before me, a scarecrow figure in dripping rags. He got my eye on the place. It was still a mass scuttled for the shore and I followed him, idiotically, my brain a whirl. At the water's edge I stopped.

"Mary!" I managed to get out.

Griggs shook me savagely. "Come on, come on!" he muttered. "Ain't got no time to be wonderin' about them amoors o' yours. We gotta swim for it—"

He was in the water up to his thighs, looking back at me. I stood where I was, hesitating. Up at the house the crackling and blazing continued.

"I'm going to see—" I said confusedly.

Griggs ripped out a blistering string of abuse and came splashing back. For the first time I saw him in a real passion.

"Are you comin' along o' me, mister?" he snarled. "Or strike me saucy, 'ave I gotter cut yer little gizzard out? The girl's aboard, yer fool!"

I stopped dead in my tracks. "Eh?" I said dully.

Griggs dragged me suddenly flat in the water. "Quiet!" he breathed. "Someone comin'!"

True enough, there was a figure running along the dim shore towards us. It traveled with long, jerky strides, and its hair waved wildly in the breeze. I'd seen it before, and so had Griggs.

"Careful!" he whispered. " 'E'll be 'alf-loony—"

He was—with shock and the events of the night, Whisky Jack was close to the edge of madness. He was looking for Mary, and not finding her, and it played the devil with him. Even Griggs clucked his teeth at the sight.

"Pore silly cuckoo!" he said, and hailed him. "Hey, Doc!"

Whisky Jack stopped, peering. He had the pistol in his hand still, and it seemed to me it was time to reassure him. I stood up.

"Steve Harkness, Doc!" I called. "She's safe—Mary's safe!"

He came slowly towards me, and I could see that half of his old you-be-damned manner had left him. He was almost humble.

"Wh-what's that?" he stammered. "She's safe?"

Griggs, as usual, was the hard-boiled little man of action. He clutched Whisky Jack by the arm.

"Yus," he said. "She's syfe—but she won't be, if this 'ere bloomin' tea-party's goin' on on this beach. 'Ustle now, fer Gawd's syke, an' let's see yer swim!"

WELL, the next minutes were wild ones. That lagoon, I was pretty certain, was full of sharks, and the cutter was a good quarter-mile out in it. The outfit behind us was beginning to recover itself, and there were wild whoops round the fires again, and figures prancing in the light. And halfway over we heard another whoop—this

time one of the acutest agony. It came from the house, and Griggs spat water to chuckle.

"'Owl away, ducky!" he spluttered. "That's 'it yer where it 'urts, eh?"

He said nothing more, but continued to plough onward. We had to help Whisky Jack over most of the last half of the swim—he was over fifty, and the kind of life he'd been leading didn't improve the wind. But we made it, and stopped, treading water under the cutter's stern.

"Cripes!" Griggs gasped. "'Oo'd be a 'andsome soused 'errin', eh?"

He hauled himself aboard, agile as a cat, dragged me and Whisky Jack after him, and bolted forward. The cutter's jib was merely furled, as I'd noticed from the top of my tree; it flapped loose in the breeze, filled with a snap, and the little vessel surged up to her anchor. There was a jar and a tinkle of chain, and Griggs was aft again.

"Tyke 'er!" he yelled to me, fumbling with the main halyards. "Keep 'er full, Yank, fer the love o' Mike!"

I'd caught the helm—she steered with a big tiller—and jammed it over. Whisky Jack, his breath coming like a cracked concertina, had crawled into the tiny cabin and found Mary there. She was conscious, it seemed, and I felt a great lift at hearing her voice in the dark there. I'd come to have the oddest kind of a regard for that kid.

Griggs, sweating and grunting, drove the gaff up the mast. The cutter heeled, and began to slide through the water.

Crack-zip!

Something arrived aboard us, announcing its presence with a report like the snap of a twenty-foot whip-lash. There's no mistaking that sound, once you've heard it.

"High-power rifle!" I called to Griggs.

He took a turn of the halyards round their pin and dropped back to me, sucking his teeth absently.

"Yus," he said. "Shouldn't be s'prised. 'E ain't so pleased wiv any of us, Mister Jake ain't. Pinched 'is girl, bust-up 'is pretty little gyme 'erebouts, *and*" he broke into a guffaw as another wicked affair hummed past us, "there's a little matter o' six-month's pearls 'e's just missed. 'Erd 'im a-bellerin' just now, didn't yer? Well, that's wot all the bloomin' shine was about!"

"You're telling me!" I grinned. "Make a good job while you're about it, don't you? I thought you were dead, anyway."

Griggs scoffed. "Me?" he said. "Tykes more'n Jake Lindquist to scupper me, Yank! 'Ere, watch out—where's that blinkin' gap? We got to 'it it slap-bang, cully, or it'll be good-night nurse for ours, after all!"

He lay flat forward, conning the ship, his eyes on the glittering reef. It was close aboard us now, and my heart was in my mouth as he took us along it. A touch on that coral, and we should go to glory all together. The sensation wasn't a nice one at all.

Behind us, Jake Lindquist had stopped his long-range bombardment. I snatched a glance over my shoulder, but there was nothing to see except the dark and the row of fires on the beach. Griggs flung his directions back, left and right, and we went careening along before the wind. Suddenly he sprang up and dashed for the main sheet.

"Port, now!" he snarled. "Round with 'er!"

In an instant we were heeling over, rail almost awash. To each side of us the surf on the reef shone creaming. Its spume stung my face as the cutter lifted. Then we were through and in open water, rising and falling to the jump of a steep little cross-sea outside. I relaxed and breathed again.

"Whew!" I said.

GRIGGS sat up by my side, sniffing like a terrier. He squinted eastward under one lean and grimy hand, and pointed in a decided manner.

"Yus!" he said sarcastically. "An' don't you go for to do too much whewin' neither, Yank. There's the dawn a-breakin'—an' there's 'half a dozen o' them outriggers behind there. Think old Ole Oleson and 'is little mob's goin' to let us get away from this without makin' a run for it? An' did yer ever see them outriggers sail in the wind? Yank, yer ain't born yet—no, swelp me yer ain't!"

He fumbled in a locker and fished out a gin-bottle. I left him swigging at it, while I remembered, most uncomfortably, what those crazy-looking craft could do in open water.

CHAPTER XIV

STERN CHASE

WHISKY JACK came unsteadily up from the cabin. He'd aged half a lifetime, it seemed to me, since I had seen him in Jake Lindquist's house. Aged, and sobered.

"Griggs," he said to the little man, "there's no sense in my trying to thank you for this—"

By way of answer, Griggs thrust the bottle into his hand. "Don't go a-tryin', Doc!" he said. "It ain't nothin'—only I got it in for Mister Jake Lindquist, so I 'ave, an' I wasn't goin' to let 'im scoff the little gal. That Ginger, she was good enough for 'im."

"Ginger's dead," said Whisky Jack, and Griggs nodded.

"Yuh, I saw wot 'e'd left of 'er," he said coolly. "Tumbled over 'er, lookin' for that damn dynamite. Lucky, ain't it," he chuckled, "Jake 'ad that case there. Fishin', 'e used it for—an' it's queer, but 'e pinched it right out of 'Orrocks' store, after 'e'd *puckarowed* 'im. Rum, 'ow things come around, ain't it?"

He was glancing back over his shoulder again, to where Buwi Island's mass rose out of the sea, dark against the slowly lightening sky. There was nothing to be seen there so far, but visibility was still tricky under the land. Whisky Jack noticed the look.

"D'ye think—?" he began suddenly.

Griggs snorted. "Nah, I don't think, mister," he said. "I'm jolly well sure. We'll 'ave ter be scratchin' our 'eads pretty soon, gents—an' chance it! This 'ere tub won't do no more than seven knots, an' them outriggers—"

He twisted up his ugly little face, and went after the gin-bottle again. Whisky Jack stood up, looking over the stern. He was frowning now, and some of his masterful, harsh manner seemed to be returning.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Just a little matter of arithmetic, gentlemen, eh? Well, what's the plan—if there is a plan?"

Griggs shrugged and spat. "Run for it," he said shortly. "It'll take Lindquist all of an hour to get 'is hurrah-boys together, an' another hour to clear the lagoon. They're clumsy gettin' started, these 'ere skimmin'-dishes. We got a start—if the wind holds."

He squinted up at the leech of the sail. It was drawing full, and the cutter was going great guns, for her. But seven knots, as he'd said, was about her limit, and it wasn't a comforting pair of heels.

Nothing about this situation was comforting, for the breeze mightn't hold. With the dawn, a change had spread over the sky. Mountains of cloud were visible now, hiding the sunrise. It had fallen heavy and sultry. Even an amateur weather prophet might have told that there was a change coming.

Well, for the next long while we were all of us pretty silent, our eyes on Buwi astern. Whisky Jack went back to Mary, asleep in the cabin, and sat there, holding her hand. I watched him curiously. Another kind of a man seemed to have grown out of him in these last hours. He was grave and serious and concerned; I thought, that's what he must have been like in the old days, when he was on top of the world, and his name counted for something in those high places.

Yes, there was dignity now about Whisky Jack. I forgot his share in the dirty stuff that had been going on in Buwi there—his stand-in with the pot-pie boys, the death of Horrocks, and all the rest of it. I was watching him and Mary.

Even Griggs noticed the change. He stared thoughtfully, and for once hadn't a snappy comment to make.

"Yus," he said at last. "Mykes a cove wonder, don't it? Not 'ardly nacheral, it ain't, seein' 'im this way."

"Wish to God we were all of us out of this," I said uncomfortably, and Griggs grinned.

"Me too, by crimes!" he agreed. "I got a couple o' thousand jimmy-o'-goblins, right 'ere in me poke, I 'ave. You lemme see Sydney again, that's all—"

He broke off, licking his lips at the idea. Then he picked up the battered pair of binoculars and focused them astern once more. This time he took a long look, and when he lowered them his expression had changed.

"Four!" was all he said.

Well, he was right. Over Buwi Island there was a heavy cloud of purple mist

now, lowering, but the shore line was clearer. Right against it, the merest spots on the water, you could see them—the outriggers' square matting sails. They were maybe eight miles away. I figured. By midmorning, they'd catch us. Earlier, if the wind dropped.

Griggs spoke. "Yus," he said. "There we are, mister. An' now wot's next, eh?"

"Run for one of the other islands," I suggested, but he shook his head.

"No damn use," he said. They'd follow us, an' there's nothin' but the same lot ashore there, too. No, we gotter beat 'em, right out 'ere, cully!"

"See how it's going to be done?" I wanted to know, irritably.

He said nothing, only hunched his shoulders and sucked his teeth again. I remembered what he was—the setting-fire of Whisky Jack's house, the fake death in the lagoon, the dynamite—and I wondered. This time it looked pretty much as if he'd bitten off more than even he could chew.

Whisky Jack interrupted my thoughts. He called to me, and beckoned. I went down into the cabin, and found Mary awake. Whisky Jack himself was sitting hunched opposite her.

He looked at me under his heavy eyebrows. "There's news, eh?" was all he said, and I nodded. Mary was staring at me with eyes like saucers, but she asked no questions. Whisky Jack sat for a moment with pursed-up lips.

"Listen to me, young feller," he said—and now the old tang had come back into his voice. "There's a job for you. When this show's over, you've got to look out for Mary."

Well, put that way, there were plenty of things to say to it. In the first place, this show wasn't over. It hadn't really begun, if those square sails meant anything at all. And there was more, but Whisky Jack didn't allow me to say it.

"Take her back to Australia," he said. "She knows where. This isn't any country for her, in the islands here. Or you, either, my hearty. You're the wrong cut for it. Too damned inquisitive, besides."

I must have shown the kind of a stew I was in, for he chuckled.

"Don't seem to cotton to the idea, eh?" he said. "I think you'll do it, just the same—"

"What about you?" I was fool enough to blurt out.

He didn't say anything for a moment; seemed to be studying the cabin table.

"Oh, that?" he said finally. "I wouldn't worry about that, Steve, if I were you. No, I'd let that go, somehow. I'm staying here, anyway."

The hell you are, I thought; now what d'you mean by that, guy?

"Don't talk poppycock!" I said. "You'll be with us, wherever we are."

At that he flared up, quite in his original sneering, fleering way.

"Shut up!" he said. "You talk too much, too—that's another of your troubles. You going to do what I'm asking you?"

I said yes.

He nodded, and looked at Mary. I think she was too scared over everything just then to do more than gape. Whisky Jack seemed to be satisfied with what he saw, all the same. He shook hands with me, and that was a curious thing to do. Until you figured what it was he was driving at, and then maybe it wasn't so curious.

"Let's go up and have a look at those fellows," he said, and there wasn't any more emotion in him than if he'd been suggesting a quiet stroll. "It's all right, Mary my dear—we'll not be long!"

He touched her cheek as he went out, and she clutched fiercely at his fingers, as if she was unwilling to let them go. Whisky Jack smiled down at her, and loosened them; but he didn't say a word, then. He was in the strangest of moods.

In the doorway was a little locker, and he stopped by it, still smiling.

"I wonder now," he said. "Jake Lindquist generally kept something in here—"

Sure enough, there was a crock there, and cups. Ready for one of Jake's little parties aboard, I reckon. Whisky Jack took a look at it and chuckled.

"Gin," he said. "One of life's little incompletenesses, Steve. By rights it ought to have been champagne."

I'd not the haziest notion what he meant, but I took the cup of raw spirit he handed me.

"Here's good luck, Doc!" I said.

He glanced at me over the rim of his drink, and said something I didn't get. It sounded like *"morituri te salutamus"*—and he grinned at me. Then he went up into the cockpit.

Griggs was at the tiller, and he'd got his bottle as well. It was on his knee, and he jerked his thumb upward. "Look an' see!" he said. "We're for it, cullies—the wind's goin' fast!"

CHAPTER XV

AN ACCOUNT IS SETTLED

IT WAS. There wasn't any doubt of it. The steady breeze, that had blown all night, and taken us out of that lagoon of death astern, was leaving us. That mist, away over Buwi, was killing it; it had crept halfway down the island slopes now. Chances were, we'd be into dead calms by midday—light airs, at most.

And in light airs, those frail contraptions back there would go three feet to our one. With their crew of paddlers, it'd be five feet to our one.

"Hell—" I said feebly.

Griggs took a sustaining mouthful, and laughed—the little devil laughed. I could have killed him for it right there.

Whisky Jack had picked up the glasses and was looking at the outriggers. You could see their sails now with the naked eye. They were coming up hand over fist.

"Humph!" he said. "Not much more than an hour, by the look of it. Yes, they'll be here by that."

Then I lost my temper with the two of them, good and proper.

"See here," I yelled, "what in thunder's the use of going on this way? Do we have to sit here like bumps on a log, and let that crowd of rummies come and gather us in? For Pete's sake—"

Griggs sniffed. "Excoose me," he said. "When you've quite finished a-blowin' off steam an' lookin' at me like a merry walrus in a fit, p'raps you'd lemme get a word in edgeways. Yer don't know everything, Yank—does 'e, Doc?"

Whisky Jack made an amused little noise in his throat. He was standing by the cabin door again, looking in.

"That's a fact," he said. "It's down—"

"'Ow far down?" Griggs asked.

Whisky Jack peered, and I could see he was looking at the barometer.

"Twenty-eight four," he said. "And still dropping."

Griggs heaved himself round at the tiller, to stare astern over the water. The outriggers were closer now. Much closer.

I could see what they were after now—weather. That heavy pall of purple mist was creeping down and down. The outriggers were coming up and up. The cutters sails were flapping now occasionally, as the wind died in gasps and puffs. It was a gamble which caught up with her first—Jake Lindquist or the elements.

"What's all that stuff mean?" I asked, pointing. Griggs took a final swig at his bottle and threw it overside.

"Ructions," he said shortly. "Reckon you ain't seen one o' these turn-ups 'ereabouts. If this one busts—"

That was it. In an island storm, the cutter might stand a chance. But it'd sweep the outriggers away to hell and gone, in its

first wild blast. And yet they were coming on.

"Think they c'n make it, them coves do," the cockney said. "An' they ought to know, damn 'em!"

THERE was truth in that, too. It wasn't likely the pot-pie boys were going to run themselves into certain trouble, just because they'd Jake Lindquist hounding them on. I'd got a glimpse of Parrot's-head, the chief, and he didn't look that kind. So it was likely, mighty likely, they had it doped out that they'd time to get us and run for cover before the storm broke.

Whisky Jack was fingering his chin. He'd been silent for some minutes, but now he spoke.

"I suppose," he said to Griggs, "there's not much doubt we *are* in for something. A dust-up, I mean."

Griggs took a swift glance all round him. "Sure's the devil—with that glass," he said. "Question is, when? Now—or too late?"

The outriggers weren't any more than a long three miles away now. You could see the flash of their paddles. Whisky Jack inspected them carefully again.

"He's on the first one," he said.

He didn't have to tell us who he meant. His face was enough. He dropped down to the cabin again, but stopped in the doorway, and beckoned me. I went to him; just at that time, one didn't argue with Whisky Jack.

He said a few words to me, confirming the cockeyed arrangement about Mary. Somehow, it didnt' seem so cockeyed then, and I agreed to it once more. Then he went into the cabin and shut the door. I turned to Griggs.

"He's going to try and hold that lot up," I said.

"Yer don't say?" Griggs was in a vile temper all of a sudden. "Well, wot abaht it?"

"He'll get himself killed."

Griggs threw me a look that was like a poisoned knife-blade.

"Well?" he said venomously. "S'pose 'e does? You goin' to interfere? Maybe 'e wants to, eh? You shut yer fyce, Yank, an not so much yap out o' you. It's 'is own life, ain't it?"

There wasn't a single thing to be said to that one. And if there had been, I doubt if I'd have said it. Griggs at the tiller there wasn't encouraging. I think he'd have stabbed me if I'd gone much further. I stood there, watching the outriggers, and remembering Sydney and Mannie Silberstein.

Then the cabin door clicked behind me, and Whisky Jack came out. He was perfectly cool and collected.

"How's the weather?" was the first thing he asked.

"She's comin'!" said Griggs.

Whisky Jack nodded. He was sizing up the oncoming outriggers, and even they were growing indistinct now, a short mile away.

"Yes," he said very quietly. "You'll make it, I believe—"

It seemed to me that now was the time to make a protest, if I was going to at all.

"See here, Doc—" I began.

He had climbed up on the deck and was standing holding on by a shroud. Now he glanced back at me with the half-mocking, half-friendly look I'd seen before.

"Well?" he said.

SOMEHOW, that snapped things inside me. I saw his game now, or figured I did—to go overside, and by hook or crook tangle with Jake Lindquist. I remembered that look of his back in Jake's house there, when the big fellow had leered at Mary.

But the thing was crazy. Too crazy for me, anyway. I sprang after him—and brought up short with his gun in my face.

"Get back, you silly pup!" he said. "Let a man alone."

"To hell with you!" I told him. "You're not going to do it—not while I'm here. There's Mary—"

I didn't finish the sentence, because I'd gone head-over-heels across the cabin-top. Something had hit me an almighty wallop, bang through the left thigh, and I remember wondering, dully, at Whisky Jack's being such a lousy shot. I thought it was him, you see.

But the next thing was, I saw him gaping at me, the pistol still in his hand. Griggs was cursing blue-fire aft. And another slug went smashing through the top of the slant-

ing skylight roof and scattered glass all over me. Jake Lindquist was doing some fine and fancy shooting with that high-power of his.

"Damnation!" I said, and struggled to sit up.

And in another minute they'd be aboard us. I saw Whisky Jack chuck up his arms and go overboard. I heard a scream from the cockpit, and knew Mary was there, watching. With an effort I staggered to my feet, and knew once again that Jake Lindquist had missed breaking any of my bones. I heard Griggs yell.

And then I saw.

Right behind the outriggers, the wall of shifting mist became a curtain. Pitch, inky black it closed down, like the wings of some almighty bird. One second the outriggers were there, dim against their background—the next they'd gone, blotted out. A shriek of wind, loud as a banshee's wail, tore down on us on top of a wall of white water. For a minute, while the cutter went reeling and staggering before it, there was darkness.

Then came the lightning. It snapped and banged and flickered without a second's let-up in the heart of that squall. It played all round us, on the streams of water from above and the milk-white whirl of foam below. It was light as day there for a while.

I clung to a stanchion, gritting my teeth desperately against the pain of my leg. Griggs, hanging on to the tiller for dear life, was a mere blur in the cutter's stern. I saw nothing of Mary; she was down in the flooded cockpit, praying.

But there was one thing I saw, and Griggs saw it too. High above us, right on the crest of the wave, illuminated like a magic-lantern show with the blue lightning, was an outrigger's platform.

The body of the big canoe was under water, and its paddlers swept away in the boiling surf. But there was one man up there, and he was alive. He was on his knees, his wild beard flying in the wind. The rifle was gone, but he didn't need the rifle just then. He was looking down, open-mouthed, at another figure that scrambled up the rocking superstructure.

Open-mouthed, and I think Jake Lindquist was afraid. But neither I nor Griggs nor any of us ever knew the truth of that. In another second that photographic lightning-flash had gone—and when its successor blazed there was nothing.

Only the tortured sea, and the yelling wind, and the cutter spinning and staggering among them. I crawled to the edge of the cabin roof and toppled bodily into the cockpit with Mary. And that's the last I remember for many hours.

CHAPTER XVI

PAY-OFF

OLD Andries of the *Hendryk Van Dam* looked at me down the side of his long nose.

"Hoomph!" he said. "Und so—der storekeepin', it aind't such a tamn funny pizness, *na?*"

It was three days later, and I was lying in a deck-chair under his frowsy awning, while the old bumboat went stamping solemnly down the islands. I'd my leg in bandages, and my ribs as well, but a plucky lot I cared. We were out of Buwi, and Sydney was three weeks ahead. And Mary was asleep below.

I grinned. "No," I said. "I've seen funnier."

Andries rumbled a deep laugh from the recesses of his being. *"Ja!"* he said. "Dey aind't so nice, dose boys. Der luck, she's with you, I t'ink."

I looked across at Griggs, who was in the other chair, full of gin and cheerful cold-swearing. He winked at me.

"Yus," he said. "Luck's with 'im, all right. About ninety pounds o' luck in petticoats, by crimes! An' wot's more, 'e reckons 'e's a bloomin' millionaire—don't yer, Yank?"

I said something crisp and snappy, and Griggs chortled with glee. He half drew out a little bag from the belt of his pants—Andries had gone to the rail—and winked at me again thunderously.

"Ho, yus!" he said. "Well, I'll come to yer weddin'—if I gets an invite, that is—but 'ere's somethin', that's got to be fust in me young affections. S'trewth, I'll 'ave a beano!"

I figured he would, with two thousand pounds worth of pearls to play with.

"You know," I said to him, "there's just one thing I don't understand about you. What in thunder were you doing for two years, there with Jake Lindquist and Ginger?"

Griggs stared at me as if I'd gone suddenly crazy. "Well, I'll be sugared!" he said. "An' I thought you was smart! What the 'ell d'yer think I was doin'? Fishin' fer sprats? I was waitin' me boy—just waitin', till Jake 'ad rolled up a nice little parcel o' these pretty-pretties 'ere. Yus, an until there was a bust-up!"

"I see," I said. "And I was the bust-up, eh?"

Griggs nodded with satisfaction. "You was," he said. "Soon's I 'eard of yer, I knew there'd be proceedin's. So I acted accordin'!"

I looked at him. "Are you trying to tell me," I said, "it was *you* engineered all that business?"

He grinned round to his ears and shook his head.

"Only some of it, my dear cully—only some of it. But it did come in doosid convenient, 'avin' a long-nosed, inquisitive cove like you droppin' in an' raisin' merry 'ell. Suited me grand, that did!"

Well, I could have murdered the hard-boiled little devil right then and there.

"Yes," I said. "And what about Whisky Jack?"

His face fell at once.

"I didn't count on that," he admitted. "'E was a better feller than what I give 'im credit for, that doc was. Yus, an' chance it! And anyway, maybe 'e's better where 'e is."

I wasn't going to go on record on that, one way or the other. Though there might—just might—be something in what Griggs said. That Horrocks business was murder, and Whisky Jack had known all about it. Maybe after all—

"Okay," I said. "We'll let it go at that. But I can't say I'm tickled with your idea of me. Why, you damned little pint-sized swipe, for two pins I'd stand you on your ear!"

Griggs sat up with a jerk. "'Ere!" he began nastily. "You cut that out, d'ye see, cully? I ain't goin' to—"

Andries had come over from the rail. He tapped Griggs on the shoulder.

"Cut it oudt yourself, liddle mans!" he growled. "Und look yonder! Dere's der very-tamn Briddish gunboat—und by Gott, she's tellin' us shtop!"

GRIGGS cast a single look over the rail. Then he dropped flat to the deck, and on his hands and knees scuttled for the companionway as if the devil and all his assistants were after him. Andries whipped up the deck-chair and handed it behind him to his mate. The gin-bottle vanished equally quickly, and Andries turned to me.

"You gif him away, eh?" he asked anxiously. "Der police, dey look for dot liddle *schellum* for years."

The British naval officer—one of those lean, benevolent British naval officers who look as if they'd hang you with all the politeness in the world—fixed me with a cold gray eye.

"Well, you're lucky, Mr. Harkness," he said. "Damned lucky, as a matter of fact. We've just come from Buwi now—dropped in there quite by accident—and there won't be any more long-pig in that area for awhile, I fancy. Thanks very much for your side of it—it'll go forward through the usual channels and you may be asked to testify later. But," the eye bored at me, "there was something else, d'ye know?"

"There was, eh?" I said, knowing very well what it was.

"In your most interesting report," said Fish-Eye, "you don't seem to have mentioned one individual. A man by the name of Griggs."

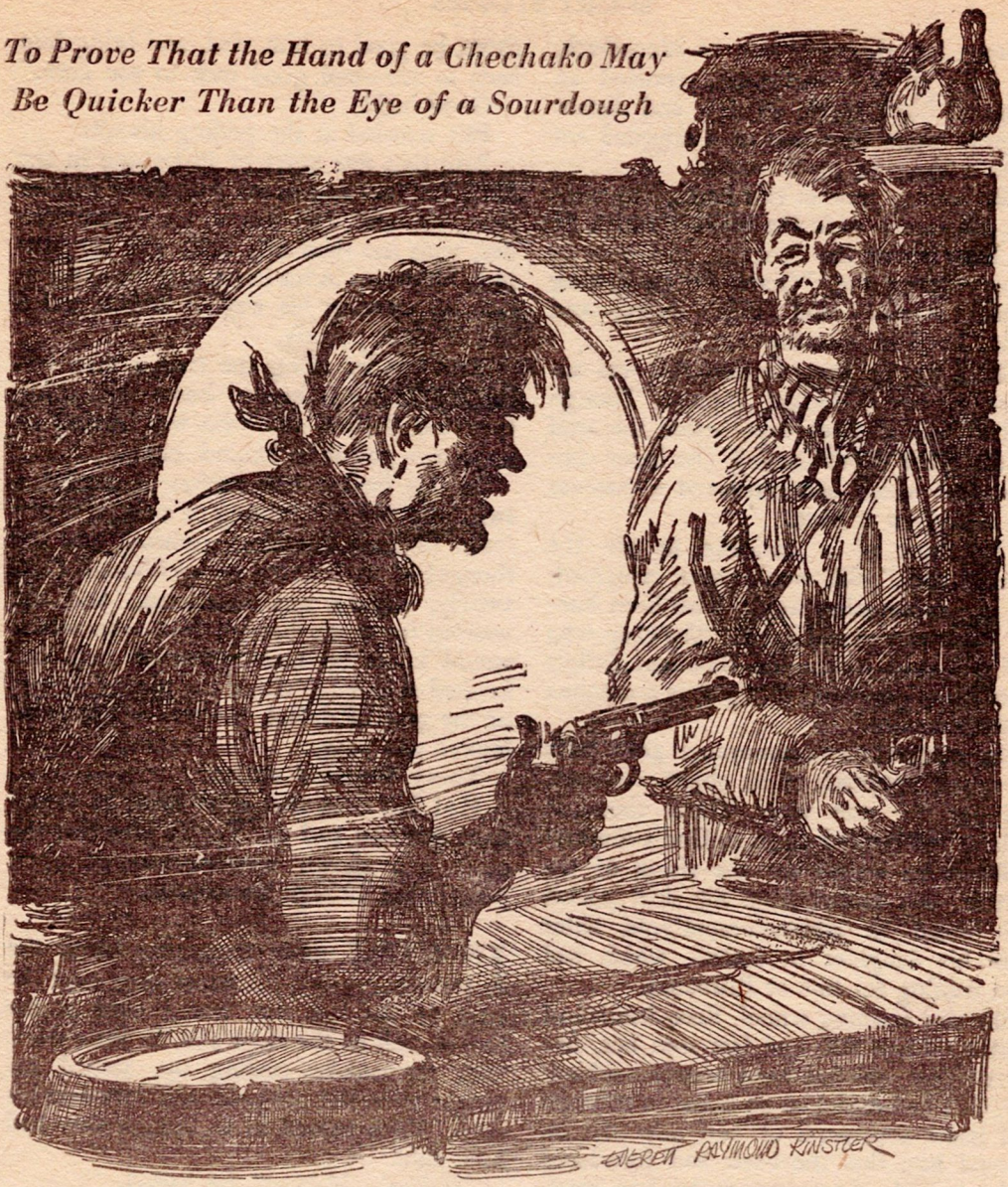
"Griggs?" I said, puzzled.

"Griggs," the officer repeated. "We know he'd been there—found traces of him, in fact. And we want him—we want him very, very badly. How about it, Mr. Harkness?"

I looked him square in that cold, you-be-damned orb of his, while his escort of stolid tars stood rigid to their rifles.

"Lieutenant," I said simply, "you've got me wrong. I never heard of the man in all my life!"

To Prove That the Hand of a Chechako May Be Quicker Than the Eye of a Sourdough



THE LUCK OF THE SMITHS

By CHARLES B. STILSON

FROM the doorless threshold of an abandoned cabin beside the Chistochina Trail, Bill Smith, straining eyes which the sun's glare on many snows had faded, saw the approach of the man whom he was going to kill.

Winter already had marched by on its way south from the Yukon; trails were erased; streams were hardened and hidden; the branches of the sullen spruces creaked earthward under white burdens.

Bill should have gone on to Valdez ahead of it; but he had waited.

Down the gleaming side of Mooseback, two hills to the northward, crawled an elongated black speck, its slow and distant progress resembling that of a crippled ant across a sheet of blank paper.

"Be here in another two hours," thought Bill. He thrust aside the blanket which he had hung across the doorway, and went in to his leaping fire. "Guess I'll be getting biscuits started, and then coffee—and bacon. He'll be wanting 'em."

There was no irony in this. Bill was unaware of any homicidal impulse. Though he had waited three days beside the trail for the other man's coming, the inner consciousness which had conceived a purpose had not given it birth.

"Just sort of a curiosity to see the damned fool," Bill would have explained; and the explanation would have been honest. What else would it be? "The chap who will quit cold with thirty thousand dollars when there's millions in sight, is a damned freak of nature."

His contemptuous annoyance grew with the nearer approach of its object. And yet, was not the man wise? Thirty thousand dollars, and headed down to God's country!

While he waited for the rising of the biscuits, Bill pulled from his shirt pocket and reread an eighteen-month-old letter from his daughter in Seattle, which had been waiting for him at Fairbanks.

She was teaching school, Rose Smith had written. When Bill had last seen her, five years before, she had been herself a schoolgirl. Bill had meant to go home in triumph and make a princess of her; now she informed him that the bank had foreclosed and taken the home which he had mortgaged to stake his fortune-hunting and she was working for a living. Bill's hand closed tightly every time he thought of that loss, though he could not blame the bank.

Rose was engaged to be married. The man was also a schoolteacher.

"But the pay is poor, and we'd have to wait too long. So he's going into the North, dad. He'll be there by the time you get this letter, maybe. His name is Smith, too, Henry Smith. He says that we may be distantly related (Ha! ha!). Anyway, we're going to be—less distantly. If you run across him up there, be good to him, dad, and bring him back to me—and good luck to you both."

Good luck!

Bill scowled at the puffing biscuits.

Sure that five years of ill-fortune in the Klondike had frozen the gold fever forever from his veins, Bill was on his way to Valdez, with less than fifty dollars in his dust-sack, bitterness in his heart, and the expectation of working his way to Seattle and a life of quiet poverty.

And yonder along the trail a man was coming who was headed home with thirty thousand dollars, and who was leaving an unknown golconda behind him!

In this land a few strokes of a pick, a twist of a pan, the turning of a stone, might mean lifelong happiness, comfort, and the thought of well-reared grandchildren. Conversely, failure was heartbreak, and the waiting for death through dead years which would know no resurrection of ambition. Looked at through either the rose of success or the gray of defeat, the toll of the gold-hunter was heavy.

Thirty thousand dollars!

Had Bill been that other man, he would have gone on and on. Yet an idea that the other had shown wisdom insisted upon penetrating through his wonder.

IN LITTLE more than two hours the traveler mushed his weary dogs over the crest of the last rise, stared hard at the broken trail on the slope and the little shack with the smoke curling up, leaned his weight upon the gee-pole, and followed his dogs, which turned in as though they had been told.

"Halloa!—Halloa!" he hailed.

"Chechako!" sneered Bill, observing those maneuvers through the blanket flap at his doorway. "Raw as an oyster! And *that* is toting thirty thousand in dust!"

He based his aspersions on the assurance of a sourdough of five years seasoning. Nevertheless, he answered the hail cordially enough, slipped into his mackinaw, and went out to help with the dogs.

As they met in the knee-deep snow, the two men were curiously similar. Both were long and lean and loosely-hung. The features of both were partially obscured by growths of scraggy black beard, and both

wore fur caps with ear-flaps. But the stranger sported a bearskin coat; and Bill guessed from his voice that he was many years the younger.

There was the further difference between sourdough and chechako (tenderfoot)—a distinction not of appearance, but of manner, and marked as the variance between a Wall Street financier and an Eden Corners banker.

Bill was off-hand and casual. The younger man was harassed and nervous, and bore himself with an air of needless bravado. He packed two .45's at the front of his hips outside his coat, and a rifle lay ostentatiously on top of the blankets on his sled. He was red-eyed from lack of sleep, and his dogs had been run to the bone. Noticing those things, Bill grinned.

"Y' goin' to leave *that* outside?" he asked with malicious emphasis, pointing to the sled. They had stowed the dogs, and the other had slipped his snowshoes and picked up his rifle to follow to the cabin. His grip on the weapon tightened perceptibly. He stared at Bill through half-drawn lids and then laughed loudly.

"So you know about that, do you? Yes, it can stay there; there isn't any one to touch it but you, and you appear honest. This isn't exactly Main Street, you know. Hell, everyone's honest up here, except the damned Indians! One of 'em trailed after me back yonder for the best part of a week, and I was near to putting a bullet through him, so I could get some sleep. He passed me six days ago. I suppose that he told you about me, eh?"

Bill admitted that such had been the fount of his information.

"And you waited for me?"

Again Bill wagged his head.

Inside the cabin the stranger leaned his rifle against the table, unbuckled his belt with its dangling revolvers, and shed his bearskin coat. He immediately picked up the belt again.

"Force of habit," he said, pausing with it partially adjusted around his hips. He made a move as if to lay it aside, laughed uneasily, and continued to buckle it, assuring himself of the easy hang of his weapons.

No armament was disclosed when Bill peeled out of his mackinaw. His own rifle hung from a peg on the wall.

He approached the fire and began to sizzle bacon. The newcomer removed the mukluks from his feet, and then the socks. He winced as the half-inch wool came away. Bill saw that the exposed members were blotched, and raw between the toes. His guest padded to the door, trampled for a few seconds in a snowdrift, and returned and dried his feet at the fire.

"They're pretty bad; but they've got to carry me to Valdez," he observed.

BILL poured coffee. The stranger ate in the manner of one to whom a meal was a rare acquaintance, the like of which he might never meet again.

"No time for this sort of stuff on the trail," he explained, indicating the fast-disappearing biscuits.

"Come in Valdez way?" Bill inquired, when only crumbs and odors remained, and the pipes were fuming.

"No—St. Michael."

"How long?"

"Fourteen months."

"Goin' back?"

"You bet—not!" with a shake of his head that sent his hair cascading over his eyes. After a pause, he asked:

"I suppose that you are thinking what a fool I am?"

"Something like that."

"Oh, I don't know; thirty thousand dollars isn't bad as things are reckoned back below. I never was a hog—and I want to tell you that I died once a day and was resurrected the next morning getting that much."

"Whereaway?"

"Not telling."

They smoked in thoughtful silence. Bill set out a whiskey bottle.

"Not on your picture!" said the stranger; but his red-rimmed eyes glittered. As he smoked, his relaxed hands rested on the grips of his revolvers. Bill poured himself a drink in one of the tin coffee cups.

"I wouldn't give a grain of that yellow stuff out there for a vat of it," asseverated his guest, lending an ear to the gurgle; "—but I would give a finger for three fingers of it."

He seized the bottle, poured half a cupful, and swallowed it in two gulps.

Presently his tongue began to run. He was querulous, ironical and bombastic by turns. Bill listened apathetically.

"Why haven't I told any one where I got it? Why, damn it, I wouldn't ask my worst enemy to go there—and to tell a man would be to force him. If I told you, you would be starting tomorrow, wouldn't you? There's millions there—when you get there. I brought away only what I could carry.

"But ninety men out of a hundred would die trying to get there, and nine out of the other ten would die getting away. I'm the hundredth man; and I belong to a family that has always been lucky. Say, wouldn't you back-trail it tomorrow, winter and all, if I should tell you, you damned old sourdough?—Look here.—Now wouldn't you?"

When the insolent and irritating chechako shook a dust-sack and strewed the table-top with glittering yellow granules as large as beans, Bill's apathy vanished up the flue with the smoke.

"Yes," he answered, and took another drink to cut the hoarseness in his throat.

"That's the way it runs, some larger and some smaller," said the stranger, scraping up the gold and dropping it clinking back into the bag. "Of course you would—if I told you. You'd go, and you'd die trying to get it. That's sure. And you're sore at me for not starting you. Stick to biscuits, old man—you're a winner at that. I have conceived a regard for you and your biscuits. I would not be a murderer. It takes a better man than you to get this stuff where I got it. The only honest Indian in Alaska showed me the way, and I buried him at the end of the trail."

Warmth of body and of spirit were having their effect. The stranger yawned widely and his eyes wavered.

"Why did I come in?" he asked, as though repeating a question. "I'm here on account of a girl, of course. What else would drive a man with a brain in his head to come into this God-forsaken wilderness? I've got enough for us, and I'm going back out to her, and we'll—" His voice trailed into unintelligibility and stopped. His head swung low.

In an instant he was out of his seat with galvanic celerity, his fingers wrapped around the butts of his pistols. He goggled owlishly at Bill.

"Got to be g-getting along," he stammered thickly. He reeled across the floor toward where he had flung his coat, saw Bill's bunk before him, and fell across it face downward, his legs dragging.

Bill followed, lifted the damaged feet into the bunk, and covered them with a blanket. Then he returned to the table, poured himself another slender drink, and sat down to think.

His thoughts were heavy; and when he lay that night beside the fire and went to sleep to the tune of the still slumbering stranger's sonorous snoring, they turned into strange dreams.

Not until he awakened in the morning and found his guest stretched just as he had left him, did Bill realize that he was going to kill the man; then he saw clearly that that had been the sole purpose of his waiting.

It was diabolically simple. Neither of them ever had been in the Valdez country. Bill had come in by way of Juneau five years before, and traversed the Canadian Klondike to Dawson. The two men were not dissimilar in appearance. Bill had only to ape the manners of the chechako, take the other man's dogs, and mush on to Valdez. His appearance would satisfy any curious ones there, whom rumor had prepared for the coming of the mad tenderfoot and his load of gold. What was left behind the snow would cover and the spring would make unrecognizable. If it were ever found, someone might say a prayer over the remains of one William Smith, dead from causes unknown.

Thirty thousand dollars! Not the riches of his early dreams, but still life comfort. His daughter's young man could come home again, and they would live quietly together.

Bill stepped out and looked at the sled. He fed the dogs. They were a measly lot, and he hated to take them and abandon his own; but he must pare down the chances. Sometimes dogs were recognized where a man might pass unchallenged, and they would have to be sold at Valdez.

With his best skill Bill prepared breakfast. When the bacon was crisped to ring a

knife-blade, he touched the sleeper on the shoulder. The man came up standing, striking straight in front of him with both fists, and then stood in the center of the floor laughing foolishly.

"My God! I've slept my head off, haven't I? First snooze I've had like that in six months—and say, I could turn right back in and do it over again." He yawned.

From the corner of an eye Bill, who pretended to be absorbed in the condition of the coffee, saw that the man, while he talked, covertly examined his revolvers, and groped in the pocket where he carried his dust-sack. He stepped to the door, cast a sharp glance at the sled, and turned back to the table with an expression of relief on his face.

These demonstrations were distinctly in bad taste; and under any than the given circumstances they would have borne grapes of wrath. But Bill, calculating robbery at the price of murder, heeded them not.

Bill, who had not done a dishonest act in his life, was surprised that he felt no qualm whatever. It was as though an intelligence more powerful than his had possessed itself of his faculties in the night and clubbed his conscience into numbed submission.

"I'll let him eat in peace, and then I'll do it," he thought.

While the stranger was still doing nobly by his cookery, Bill left the table and from the doorway inspected the trail. More snow had fallen in the night. North and south to the limit of vision the white monotony was broken only by the motionless dark patches of the spruce clumps. Fate was sending no messenger along the Chistochina Trail to reprieve the chechako. Bill returned to his seat and waited.

When the other man asked for more whiskey, Bill ungrudgingly produced the bottle, though there was not enough left for more than one drink, as this man drank.

"Might as well die happy," Bill reflected, watching the last of the liquor slip down his guest's throat. He set the emptied cup on the table with a sigh of satisfaction.

"First whiskey I've had in a year, you have given me; first easy sleep I've had in half a year, has been under your roof." He stretched his arms luxuriously. To the last a very devil of discourtesy ruled his language. "Say, partner, you've had all kinds of chances to do for me and cut stick with my dust. You must be an honest man."

"I allow to controvert that statement," replied Bill; and there was no mirth in his voice or eyes.

He spoke deliberately, and as deliberately drew his revolver from inside his vest under his armpit, and leveled it across the table.

Sensitive as a wire to the change in his host's attitude, the chechako's arms had fallen, and his nervous hand fluttered toward his pistols. At sight of Bill's weapon he arrested them near the edge of the table.

"What's the joke?" he asked, with a sickly attempt at a smile.

"Put 'em up!" Bill's voice rang uncompromisingly. "You had your one chance when I started to draw. If you was anything but a miserable chechako, you'd a' beat me to it and plugged me. Stick 'em up, I say!"

The stranger had hesitated, and seemed disposed to argue the injunction. He hesitated still.

"Chance!" he exclaimed. "How was I to know that you would violate the sacred laws of hospitality?"

"Damn the sacred laws of hospitality!" groaned Bill, touched on the raw. "Lift 'em, or I'll violate your sacred jaw with an ounce of lead!" His trigger-finger trembled.

With astounding promptitude, the chechako "lifted 'em," not in the air, where Bill had directed, but to set them against the edge of the table and thrust it from him with both speed and force.

The edge of it caught Bill in the midriff, jolted the breath out of him, and spilled him backward. Clawing at the air, he sprawled from his stool; the revolver exploded, its bullet ripping through the bark roof; and his discomfiture was completed by the arrival upon his chest of the chechako who leaped cleanly over the table and descended through the smoke with a violence which expelled the little wind left in Bill's lungs.

Bill gulped and choked, looking into the unwinking eye of one of the stranger's .45's.

"In which it is proved that the hand of a chechako may be quicker than the eye of a sourdough," jeered the younger man, removing his knees from Bill's stomach and

possessing himself of Bill's gun. "Didn't I tell you that I came of a lucky family? You can't beat the luck of the Smiths.—Get up!"

His foot prodded Bill in the ribs.

But Bill showed no inclination to obey the command or resent the indignity. He lay on his back with a cold fear at his heart, and his eyes popped. A name had sounded in his ears like screaming brass.

"Smith!" he gasped painfully with his returning breath. "Is *your* name Smith?"

"Yes, my ancient and sluggish sourdough it is—Smith—Henry Smith. Didn't you ever hear the name before? I assure you that the family is large—and lucky."

Fearful least his eyes should say a volume, Bill turned his face toward the hearth.

"Say, are you a schoolteacher?" he asked at length, striving for his oldtime casual speech.

"Why, I *have* taught school in the course of my checkered career," answered Henry Smith, looking down at him curiously across the sights of his revolver. "How did you guess it?"

"Oh, you kinda talk like one." Bill got limply to his feet.

"*Huh,*" said Henry. "Stand away from me.— Say, I hardly know what to do to you, you old beast. I suppose that I would be entirely justified in killing you, after the miserable play you've made. Why, you're worse than any damned Indian! But I've been up here only a few months, and I have not acquired the sourdough facility at murder— By Jove! I *do* know what I'll do with you! Back over there to the corner by the fire, please, and stand perfectly still. I warn you that for a chechako I'm a fair shot— So; that will do."

He extracted an envelope and a stub of a pencil from a pocket. From the envelope he took a dirty piece of paper on which a map had been traced.

"There," he went on, after he had scrawled a few sentences beneath the diagram. "That should be intelligible to a sourdough. That's the map of the place where I've come from. It's up in the Colville River district beyond Chandler Lake, at the head of a creek that the Indians call 'Whispering Water.'" Bill's eyes widened at mention of the Colville region, as dangerous a locality as there is in all perilous Alaska. "I'm going to make you a present of it. You will go, of course; and it is my impression that you will perish miserably. I may relent toward you later, in time forgive you; but in my present frame of mind I most sincerely hope that you do."

Bill had nothing to say. He stood humbly and with downcast eyes in the presence of fate and Henry Smith. When the chechako brusquely commanded him to help with the dogs, he went meekly forth at the pistol's point, and did his bidding.

Henry Smith had taken the rifle from its peg in the cabin. He laid it with Bill's revolver on the sled, and spoke succinctly.

"I'll hang your guns on that clump of spruce on top of the next hill. When I have passed on, you may go and get them. If you follow me into Valdez, I shall turn you over to the authorities. If I run across you again on this trail, or any other trail I shall shoot you without compunction. Good-bye, and bad luck to you!"

Bill sat on the threshold and watched his departure; and presently he spoke aloud:

"There goes the father of my future grandchildren—and my last chance of ever seeing Rosie." He said it with a sob. "I dassent go home now. And it serves me right. Oh, what an ass I am!"

It was some time before he remembered the map. When he looked on the table for the paper, it was gone. He found it perilously near the fire, where a gust of wind had blown it.

"Suppose it's the only thing left to do— Kade Ember will stake me," he muttered. "Damn the luck of the Smiths!"

So, while Henry Smith mushed southward toward Valdez, open water, and a girl who waited at home, William Smith fled into the white north, his trail haunted by ghosts of the living—which may be much more troublesome than the ghost of the dead.

Something less than two years later Bill Smith entered Fairbanks from the northwest with twenty Yukon Indians and their dog-sleds behind him. He was gaunt as a famished wolf, and the Colville trails had claimed six of his toes. He led his procession to the government office. After the conclusion of formalities there, and the departure of his Indians with orders on many

stores, he stumped into Kade Ember's Golden Palace, whither rumor and reputation had preceded him.

Dice, coins, and glasses were clicking and clinking, and voices hoarse and voices mellow were intoning familiar invocations.

Bill marched to the bar.

"Weigh your stake out of that, Kade, and treat yourself right," he said, hoisting onto the bar a dust-sack that opened the gambler's seasoned eyes.

"Whew-ee!" whistled Ember, peering inside before he sent the sack to the blower. "Hit it hard at last, ain't you? There's a flock of stories flying around about you."

"Fetched in about nine hundred thousand," responded Bill, without enthusiasm. "There's plenty more where it came from."

Ember's eyebrows went up. "S'pose you'll be goin' out?" he queried.

"Naw, I ain't goin' out." Bill said it shortly. "Tell you what, Kade, I might buy you out, and run this dump myself. What, about, do you consider she's worth, lock, stock and barrel—and good-will?"

Kade laughed; but Bill was in earnest.

"Got some letters for you, Bill," announced the gambler, to turn the conversation. "Here's your sack, a little lighter."

There were three letters from Rose Smith, dated many months apart. Bill read them chronologically. In each of the three was one feature which sprang out and hit him between the eyes like a hammer.

"Henry has accepted a position as principal of a grammar-school," was the high light in the oldest communication. "The pay is quite good, so he won't come North after all. We are to be married at once."

"I worry a lot about you, dad," began the kick in the second letter. "Why don't you write? You are going to be a grandpa before very long."

In the third envelope were a few sentences only, and a picture labeled; "The Smith Family. William Henry wants to see his grand-daddy."

Bill's eyes snapped first of all to the man in the picture, the parent of William Henry. He was a short, stoutish chap with undeniably blond hair.

To recover from the daze which the blows had dealt him, Bill leaned his forehead against the bar. Then he raised his arms and howled.

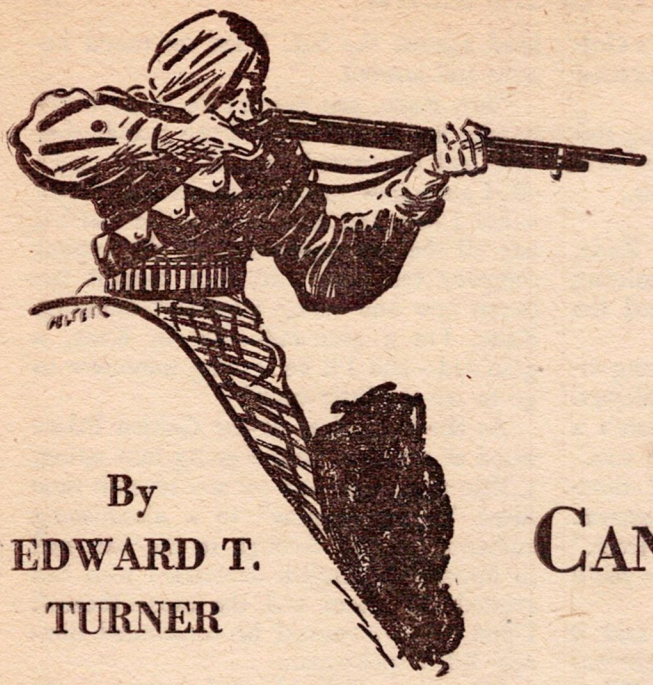
"Say, Kade, you needn't be in no hurry to take inventory!" bawled the grandfather who had discovered himself. "That deal's off. I ain't goin' to buy your darned ol' pen—but I here and now serve notice that I'll buy all the wet goods that all the present company can pour into their coppers between now and sunup tomorrow morning. Kade, I'm a gran'dad!—get it, Kade, a gran'dad—and I'll be leaving tomorrow to go to see the little cuss!"

As the bartenders of the Golden Palace stood at attention before going into action, a Yale man, who had for the seventh time lilted "Sweet Adeline" to a diminishing audience, pushed through to the bar, and in impeccable English demanded who had created the alarm and the cause thereof. Upon being informed he constituted himself Bill's spokesman.

"Gentlemen!" he shouted, leaping on to the bar. "We have with us tonight William Smith, sourdough. He returns to our bosom after a course of high adventure under the auspices of the fickle goddess. She has smiled upon him, and he comes heavy-laden. To overflow his cup of gladness, he has received news from God's good country down below that his daughter, blood of his blood and bone of his bone, has—er—in short, that he has attained the dignity of a grandfather. Tomorrow he goes again from our midst to visit the child, and he doubtless will buy it a golden rattle set with diamonds. But tonight, gentlemen, he asks that you join him in drinking to the health of—what is the child's name, please? Ah, yes—to the health of William Henry Smith!"

When the crashing echoes of that first toast had died away, Bill spoke up for himself, employing language which proclaimed him forever an outcast and renegade from the honorable ranks of sourdoughs.

"Gentlemen, I thank you. I trust that you will not find it presumptuous in me if I propose as a second toast a sentiment which seems to me peculiarly appropriate, under all the circumstances involved. Gentlemen, you will honor me by drinking 'The Luck of the Smiths!' "



THE COBRA CANDLESTICKS

By EDWARD T. TURNER

IT HAD been said, with a good deal of truth, that all things of any importance in India, started and finished at Delhi. And the reason was not just because it happened to be the capital of British India, but rather by reason of that sink of iniquity which lay beneath the din, and stink, and dust of the native section beyond the Old City Gate.

There were in all perhaps a dozen Englishmen who could claim to know even a tenth part of what went on there. Without exception, each one of this dozen was known only by a number, filed at Government House under the Secret Service list.

Tom Blakney had been one of them.

But this day as his huge, loose figure, clad in spotless shantung, percolated through the crowd along the Chandi Chauk, ancient street of the silversmiths, he felt none of the responsibilities of office. Blakney's three months leave started in the morning, and he was on no more serious business than the choice of gifts for the folks at home. Even so his alert blue eyes missed nothing worth noticing in all the hot human kaleidoscope which eddied around him, and seemed to find new interest at every turn.

The street was ablaze with crude color beneath a savage sun. A thousand signs, unintelligible to most Western eyes, made an endless pattern as far as the eye could reach.

Turning into the unpretentious shop of a silver *bunnia,* the gloom of the stifling little room after the outside glare, momentarily dimmed his sight. But his sharp hearing picked up the sing-song tone of voice

It Was a Snake of Death and Its Trail Led to the Ever Restless Hills

adopted by a native when he breaks into precise English.

"Guard it well, Sahib, and show it to no man on the way unless hard pressed. Follow the directions I gave thee to She who waits thy coming. At journey's end show it as thy right for audience."

CURIOUS words these, enough to tickle the curiosity of any man, let alone a member of the S. S. Blakney's eyes, now accustomed to the gloom, made out two figures at the far end of the shop. Apparently neither of them had noticed his silent entry. The native speaker behind the counter was undoubtedly Sharma the proprietor, and the other, judging from the cut of his clothes, an American tourist. This was confirmed a moment later when the tones of a Mid-Western voice drifted back to Blakney.

"Sounds very mysterious. And what's the answer when I get there?"

"She will tell thee," replied the native.

"Okay. Wrap it up!"

This the *bunnia* proceeded to do, but not before Blakney got a good look at the object under discussion. It was a curiously designed candlestick of beaten silver, standing about six inches high. Common to many made for the European market by the brass workers of India, it resembled a cobra with its head raised to strike, and the body twisted into a coil to form a standing base.

A strange feature distinguished this model from the more usual design. In place of the usually symmetrical coiling of the body, this one twisted and turned upon itself as if the reptile was writhing in agony.

Blakney moved forward to get a better view. Instantly the *bunnia* became aware of his presence and hastily parceled the candlestick.

A strangely silent young man, this Blakney, who rarely spoke unless first addressed; tough as raffia, brown as leather, he leaned backward across the counter, slowly exhaling cigarette smoke and watching the American with a slightly insolent stare.

He saw a man in his early thirties; a sharply defined sensitive profile, matched with equally sensitive hands; an alert expression and blazing blue eyes—and liked what he saw.

The American tucked the parcel under his arm, and left the shop without speaking.

Now this, too, was strange, thought Blakney. He had been given to understand that Americans in far places were inclined to hail fellow whites with a big hand. He shrugged and turned to the *bunnia*.

"Show me some silver ink-wells," he drawled.

AFTER making his purchases, Blakney hailed a *ghærri* and told the driver to take him to the squat white stone buildings which housed the British administration.

There is a native proverb which says in effect that the best way for a man to appear inconspicuous, is for him to walk boldly in the center of the bazaar. This may or may not be true, but the fact remained that just inside the lobby of Government House, facing the busy main entrance, there was a door with no name printed on its frosted glass panel.

Blakney swung open that door without knocking and greeted his chief with a slow smile.

"Come to say good-bye," sir," he said. "Going on leave in the morning."

The little man behind a big mahogany desk pushed the chair opposite him out with his foot.

"Sit down, laddie, and tell me how you're planning to waste your time," he grumbled. To George MacIntyre, who headed that Secret Service list, with twenty odd years service to his record, anything not directly or indirectly connected with the S. S. was a waste of time. When the British finally left India one of the last men to go was MacIntyre.

BLAKNEY slumped down into the proffered chair and crossed his long legs in front of him.

"Don't exactly know, sir," he answered. "The usual things I suppose. Drop in on the old folks. Play some golf. See a bit of first class cricket. Do a few shows." It didn't sound much put that way, but behind the casual words there was a depth of feeling for those things which constituted leave in the Old Country. They embraced things only dreamed of in sunbaked India: cool green grass and shade; the Oval and Hen-

ley; clear pitched English voices everywhere; pretty girls beneath picture hats on the river; cool nights which would let a man sleep.

"I ran into an odd thing on Silver Street today, sir," the younger man remarked, and proceeded to tell his chief of the incident of the American and his candlestick.

When he had finished MacIntyre whistled softly. Then without a word, rose and unlocked a steel cabinet, thumbed over the index until he reached the letter M. Pulling out a bulky folio he returned with it to his desk.

"You wouldn't of course remember Allen Monkhouse—a little before your time. Nice lad." MacIntyre's voice cut crisply across the room. "I sent him up into the Hills to investigate a series of raids that looked too well organized to be the work of common bandits. He never got back. Died from a cobra bite at Fort Ali Masjid. That was in '19. Among his papers we found this. Take a look at it." He handed Blakney a piece of soiled brownish paper on which there was a rough sketch in charcoal.

"By Jove!" Blakney straightened up with interest. "Why that's a sketch of the candlestick I saw this morning!"

"I thought it might be."

"He has even made a separate plan of the peculiar twisting of the body."

"You say this fellow was an American?" cut in his chief.

"Pretty certain, sir."

MACINTYRE briefly consulted the consulate's official visitors list in Delhi. "Here we are," he grunted. "The only American to visit our Mother City of Dynasties in the past month was one, Julius H. Cordie. And he is still with us, staying at the Star of India Hotel. Let's see what we can find out about him." He pulled the telephone toward him.

First he called the Star Hotel and asked for a room number.

"That you Number 87? This is Number One. Yes. Get all you can on Julius H. Cordie, now staying at the Star, and call me back within half an hour. I am especially interested in his future plans—when leaving, destination, and purpose. Repeat!"

The second call was to the editorial offices of the Delhi *Times*, and asked for Charlie Skentlebury, American newspaper correspondent for a well-known New York daily.

"Is that you, Charlie? This is MacIntyre." The Scotchman's r's rolled out a shade more prominently. "Where in the world have you been? Is that so? Now you're back what about dinner at my place next Friday? You will? Fine, I'll expect you at eight. I heard the other day—quite unofficially of course—that the ah—notorious Mrs. Cooper is returning to the States next month. Yes you're welcome to use it. By the way, give me the low-down on this fellow Cordie, just come in. No, nothing wrong—just curious."

He drew a scribbling pad forward and for the next minute wrote rapidly. Slipping the receiver back on its hook he turned to Blakney.

"You know Charlie of course" he queried.

"Yes, sir."

"He can't give us much, but what he has is illuminating. Our friend Cordie enjoys quite a reputation in the States as a clever young physician and surgeon. Park Avenue place and all that. Harvard graduate, independent means, whatever that means, and single. And get this—he's known in club circles as the Magic Carpet Doctor, because of a weakness for foreign travel off the beaten tracks—likes to boast of visiting places previously unseen by white men. There, I fancy, Blakney, we'll find the motive."

"Motive for what?"

"While we're waiting for the rest of the set-up, I'll tell you what we suspect, and what little we actually know. Rumor has it that there is but a single pair of these candlesticks in existence. Whenever one of 'em turns up in Delhi, trouble in the Hills follows as inevitably as a female snake follows her mate. In '15, it was a series of well-organized raids on border forts. In '19, when young Monkhouse got his, it was a jihad. And if it hadn't been for his guts in making Ali Masjid with advance information, you and I, laddie, might not be sitting here now!"

MacIntyre paused to pull thoughtfully at his sandy mustache.

"Then in May, 1929," he resumed, "one of the cursed things was seen right inside the army barracks, here in Delhi. Two weeks later a horde of fifteen hundred fighting Pathans descended on the fort at Quetta, and, after wiping out the garrison, carried off five hundred government rifles and fifty thousand rounds of ammunition! Now you say you've seen the damned thing again this morning. What will it be this time?"

"What's most likely, sir?"

"Another jihad. Whole country is gasping for it. Ghandi has got the south all keyed up—"

"And a Holy war launched from the Hills would mean anarchy in the plains," cut in Blakney.

"Exactly! A big scale jihad just now would set all India by the ears, Hindus and Moslems alike."

"But where do the candlesticks come from?"

"There's the rub. We don't know. Every time one of them comes down from the Hills, somebody has got to take it back. Until today, we have never been able to get a line on the messenger. And now, as if the riddle wasn't hard enough, it turns out to be a Westerner!"

"Couldn't be anything political?"

"Hell no! What in the name of creation would the States want in India?" MacIntyre frowned. "There's just one other thing I haven't told you. The sort of gossip a lot of men would call a piece of superstitious rubbish, but we of the Service have learnt not to discount all gossip as useless, eh?"

Blakney gave an affirmative nod.

"Well the bazaars have it that these two candlesticks are the special talisman of a legendary figure known as the 'Mother of Cobra Mountain.' Who or what she is, heaven alone knows, but the story goes that she claims kinship with Alexander the Great, who as you know, crossed the Himalayas to invade India around 329 B.C. Rubbish of course, but there it is. Further, she is supposed to have a stronghold somewhere in the Hills back of the Khyber Pass, where sooner or later, every Afghan desperado pitches his tent." He coughed apologetically. "All efforts of the Air Force border patrol to locate such a spot have failed."

"Sounds a bit fantastic, sir."

"Of course it does! Ever hear of anything that didn't in this country?"

There was a discreet knock at the door.

"Come in!" snapped MacIntyre.

A WELL dressed native entered softly, salaamed, and stood a dozen paces in front of the desk.

MacIntyre frowned. "I told you to telephone, Number 87," he snapped. "Why then are you here?"

"The distance from the *istashun*, Sahib, was of less duration than the wrong numbers of telephone operators," the native answered simply without a smile.

"What didst thou at the station?"

"The hotel clerk tell me that the Cordie Sahib had left for the isstation without his baggage but a few moments before your honor called me."

"Proceed!"

"Cordie Sahib travels north by tonight's teerain."

"How knowest thou?"

"Did I not myself see him buy the tikkut, Sahib?"

"For what destination?"

"Peshawar!"

"Good! Return now to the hotel, and keep Cordie Sahib under observation. Report only to me should he attempt to leave by any other route. You may go."

MacIntyre pushed back his chair, paced once across the room, and once back again with hands locked behind him, eyes on the floor. Then he stood for long minutes looking out of the window.

Reluctantly Blakney stood up to go. Just his luck to come up for leave when something big broke.

"Well, sir, I think I'll move along—packing to do."

The little Scotchman turned inward and came to a halt in front of his subordinate. His voice became the least shade more authoritative.

"Sit down, Number Four! Your leave of absence is revoked indefinitely. Your orders are to keep the American, Julius Cordie, under close observation without his knowledge," he continued evenly. "You will travel *with* him to his unknown destination in Afghanistan, and will do everything within your power to see that he returns alive. Report your findings to me as soon as possible, and—there mustn't be a jihad! That's all." MacIntyre relaxed in his chair with something very near a sigh of relief as at the completion of an unpleasant duty.

"Yes, sir. Thank you!" Blakney beamed.

"Don't thank me—spoiling your fun. Wouldn't have done it if there had been anyone else I could have trusted." He sent a box of cigars sliding across the table. No one ever started out on a job before smoking one of Mac's famous cigars.

"Smoke? Every riddle has a key. Try and find the one to Cobra Mountain, if such a place exists, and I'll promise your leave is doubled when you get back. It may help you to know that I realize you've got about one chance in a thousand to get out alive. Draw what money you need from the cashier, and I'll see the border patrol give you every cooperation."

The Scotchman's hairy little right hand shot out across the desk.

"Go to it, laddie!"

THE station platform was crowded to suffocation by a crowd that chattered like excited monkeys, and smelled to high heaven. Flies buzzed everywhere. Above the unholy din of the native travelers clamoring for places, rose the scream of escaping steam. Lean brown coolies were elbowed ruthlessly aside for more prosperous looking merchants, in the mad scramble to board the already crowded train.

Head and shoulders above the mob, Blakney's passage through that frenzied human eddy was little more than miraculous. It seemed the easiest thing in the world. The looseness of his long limbs appeared to dissolve into the densest part of the crowd, and a moment later arrive at the door of a first class carriage with a reserved label plastered across its window.

He was relieved to notice that the American had not yet arrived. By being there first, the coincidence of a second chance meeting on the same day, would not appear so marked.

Five minutes later, a native porter burdened with but a single small suitcase jostled his way to the carriage door. Half a dozen native travelers sought to drag information from him in passing, and even clung to his free arm to gain attention.

"Am I Allah?" the babu wailed, spitting eloquently at the nearest detaining hand. "That I can work ten miracles at once, if not sooner!"

Behind the babu two native "constabeels" scattered a way through the crowd for the American.

If he felt any surprise at seeing Blakney in the carriage, he did not show it. Over-tipping the babu, he hesitated to do likewise to the perspiring members of law and order.

"The excellent constabeels will not take offense, I'm sure," Blakney helped him out with a disarming smile. That smile had more than once dissolved seemingly unsurmountable barriers.

"Thanks!" Cordie acknowledged, dispensing coins. "Say—didn't I see you in Silver Street this morning?"

"Why yes—in Sharma's place," he held out his hand. "The name is Blakney."

"Glad to know you Mr. Blakney. Mine's Cordie. Julius H. Cordie."

"Not the heart specialist?"

"Uh-huh. But let's forget it. I'm on vacation." When he smiled, attractive crowfeet wrinkled around his eyes.

"You choose a strange spot for a vacation," Blakney shrugged toward the seething mass of humanity outside the carriage window. "Hardly a Grand Central crowd!" he added.

"No, by golly! But I like it. Different—that's what it is. Something to tell the folks about when a man gets home. Pfui! Can't we get any air into this fousty carriage?" He struggled with the ventilators under the roof without much success.

"It will be better as soon as we move out." Cutting across Blakney's words came the shrill blast of a whistle, and the train began to move.

Blakney threw off his coat and shoes, and lay on his berth in his shirt-sleeves. Cordie followed suit by stripping completely and pulling on pajamas.

"Better watch your clothes," cautioned Blakney. "Train thieves swarm all over this line."

Gradually the stifling Indian night began to close down on them in earnest. For a time the two men swapped war time yarns. Both had seen active service. The more Cordie talked, the better Blakney liked him. And the more bewildered he became as to the American's possible objective in the Land of the Knife.

AS THE first pale streaks of a comfortless northern dawn lightened the eastern horizon, the train pulled into Peshawar.

For all practical purposes, Peshawar was about the northern limit for visitors in India. Ten miles farther north lay Jumrood, where a small British force guarded the throat of the deadliest gorge in the world—the Khyber Pass.

In order to pass the fort at Jumrood, Cordie would either have to have had a permit signed by half the powers-that-be in India, or hire a cut-throat guide and horses to detour the first stages of the Pass.

Blakney decided the American would, by force of circumstances, take the latter course. Had he been able to obtain a permit, MacIntyre would have known about it. His assumption was confirmed as the two men climbed stiffly from the carriage.

"Say, where'd I be likely to find a good guide?" Cordie asked. "I aim to do a little Hill climbing."

"Nothin' doing!" drawled Blakney. "You can go as far as Jumrood of course—last British outpost. But after that you'll find a jolly old sign as big as a house: 'IT IS ABSOLUTELY FORBIDDEN TO CROSS THIS FRONTIER INTO AFGHAN TERRITORY.'"

Cordie thrust out a determined chin.

"Nevertheless I intend to go. A hundred dollars should look good to some of these poverty stricken natives."

"Such a wealthy Sahib would not live long in the Hills!"

"You can't scare me," the American came back. "Com'on, be a regular guy and spill it!"

"Well, there is a man I know might accommodate you. Name of Habib, lives with the fruit merchant on the Malakand Road. He's an old hunting bearer of mine. I taught him all the English he knows. Tell him I sent you. And for pity's sake don't offer him more than a five-pound note. You Americans spoil a good servant. Better stay at Deans Hotel—only possible dump in town."

As soon as the American's carriage had disappeared in a cloud of dust from the station compound, Blakney beckoned another hovering tonga and climbed in.

"To the house of Habib Rao, the fruit-*bunnia* on the Malakand Road," he snapped in Pushtu. "And let not thy nag sleep on the way!"

"To hear is to obey, Captain Sahib!"

A REAL service is rarely forgotten in the East, and the debtor will as likely as not repay it several times over, and still feel under an obligation. So it was with the little merchant who kept the fruit shop along the Malakand Road.

Blakney had once extricated him from a nasty encounter with the Department of Weights and Measures, and his gratitude was enormous.

At sight of the tall Englishman he beamed.

"May Allah cover thee with blessings, my son!"

Blakney wasted no time on pleasantries but backed Habib Rao into the room at the rear of his shop.

"I have a favor to ask thee, Habib," he said.

"Ask, my son."

"An American Sahib will shortly come to thee saying I sent him. Even now he may be on the way. He is in need of a guide and horses to take him into the hills. I will be that guide. It remains for you to provide the disguise and the horses. You will be well paid."

"Payment will not be necessary, Heaven sent. Only yesterday a cousin of mine came to visit me. He is of thy build and will gladly furnish the clothes." He raised his voice in a shrill shout.

The cousin, a tall, fair-skinned Mahsud, produced long shapeless white pantaloons, a knee length robe, and a short pea-green jacket to wear over all.

Blakney stripped to the skin, and taking a bottle of stain from one of his pockets, spread the mixture evenly over his face, neck and arms with the aid of a small shaving brush. Next he produced a false straggling mustache which would have done credit to a Mexican bandit.

Habib proudly provided the principal item of the disguise—about fifty yards of fine silk, which he proceeded to bind round Blakney's head into a turban, his cousin lending a guiding finger at every other turn.

The transformation complete, the merchant stood back to admire.

"Thine own mother would not know thee! If I lie, may I eat dirt!" he crowed.

"As good as that, eh?"

"Allah be my witness—"

Blakney cut him short with a jerk of his head.

"I hear someone in thy shop. If it is the American Sahib bring him back here. My name will be as thine—Habib."

The merchant waddled off into the shop, and a few minutes later returned with Cordie.

BLAKNEY had taken up a squatting position on the floor with his legs crossed under him. He had changed his very nature with his clothes. Now he sat like a native; he moved his head like one; even the timbre of his voice had changed. On seeing the American enter, he raised his hands, palms upward, and his voice rose in a thin wail.

"O Tower of generosity, have mercy on my great distress! Only this day, my father died leaving me with untold debts, and mine own brother has deserted me." His face assumed a look of utter wretchedness as he edged a few paces nearer Cordie. He looked straight up into the American's eyes to catch any recognition there might be there. There was none.

Cordie turned to the merchant.

"Is this the man?" he asked.

"Aye! He is Habib."

"An English Sahib on the train told me you were a good guide," he next addressed Blakney.

"His name, Sahib?"

"Blakney."

"Peace be with him. He spoke no lie. I am best guide of the Khyber! Where does your Honor wish to go?" Blakney replied in glib babu English.

"To Darrak—and then beyond."

"The Sahib has of course authority from the British?"

Blakney spat into the dirt as though the mere mention of the word was defiling to a true believer.

"Nope, can't say I have."

"Then there is but one road to take. A veree difficult road. It will take much

money, and along its length, the knives of the Hill men are keen!"

"Are you certain you can find it?"

"Aye, Sahib—in the dark!"

"Then we leave tonight. Bring horses to Deans Hotel at sundown. Here is money for food and anything we may need." He handed Blakney a fifty dollar bill.

"A Prince! May Allah cover thee with blessings!"

AND so started one of the strangest adventures of all Blakney's hazardous career.

It was well after midnight before the two men reached the shadow of boulder-strewn slopes that led up to the thousand-foot high walls of the dreaded Himalayas. As they entered a deep ravine, an uncanny silence closed down upon them, broken only by the eerie howls of prowling jackals, and the sound of their horses' hoofs on loose stones.

After a mile of fairly easy progress, Blakney turned his horse westward, and leaving the fast narrowing bed of the ravine, started to climb.

The path, little more than a goat track, stretched steep-up a thousand feet to the sky line. Only once before had he traveled the route. No map carried detail of it, and he doubted if its existence was known even to the fort. It ran parallel with the Khyber Pass, and eventually joined the main highway at a point above Fort Ali Masjid. Once beyond that last British stronghold there would be no interference from his own men —and no protection.

High above them the jagged outline of the ridge showed against a rapidly paling sky. That could mean only one thing. The moon must be rising. Just how long it would be before it climbed above the rim to flood the ravine with silver light, he could not judge. But when that happened, they would make easy marks for any prowlers lurking on the ridge.

Blakney urged his horse forward to greater speed. The animal's hoofs dislodged a fair sized boulder and sent it ricocheting down the gorge. The sound rattled from wall to wall, multiplying as it went, until the place seemed full of thunder. A chill night wind moaned about the horses' flanks, sending eddies of white mist swirling down into the blackness below.

Fearsome and uncanny it was, adding to the mystery of their mission. Desperately Blakney tried to sift his problem into some semblance of order. Everything about the puzzle was so intangible. Two white men, one disguised from the other, traveling practically unarmed through the wild country of the fiercest fighters on earth! And bound for some mythical unknown spot where a legendary woman was planning to launch the biggest Holy War India had ever seen!

What kind of a woman must she be, he mused, to command obedience from men whose savagery was a byword in every border town and village? Where was Cobra Mountain? And crowning problem of all —what, in God's name, had the American to do with it all?

Blakney's orders were to see that Cordie got back alive, and to stop a jihad! He smiled grimly to himself. How could one man, single-handed, stop a Holy war? Might as well try and stop the moon from rising above the ridge! He wondered what thoughts occupied his silent companion.

HIS keen ears picked up a new sound behind him. Sharply a match scraped into flame. Half turning in his saddle Blakney glanced back at Cordie who was in the act of lighting a cigarette. The man's face in the flare from the match, looked as unconcerned and insensible to fear as a baby's!

"The Sahib would be wise not to smoke," barked Blakney. "The eyes of the Khyber are many and as watchful as an eagle."

"What do you fear, Habib?"

Blakney admired the fellow's disregard for atmosphere.

"Habib knows not this thing called fear," he rasped. "But why risk the eagle's claws when there is no plunder?"

They were now approaching the ridge. It lay like a knife edge barely two hundred feet above them, when the first thin crescent of the moon showed above the rim.

Blakney's sharp eyes instantly swept the ridge from side to side, and in that glance, they picked up something they were not

meant to see—the flash of moonlight on a rifle stock, five hundred paces to their right. He dropped back alongside Cordie.

"Look, Sahib! Away to your right," he whispered.

"I see nothing."

"Look again!"

This time Cordie caught the glint of light on steel.

"What now?" he snapped. "You are the guide."

"Continue slowly as if thou had not seen. It may be an outpost sentry from the fort, or a Hillman anxious for thy gold, Sahib."

THEY proceeded cautiously for another hundred feet before anything happened. Then without warning a single rifle shot sounded away to the right, and a bullet whined overhead. From a large boulder bordering the track, a handful of ragged Hillmen spilled out to bar their way.

The leader, a huge, hawk-eyed desperado of the worst type, with a flowing black beard and a hook nose, spat out a brief command to halt. Across his saddle-bows lays a government rifle.

"Tauba!" Blakney swore. "What seek ye, men of the Hills?"

"Who art thou, and the Sahib with thee?"

"I am an honest man from the plains and I guide the Sahib."

"Whither?"

"What is it to thee?" snapped Blakney arrogantly, and then he took a long chance. Turning to the American he spoke in English.

"Tell this brood of the Evil One where we go, Sahib—not that it concerns them."

Cordie jerked his horse's head sharply round as two of the bandits sidled forward to take hold of the reins.

"Tell them to go to hell!" he rasped, and his hand crept to a holster under his arm.

Blakney grinned. Here was a man after his own heart.

It would be difficult to find in all India, a man more skilled in the art of using a stick, than Blakney. With a movement so swift, that not one of the Hillmen could have told from where exactly it came, the Secret Service man produced a stout ash stick.

Twice he brought it down on his horse's flank, and then, as the surprised beast plunged forward, he proceeded to make the air whistle about the heads of those nearest.

"Forgotten of God!" he howled at them, bringing the stick down on an arm that reached out to clutch his horse's bit. "Ye who would shame a vulture! Hands off! Back I say!"

REARING his horse in the midst of the bandits, he swept the stick left and right in wide circles. In the darkness and confusion that followed, and in their futile efforts to shield their heads from that unerring flail, not one thought to use his rifle.

Following Blakney's move, Cordie brought his mount round the far side of the boulder to keep their way open over the ridge.

The leader of the band, wheeling away from the plunging mass of men and horses, brought his rifle to the port so quickly, that he almost had the American at a disadvantage.

Taking no chances, Cordie's automatic spat twice, and the huge Hillman slid from his saddle. The frightened nag, relieved of its burden, galloped headlong down the ravine.

Seeing their leader down, it took but a few masterly strokes of Blakney's club to convince the rest left standing that the best course was to turn their own horses after the plunging beast.

Flinging a wild, blood-curdling cry into the night, they disappeared down the trail into the swirling mists. The thunder of hoofs echoed and re-echoed from wall to wall, and as from a great distance came back their cry.

"Ah-hee-ee!"

Then as suddenly there was measureless black silence.

"Forward, Sahib! Quickly before these jackals send their ghosts on our trail," Blakney shouted, urging his frightened horse up the few remaining feet to the ridge.

Topping the rim, a wide stretch of country, dipping down into the Khyber Pass, lay pale and unearthly in the moonlight. Behind them, on the right stood Ali Mas-

jid, its grim buttresses apparently lifeless, and in front, winding like a ribbon of silver, the main highway into Afghanistan.

THE first rays of the sun, rising over the Himalayas, touched the mud walls of Darrak a pearly pink as the two men approached the East Gate.

A swarm of bearded tribesmen, suspicious of all strangers, came out and formed a wide semi-circle around them. In Cordie they scented loot. But respect for British reprisals kept them at a distance, fingering the hilts of long knives, their sharp features and hawk's eyes like those of hungry wolves.

Cordie now took the lead along a winding track beside the Kabul River.

Blakney wondered how soon the American would be forced to show his hand. For some time they rode along a canyon which, from a distance, looked like a cul-de-sac. But on nearing the impasse, half-a-dozen pathways, formed either by mountain goats or water courses, led upward to almost unscalable ridges.

"Now whither, Sahib?" Blakney inquired innocently. "Thy servant does not yet know thy honor's destination. How then shall he guide thee?"

Cordie slowly drew the silver candlestick from his pack.

"Ever hear of Cobra Mountain, Habib?" he asked casually.

"*Tauba!* Who has not? Has the Devil heard of Hell? And only the Evil One himself can tell thee how to get there!"

"Then I must be he!" laughed Cordie. "Because that's just where we're headed for."

He rested the candlestick on his saddle with the snake's head pointing east.

"This little ornament is going to be our map. Perfectly simple. We follow the beast's tail. See here—it bends backward and to the right." He looked over his shoulder and pointed to a narrow, precipitous track which doubled back and upward at the same time. "That's our route," he added.

A FLASH of more than ordinary interest flicked into Blakney's eyes and was gone. So that was the answer to one riddle! Allen Monkhouse had met his death in solving it. But the proof that he *had* solved it, lay in MacIntyre's files in Delhi.

"Allah witness the choice is none of my making," grumbled Blakney, urging his horse up the mountain side.

Many times they had recourse to the candlestick, and often Blakney marveled at the sheer steepness of the trail. There was one consolation about it. To get a rebel army of even five thousand strong across those mountains into the Khyber, would take weeks—nay months.

At length, just as Blakney was about to suggest resting their horses through the noon-day heat, they topped a mighty ridge higher than any yet encountered. A dozen yards in front of Cordie, he let out a gasp of surprise at the sight that met his gaze, and a brief exultant flash of triumph flicked into his eyes.

There below, stretching as far as the eye could reach, lay a wide fertile valley, its lush grass showing a vivid green against the lean, sun-scorched hills which enclosed it on every side.

Letting his gaze travel slowly down the track, Blakney followed its winding path along the valley. For a full mile it hugged a stream-bed, and then seemed to terminate abruptly at the base of a peculiarly shaped mountain. From where he stood the shape was unmistakable. Rising almost perpendicular, a thousand feet from the plain, its flattened peak resembled the hood of a gigantic cobra, with mouth agape, ready to strike!

"Cobra Mountain!" burst from Cordie. "Holy smoke! Look at that, will you!"

HARDLY had the words left his lips than a handful of horsemen appeared round a shoulder of the hill, not fifty yards down the trail. The leader, a fierce-eyed, bearded Afridi chieftain, advanced a few paces in front of his men and threw his rifle threateningly forward.

"What seek ye, strangers?" he rapped out in Pushtu at Cordie.

Blakney translated for the American, and added, "It would be prudent, Sahib, to show the candlestick."

Cordie pulled out the talisman and held it high above his head. The action had a strange effect upon the horsemen. Their

attitude of hostile defiance changed to one of obeisance.

"Peace be with thee!" cried the leader. "I am Zaffar, chief adviser to Her who is impatient for thy coming. Come!" And wheeling his horse, he led the way down into the canyon.

Nearing the mountain, Blakney saw that the illusion of the gaping mouth was formed by a huge cavern at the peak. So steep were the mountain's sides, there could be no access to it unless— A thought so extravagant entered his mind, that he discarded it almost as soon as formed. Could there be some sort of pathway *inside the mountain?* Was it possible that by volcanic action, the mountain was hollow like the belly of a snake?

Not until they were within fifty yards of the mountain, did Blakney notice a fissure in the rock at its base, partially concealed by a large clump of bushes.

Zaffar rode straight toward this opening, and passing through it, urged Cordie and Blakney to follow.

Right into the heart of the mountain they passed, along a roughly hewn passage that most assuredly was not the work of nature. A series of strangely designed oil lamps, placed at intervals along the passage, gave off a sickly yellow light. The clatter of their horses hoofs echoed from the rock walls until it sounded like the rattle of machine-gun fire. And then as suddenly the racket ceased, and again they seemed to be in the open air.

But the pattern of sunlight across their path Blakney noticed was only a single beam, striking down through a hole a thousand feet above. Instead of being in the open, they stood in the well of a vast cavern, almost circular in shape, and so wide across that he could barely make out the opposite wall.

He had been right—Cobra Mountain was hollow like the belly of a snake! No wonder the border scouting planes had been unable to locate the stronghold.

Zaffar told them to dismount. Two men came forward from the shadows to take their mounts.

"Is it thy master's wish that thou stay with him?" the chieftain addressed Blakney.

"Even while he sleeps!"

"Follow then!" He led the way along a short passage running at right angles to the one they had entered by. It in turn opened into a small cave, hung with silk hangings. On the rock floor, tiger and leopard skins were scattered in careless profusion.

"Request the Doctor Sahib to wait here while I inform the Princess of his coming," Zaffar told Blakney, and left.

Blakney's first action after giving Cordie the message was to move silently over toward the cave's opening, and peer cautiously along the passage. At the far end two men leaned on long-barreled native rifles.

"Thy friends do not appear to trust us, Sahib," Blakney muttered. "Or why should they place guards in the passage?"

"I guess it's an old Afghan custom," Cordie returned, and stretched himself out on a *charpais* that occupied one corner of the cave.

TO BLAKNEY, his nerves taut and impatient for action, it seemed a lifetime before Zaffar again entered the cave.

Through dank, evil-smelling passages, and along narrow galleries cut in the face of the rock he led them, until Blakney lost all sense of direction.

At length they stood on the threshold of a chamber so luxuriously furnished that it might easily have passed for the salon of a Delhi courtesan. Heavy silken drapes entirely covered the walls. Carved teakwood chairs and couches of some past dynasty were arranged with excellent taste about the place, and upon the rock floor a priceless Persian carpet deadened all sound.

But the thing that immediately drew Blakney's attention on entering was a massive four-poster bed which occupied almost the entire far wall. Curtained and valanced with ancient tapestries, it resembled an imperial couch. At head and foot the curtains were drawn together.

On its silken cushions there reclined a woman, whose very beauty made the Englishman catch his breath sharply.

She was young, and unlike most Indian women possessed the clear-skinned complexion of the West. Unveiled she was, and dressed in some fine gossamer mantle that hid nothing of her perfect form.

Rising on one elbow, she fixed Cordie with a direct stare, unblinking and strangely penetrating, coming as it did from eyes oddly dark in contrast to the fairness of her skin. An exotic perfume of musk-rose pervaded the room.

With a regal gesture she dismissed Zaffar. Then she received the American with an air of mystic calm, gracious and dignified as a Park Avenue hostess.

Blakney, like a good servant, squatted on the floor near the doorway.

"I am Maiwand, daughter of the Queen Mother, Nur Amanullah," came from her lovely lips, in perfect English, the words rising clear and bell-like across the chamber. "It was because of her ill health that I sent for thee. Word had been brought me of thy skill in ailments of the heart, and it was not desirable that an English doctor penetrate Cobra Mountain."

She hissed out the word "English" with such vehemence that Blakney instinctively dropped his head a little lower onto his chest, feigning sleep. He could have cheerfully kicked himself for not guessing the simple explanation of Cordie's presence. But then, he consoled himself, it was the simple things one passed up.

Maiwan was again speaking. A sadness had crept into her voice.

"But you come too late. Even as thou wert on the way, my Queen Mother died."

CORDIE, who had been unable to take his eyes off her since he entered the chamber, muttered conventional condolence.

She silenced him with a brief gesture of her hand. A new light, almost fanatical, flashed into her eyes.

"It was but the will of Allah. And of small consequence so long as her life work is brought to fruition—thus she would have wished."

"And that, Princess?" Cordie was interested in spite of himself.

"To conquer India!" A sudden fancy took her. Laying a jewelled hand on the American's shoulder, she looked searchingly into his face. "I like thy looks," she stated simply. "As a reward for thy journey, thou shall ride with me into India! Thou shall share the triumph of the biggest war since my kinsman Alexander the Great brought his armies over these Hills."

Blakney's lips compressed themselves into a grim straight line beneath his shielding arms. So! The bazaar gossip had been true. And there was a second reason for bringing the American to Cobra Mountain. If Maiwand could succeed in enlisting Cordie and thus make hostile relations between England and America—

Cordie's voice cut across his train of thought.

"But that just isn't possible, Princess," he smiled indulgently. "You see I have my practice—back in New York. And besides there's the British government—"

"Fool!" Sudden anger shook her. "What are these compared with the things I offer?" Then as if relenting of the outburst, her voice again became smooth and enticing. "But enough for the present. Later when you have rested, thou and I will talk of these things. Now I will dance for thee."

She rose from the bed and clapped her hands twice.

Two huge native guards appeared instantly. She spoke to them rapidly in some tongue unknown to Blakney. They bowed themselves out, to reappear a moment later carrying a round wicker basket, which they placed in the center of the floor.

WITH the supple grace of a cat, Maiwand seemed to glide across the floor toward the basket. Wailing flute music started. Blakney could not tell exactly from where it came, but it seemed to drift out from behind each silk curtain covering the walls, filling the room with sound.

Maiwand then sat cross-legged, with arms raised above the closed basket, and slowly she swayed from the hips, in time with the music. The long white tapering fingers of her beautiful hands moved sinuously, like things alive—apart from their owner.

Slowly they lifted in widening circles, higher and higher above the lid of the basket. And the lid began to rise with them!

Blakney glanced away to look across at Cordie. That lifting cover held the American's gaze in a fascinated stare. There was something strangely compelling about that rising lid, holding a man's eyes riveted against his will.

When at length it stood upright, Blak-

ney saw the heads of two great King cobras, moving slowly upward.

The music rose to a higher key, and a low chanting song burst from the woman's slightly parted lips. With a swift gesture she kicked over the basket, and there, with raised hoods, hissing their hate song of sudden death, lay the snakes.

With cruel unblinking eyes they watched the woman's every move, waiting an opportunity to strike. The music quickened. Leaping away from the cobras, Maiwand started to dance—a twisting sensuous dance, with all the dark passion of the East in it.

Blakney had seen its counterpart in the dancing-halls of Delhi. He had seen men mesmerized by its power over the senses. Mostly it was just stuff for the tourists—but this! There was something about the woman's cold beauty that sent cold shivers down his spine.

ON AND on she danced, pursued by the snakes. As they struck at her she leaped away out of range, and then as swiftly came back to tease them anew. Beautiful she was and infinitely desirable.

Without warning, Doctor Cordie suddenly staggered to his feet. A fixed, glassy stare shone from his eyes, as he took a few steps toward the swaying figure of Maiwand. An agonized, half-choked cry rose in his throat, and died there.

One swift penetrating second told the Secret Service man that there was only one way now to stop the American from playing straight into her hand, and that was by disclosing his own identity.

With a spring he was on his feet.

"For God's sake, man—stop!" he shouted.

Cordie stopped short where he stood; his head jerked round to stare uncomprehendingly at the man he had thought of only as a native guide. No one but an Englishman could have spoken those crisp English words in just that tone!

Gradually the madness faded from his eyes and he straightened up. Oblivious to the woman dancing or the King cobras, he crossed over to the tall figure by the doorway.

"Who the devil are you?" he snorted.

"Explain later," whispered Blakney. "Keep your head—carry on as if nothing had happened. Now get back to your chair—and stick to it!" And he resumed his squatting position on the floor.

ABRUPTLY Maiwand ceased dancing. Again she clapped her hands and the music stopped. The two guards entered noiselessly, got the cobras into their basket, the lid was closed, and once more the two white men were alone with Maiwand.

But now a forbidding silence, loaded with suspicion, hung over the chamber. Blakney sensed it, and his uncanny intuition recognized the tenseness that always precedes danger.

Swiftly, with cat-like grace, Maiwand moved across the room until she stood within a foot of the Secret Service man. For a full minute she remained motionless, casting a long searching look down into his expressionless face. Then with a movement unbelievably quick, she ripped his shirt open at the neck, revealing the white unstained skin beneath.

"So! A pale-skinned spy!" she said.

Her hand came forward and struck him full in the face—once—twice. Before he could move, the huge guards were behind him, pinioning his arms. With them came Zaffar.

Anger blazed from the woman's eyes, making them shine like two smoldering bits of charcoal.

"Thou must crawl in like a snake to gain the secret of Cobra Mountain for the cursed British! Well, thou hast come too late, dog. In three days from now, ten thousand armed men will march out of Cobra Mountain! They will sweep through India like the wind. They will sweep the English pig-eaters into the sea. I, Maiwand, will start such a Holy War as has never yet been dreamed of." A fierce fanatical light burned in her eyes.

Then Blakney did a strange thing.

He threw back his head and let out a long mocking laugh. It seemed to bubble up from deep down inside him, to echo and re-echo along the vaulted cave, and finally die away in noisy chuckles.

"It would take them a year to reach Khyber along that crazy goat track we came by!" he taunted. "And then the British at

Ali Masjid would make mince meat of 'em!"

The thrust succeeded. Maiwand clenched her fists until the knuckles showed white.

"Fool!" she raged. "Do you think there is but one road from Cobra Mountain?"

There were still other things he must learn, so Blakney curled his lips into a disbelieving sneer, and laughed deliberately.

"Men do not fight on empty bellies, or without ammunition in their breech-blocks!" he scoffed.

Zaffar edged forward and drew his knife.

"Let me but strike the unbeliever once, Princess," he begged.

"Nay, Zaffar, that would be too easy a death." She turned again to Blakney. "Thou dost not believe? I will show thee, and then like the snake thou art, the cobras shall be thy sleeping partners tonight!"

With a sweep of her arm she commanded the guards to follow with the two white men, and led the way out of the chamber.

SHE led them through long hand-hewn passages from cavern to cavern. Blakney noticed the place was a veritable honeycomb; most of the larger caves were shut off by ponderous doors of solid teak, nail-studded. As the little party came to each door, Zaffar produced a massive key.

Blakney's incredulity slowly turned to amazement, and then to admiration. The place was a veritable storehouse for a standing army. Caves full of food, preserved by the depth under ground; blankets by the thousand, saddles and tents; long narrow galleries ventilated by shafts running into the huge natural chimney in the central cavern, and divided into rough wooden stalls for hundreds of horses.

At length they came to a door reinforced with hand-beaten sheets of steel.

"Let the unbeliever come forward, so that his eyes see plainly," commanded Maiwand.

Strong arms propelled Blakney from behind. A key was inserted in the lock. Slowly the heavy door swung open of its own accord. The sight which met the Englishman's gaze made him step involuntarily backward.

"Good Lord!" he gasped.

There before him, a vast subterranean vault stretched away into unfathomable distance. By the dim flickering light of an oil lamp held high by Maiwand herself, he could make out rack upon rack of closely stacked rifles; rows of neatly piled wooden boxes with rope handles, which could contain only one thing—ammunition.

But it wasn't these alone that caused his exclamation.

Directly in front of the doorway, extending back for some twenty feet in each direction, yawned a deep pit, its walls green with slime. And the floor of this pit was alive with giant cobras.

PEERING down into the shadows he could see the hoods of several reptiles raised inquiringly toward the unaccustomed light.

He was looking upon the secret strength of Cobra Mountain. Enough H. E. was stored there to blow the roof off the place, and the deadly stuff was guarded by King cobras!

Maiwand's low exultant laugh rang out and echoed along the rock vault, sending cold shivers down Blakney's back.

"Our breech-blocks will not travel empty! she cried. "Let the unbeliever look well."

"Where in God's name did you get all that ammunition?" gasped Blakney.

"From the big Bear to the north—Russia."

"And the rifles?"

"The British supplied some—and now that thou hast seen, and possess more knowledge than is good for any one man to have, it is time for thee to die." She gave a sign to the guards. "Strip him!" she commanded. "Then throw him in the pit. As the American Sahib here would say, 'laugh that off!' "

Which Blakney immediately proceeded to do. So genuinely hearty was that laugh, that even the guards hesitated to obey the order.

"What now?" asked Maiwand. "Does the dog of an unbeliever find it so funny to die?"

Blakney checked himself with difficulty.

"No, Princess, it is not the thought of death that amuses me, but the picture of your rabble army being caught between the heavy field guns the British have but re-

cently brought secretly to the border!" And again he burst out with noisy chuckles.

"It's a lie!" she flashed back.

"Does a man lie in the teeth of death? Do you think that not one of your followers can be bribed with British gold? Cobra Mountain is no secret in Delhi. Even thy secret road into India is known and watched."

"Then what brought thee here?" she sneered.

"I came to escort the American Sahib back safely."

She considered this thoughtfully. Blakney pressed his advantage.

"Without knowledge of where these guns are placed, your Holy War will surely fail."

"Knowest thou where they are?"

"The eyes of the Secret Service know all things."

"Prove then that thou hast not lied. Where are they?"

A smile spread slowly across the Englishman's face. "Such information is not so easily gained, Princess."

"Thy price?"

"The safe return of Cordie Sahib to Fort Ali Masjid!"

Maiwand considered this slowly before replying.

"Thou dost not ask for thy life?"

Blakney shrugged his massive shoulders. "Why ask for something I know you do not intend to grant under any circumstances?"

Abruptly Maiwand ordered Zaffar to close and lock the vault door. Then she gave a sign that the two white men were to be escorted back to her chamber.

Blakney allowed himself the merest flicker of a smile. He had won the first round!

"THY wish will be granted. I have no quarrel with the American, who came freely at my bidding with no intent to spy," the Princess told Blakney. "He will be escorted back to Ali Masjid tonight. But thou—" Her jet-black eyes blazed fiercely into those of the Englishman—"fulfil now thy half of the bargain. Where are these mighty guns you brag of?"

"Nay, Princess, not so fast. How will I know the American Sahib returns safely? Many men have met strange deaths in the Khyber."

"What proof seek ye?"

"Let me and Doctor Cordie agree on a secret password which he will speak to your man when they arrive at the fort. If your man brings that password back to me, I will know for a certainty that the Sahib has arrived without mishap."

"It is well spoken." Maiwand turned to Zaffar and explained the plan in Pushtu. "Before you go," she finished, "allow the strangers but one minute alone together, so they may agree on the password. Afterwards see that the Englishman is well guarded in thy absence." She turned back to Blakney.

"If thou hast lied," she said, "thy death in the cobra pit would have been but pleasure compared with the tortures that await thee! Go!"

LEFT alone in the cave they had occupied on first entering the mountain, Blakney pulled the American down on the string-bed, and cupped his hands about the other man's ear.

"Not much time—I'll do the talking—can't even trust the walls in this place," he began. "The password will be 'Dynamite'. Now get this—my name is Blakney—fellow you met on the train, remember? British Secret Service. Tell that to Forsyth, commanding Ali Masjid. Tell him to communicate with MacIntyre at Delhi, and give this message. . . ." For the full minute Blakney talked without stopping. When he had finished, Cordie let out a suppressed gasp.

"By golly, I've got to hand it to you!" he whispered. "But where do you get off?"

"Don't worry about me. It's the one chance in a thousand that might come off. If it fails—well I don't expect to get out of here alive anyway. Got to cash in sometime y'know."

"And the big guns dope you handed the Princess?"

Blakney laughed.

"What you Americans would call—a bunch of hooey! There ain't no sich things. Well, good-bye, old man." He held out his hand. As he did so, Zaffar appeared at the cave entrance and beckoned the American to follow him.

EARLY the following morning Blakney was awakened by the sound of activity from the central cavern. Going to the cave opening, he could get a glimpse past the armed guards.

By the dim light of dawn, struggling through the roof chimney, he made out the figures of men carrying small heavy objects. These they stacked in orderly piles around the walls of the cavern.

It wasn't until he saw a man bearing half-a-dozen rifles across his shoulder, that he realized the truth. The ammunition and rifles were being brought up from the vault.

As he was standing there, the Princess herself appeared, and came toward him. He waited for her to speak.

"At dawn tomorrow, when Zaffar returns with thy password, I, Princess Amanullah, and thou, English spy, will ride at the head of my men into India!" She thrust her face close to catch the effect of her words. But she was disappointed.

Save for a slight tightening of the lines about his mouth, Blakney's expression did not change from one of quiet amusement.

"I, Princess?"

"Even thou. What will thy friends think of thee then?" she sneered.

"The Princess forgets my bargain was but to tell her where the British guns are hidden."

"Is it not better that thou should show me? And the figure of an English officer, riding at the head of my army will add much prestige. Then if thou hast lied, what matter? An unbeliever will die by the hand of his own countrymen—without honor!" With that parting thrust she left him.

THE long day dragged interminably. Blakney paced the narrow cave, and watched the piles of boxes steadily increase until at sundown the last case had been stacked.

Far into the night he tossed and turned on the string-bed, unable to sleep. Feverish activity continued in the central cavern. He surmised that supplies were being handed out; the pack-horses loaded with camping equipment.

He was awakened from a fitful doze by somebody shaking him roughly by the shoulder. Sitting bolt upright, he glanced at his watch. It was five o'clock. By the bedside stood Zaffar and two men with rifles.

"Speak!" commanded Blakney.

"Cordie Sahib gave me the word 'Dynamite'." The man had some trouble pronouncing the English word, but Blakney recognized with a sigh of relief that the American must have got through safely.

"It is well," he replied. "What now?"

"Follow!"

Emerging into the central cavern, a pale ethereal light of dawn struck down through the roof chimney across a scene the Englishman would never quite forget. The wonder of it made him hold his breath.

From wall to wall the vast arena was packed with the standing figures of fighting men.

Blakney estimated rapidly that there were all of ten thousand men present. Maiwand had not exaggerated even in that. A fine husky bunch they were too; tall, fair-skinned, with the blood of fighting men in their veins. They waited with tense expectancy, as though for a sign from heaven, which would release the wild battle cry that was bottled in every throat.

The piles of ammunition boxes still formed a circle around the walls. No horses were in sight, and Blakney guessed they had already been taken outside.

Zaffar halted immediately inside the cavern, and passed back a sign for the two guards to close in on either side of their prisoner. Thus they waited. Slowly the light increased. The impatience of the crowd began to grow into a restlessness.

Then high up on one of the natural rock balconies which surrounded the place, a green-turbaned mullah appeared.

A sudden hush fell upon the assembly. *"Akbar! Allah akbar!"* the mullah chanted.

"There is no God but God!" the crowd thundered in response.

"And Mohammed is his Prophet."

"Mohammed is his Prophet," echoed the crowd.

"Let His glory shine!" sang the mullah. He struck three booming notes on a circular brass gong suspended from the roof.

All heads swung round to the right where another figure had appeared on a ridge in line with the mullah.

It was Maiwand.

So radiantly lovely she was that Blakney involuntarily whistled softly. No wonder these men obeyed her, he thought. Clothed in a long flowing dress of silver, coiled about her hair the emblem of the mountain—a silver cobra, its hood raised to strike—she looked clear across the sea of heads at Blakney. A triumphant smile curved her lips.

It seemed to say—"Now perhaps you believe!"

A mighty shout rose from ten thousand throats, and as quickly died when she raised a hand for silence.

Then her voice, husky with passion, yet strangely penetrating, addressed them.

"Men of Cobra Mountain!" she cried. "Ye have long been patient. Many of you have waited years, nay a lifetime, in the service of my Queen-Mother for this day. Ye have seen the pig-eating English unbelievers invade all India. Ye have seen them creep up to the fringe of your Hills—and set their tents upon your very doorstep, in the Khyber. Like vultures they prey upon the body of Islam, with murder and plunder in their black hearts. Fighting men of the Hills it is time for the Cobra to strike!"

THE mob roared its enthusiasm.

As her voice continued, Blakney dragged his eyes away to glance at his watch. It was almost six o'clock. MacIntyre had said there was one chance in a thousand of his getting back alive. The Old Man had been right. Dead right. One man against ten thousand!

Maiwand's voice, rising to a wild shriek, cut across his thoughts.

"And behold an English spy is standing here in your very midst!" she cried, pointing straight at Blakney.

Heads swung around to glare at him. A thousand cries of: "Kill him!" rent the air.

"Nay, men of true faith, let the dog of an unbeliever ride at your head into India. Thus will we throw his honor into the teeth of our enemies!"

But Blakney wasn't listening. His keen hearing had picked up another sound. So faint at first it might have been nothing more than the echoes of the angry crowd's roaring. A sound he had been straining every nerve to catch since his watch showed six o'clock.

He glanced sideways at the guards. Apparently they had heard nothing; their eyes were fixed in an enthralled stare on the Princess. Zaffar, two paces in front, stood at his ease.

Blakney tensed his muscles and took one lightning glance behind him. The way was clear to the passage which led out of the mountain.

Moving both hands up as if to cover his face, he suddenly jerked his elbows backward into the guard's faces with such unexpected force that both men crumpled up where they stood. At the same instant the Englishman's foot doubled up and shot out into the small of Zaffar's back.

WITH a bound Blakney reached the exit passage, and raced down it. Behind him, an uproar of angry sound poured from the cavern. The suddenness of his audacious attack had left those standing nearest helplessly bewildered. By the time they turned their heads, the Englishman had disappeared, and three men lay grovelling in the dust. Then with a yell the wolf pack trampled each other to reach the tunnel's narrow entrance.

Blakney rounded the last bend to run full tilt into four men just entering the mountain.

The suddenness of his approach gave him an advantage, but without a weapon of any sort, his chances of getting through alive were practically nil. However, his lowered head rammed the foremost man full in the stomach. With a low moan of escaping breath, the body folded over Blakney forming a shield. He looked up sideways. A brown hand was holding a twelve-inch curved knife high over his head. The knife was coming down in a sweeping curve to disembowel him.

In that split second, Blakney saw a snarling face beyond the knife; he saw a row of ivory-white teeth in the bronzed face—and he let go with his right with all he had behind it.

There was a *swish* as the knife descended and simultaneously a pistol-shot crack as his fist contacted. The knife ripped harmlessly through Blakney's baggy pantaloons, and

its owner staggered back into his oncoming companions.

It was just the advantage Blakney needed. Hurling the body of the man he had winded onto the struggling medley of arms and legs, he sprinted into the open air.

Just as he had suspected, the horses were picketed in a corral close to the mountain. As the first of his pursuers reached the open, the Englishman took saddle with a flying leap on the nearest horse. With a snort the frightened beast plunged forward.

A rifle bullet whined overhead, and kicked up a little spurt of sand twenty feet ahead. Another—closer this time. Then a searing pain ripped through Blakney's leg.

Abruptly the firing ceased.

GLANCING back to seek the cause, Blakney saw the knot of men staring skyward, and looking up, that broad pleasant grin which years before had nicknamed him "wide and handsome," broke from ear to ear.

The one chance in a thousand was coming off! For there, against the fast paling eastern sky, five sturdy little planes were approaching, flying in tight V shape formation—the Border Air Patrol!

Blakney let out a cheer, and sent his horse racing toward the far end of the valley. His ears had not deceived him inside the mountain. The roar of motors increased as four of the planes swooped down and circled Cobra Mountain. The fifth machine flew straight on to make a perfect three point landing half a mile distant.

As Blakney rode up, two figures climbed out of the ship. One was the pilot. The other he failed to recognize until the man pulled off his flying helmet and goggles.

"MacIntyre, sir!"

"Aye, laddie, I just couldn'a resist seeing the fireworks." He gripped Blakney's hand. "Cordie got through to me and gave your message. We used Allen Monkhouse's sketch of the candlestick to find our way here. Six o'clock you said. Well, we're just a wee bit late."

"And the—er—dynamite, sir?"

In answer the little Scotchman pointed toward Cobra Mountain.

"Look!" he barked.

Circling the peak, the planes were bombing. Several bombs dropped around the entrance, had already driven Blakney's pursuers back inside for protection. Even as Blakney turned to look, one pilot more daring than the rest, zoomed down to bring his ship within a hundred feet of the gaping cave at the peak, which formed the huge natural chimney down inside the mountain.

A small black object left the underside of the plane, and dropped clear through the opening!

Blakney quickly turned his head away. He felt a sudden sickness come over him.

He thought back to the scene he had witnessed but a few minutes before—the picture of ten thousand husky fighting men; a sea of heads all turned in one direction —Maiwand. With a pang he saw again her beauty, saw her standing there high above them, and heard her voice cry out, "Men of Cobra Mountain!" And he thought of the neatly stacked piles of ammunition boxes.

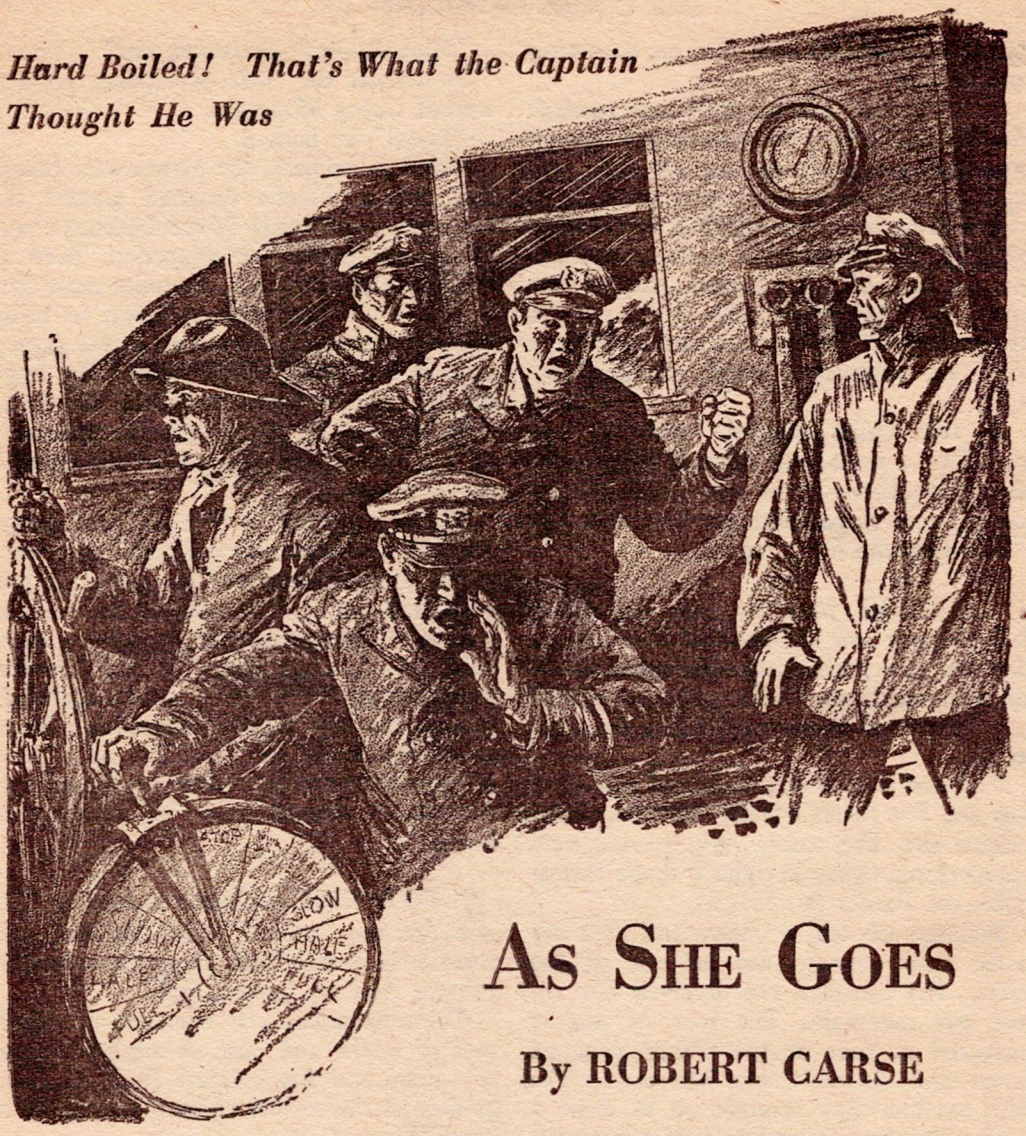
A GIGANTIC explosion seemed to rock the very ground under his feet, and thunder back and forth along the mountain ranges. And he looked again.

Cobra Mountain was wreathed in a thick pall of smoke and dust. A mighty column of smoke and fire belched from its peak, as though the extinct volcano was again in eruption.

Then Blakney fancied he saw something that made him shade his eyes with his hand and peer closely. Neither MacIntyre nor any of the pilots saw it, and long afterwards even Blakney himself began to wonder if after all, it hadn't been pure hallucination due to frayed nerves.

But he could have sworn he saw the white figure of a woman astride a black stallion emerge for a moment from the smoke around the base of the mountain, and then disappear, riding westward toward India.

Hard Boiled! That's What the Captain Thought He Was



AS SHE GOES

By ROBERT CARSE

MR. RUMSON, the young second officer, tried to enter the chartroom quietly. But a gust of wind snarling in from the bridge and a deep forward pitch contrived against him in the same moment, and the door slammed with a violent report. The captain started at once, and cursed, raising his heavy bulk up from where he had been dozing on the corner of the settee beside the chronometer casing. Mr. Rumson saluted, apologetically, but smartly:

"Just brought the landfall, sir; St. John's Head."

"Huh." The captain was on his feet now, his big hands at the collar of his watchcoat, his small and rather bloodshot eyes blinking. "How's it going out there?"

"Almost hurric'ne force, sir. But, we can beat it in."

"Yes?" said the captain. He stared at Mr. Rumson as if his second officer were a complete stranger to him, and one whose appearance he did not at all like. "Well, are there any of those thieving sons of supposed pilots out there yet?"

Mr. Rumson did not smile, and held the door open, out into the wheelroom. "Only one, sir. The usual lot of them came out,

past the Head, but they didn't seem to like the look of it out here, and put back in again."

Crossing through the doorway and into the wheelroom, the captain uttered many vile words, most of which Mr. Rumson had heard before, and all of which described a West Indian insular government which, operating five thousand miles from the sight of the Colonial Office in London, allowed pilots' papers to thirty or forty broken down native fishermen, all of whom, scrambled for the chance of the pilotage fees of each incoming ship, but ran when the first signs of a bad blow showed up. The captain was just finishing with that when Mr. Rumson came to stand beside him in the starboard bridge wing.

"Give me that long glass!" barked the captain. Mr. Rumson reached in, underneath the captain's hands upon the bridge rail, and brought forth from the box there the long brass telescope. In silence, the captain took it and raised it. Mr. Rumson looked forward also, at the low, dark and obscure line of the flat coral island they were approaching, and then at the only other craft outside the headland, a small, lugsail-rigged cutter. The captain had trained the telescope upon the cutter now. He cursed as he did so. "That the *Niobe?*" he asked of Mr. Rumson.

"Aye, sir," said Mr. Rumson in a very low voice. "That's Hanna's boat; he was 'way out here, ahead of the others, and he's stayed."

"I can see that!" commented the captain. "And that the swab has still got up what looks too much like a pilot flag for me!" The captain dropped the telescope into the gear box with a clatter. He favored Mr. Rumson with his glance. "Ignore him! Let him knock around there until he pulls the bottom out of that cheese-box; I won't take him! Anyway, when we get in closer to the Head, one of the others will come leaping for the job. Call me then!"

"Aye, aye, sir." Mr. Rumson saluted, then stood while the captain strode stiff-legged past him towards the wheelhouse door.

The fourth mate, who had been in the other bridge wing, came unobtrusively to stand at Mr. Rumson's side when the captain was safely within. The fourth mate was a small man, but not meek, and just off the Transatlantic run, new to this ship. "Listen," he demanded of Mr. Rumson in a hoarse voice, "that guy's a pilot, isn't he?"

"Look for yourself," suggested Mr. Rumson.

"Yeah," said the fourth mate, heavily, "I have. But, why didn't the Old Man take him?"

"Ask the Old Man that," prompted Mr. Rumson. "Maybe he'll tell you."

"I'll save that," said the fourth mate, "until later; thanks. . . . But, somebody had better stand by that guy soon. He's sure making bad way of it out here now. Look; he's just broken out the Distress signal, over that other hoist he's flying. And, baby! There goes the works—halyards, flags, sail and all!"

Mr. Rumson was watching through narrowed and thoughtful eyes. "Only one thing for it," he muttered, as if to himself, and not at all to the fourth mate. "Now, we're going to stand by him. Time we did; we're off the Head, and those other guys have gone on, inside. . . . Beat it back where you belong, Sonny Boy; I'm going to go and call the skipper, *pronto.*"

"He don't like this guy, Hanna, huh?" asked the fourth mate, starting.

"That," said Mr. Rumson back over his shoulder, "is the best guess you've made yet!"

THE owner of the cutter was a young, thin and grave-faced man. He stood silently by the bulwark rail on the main-deck and looked aft in silence, where his dismantled and swamped craft, just cast loose by the ship's quartermasters, was rapidly filling and sinking, off the quarter. He only looked up, at the bridge, when the captain brayed at him through a megaphone:

"You, Hanna, get to hell up here! Step alive, you swab—looking at that hulk won't bring her back!"

Hanna said nothing, nor did he seem to have heard. But, slowly, walking with sure strides in his bare feet across the wet decks and up the ladders, he came onto the bridge, where, at once, the wind caught at him, flattening back his short yellow oilskin jacket and his dungarees against his long

and lean body. The captain was waiting for him there; addressed him immediately:

"What do you want—six bosun's mates, to pipe you up the ladders?"

"No," said Hanna; he shook his head. "But, what do you want, Cap'n?"

"By God!" said the captain; for just an instant, the fourth mate, who stood behind, and could not see his superior very well, thought the commander of the vessel was going to die of apoplexy. But the captain's voice rapidly reassured him:

" 'Want'? By the ruddy, flaming ears of my old, deaf grandmother, what would I 'want'? But, now, step alive! Get to it—take this packet in, and take it right, or I'll fling you by the neck off this bridge, and surely fix it that you never see another one!"

Somewhere in that Hanna seemed to find humor, for he smiled, then nodded again. "Aye, Cap'n," he said in a quiet, slow voice. "Tell your man at the wheel to put her on 285 until I tell him different."

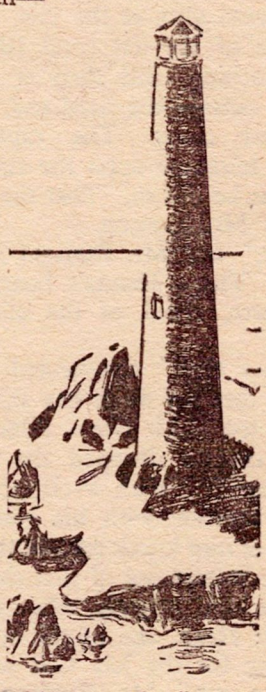
The fourth mate, whose station was before the man at the wheel, to repeat to him once more the orders already repeated after Hanna by the captain, found no outlet for his great curiosity until many minutes later. Then, the big, steady-moving ship had gone in past the blue smash of the surf and the gleaming thrust and retreat of the lighthouse on the Head, and ran through the darkness and comparative calm of the further channel. It was Mr. Rumson who allowed the fourth mate his opportunity; he had come in from the bridge in search of another pair of night glasses.

"Listen," muttered the fourth mate. "This one stripe is all I've got, after nine years at sea. But, I've pushed off in a lot of different ships, and never yet see a guy as rough and rotten as this Old Man, or a pilot get talked to like this bird is getting talked to now!"

"Listen, yourself," commanded Mr. Rumson in a whisper and hurriedly. "We had this same guy, Hanna, coming in, last trip. This channel's a brute, and it's always changing, so we're forced to take a pilot every trip, and the Old Man's sore at that, and more afraid of the channel. Last trip, he almost piled her up."

"Who—the Old Man?"

"Yeah, and shut up! He took her away from Hanna, almost scraped two sideplates off her before Hanna got her back. Right then, the Old Man saw his job in this one, his license, and all other jobs, going where those sideplates almost went. Well, it's a big ship, and a big company, and we just about keep this place alive. . . . And the Old Man bulldozed your predecessor and the guy who was on the wheel, into swearing Hanna did it, and not him, the Old Man. I wasn't up here; thank God. . . . I was in my bunk, with a bit of flu. But, the old fourth mate, and the quartermaster who'd been on the wheel, they both told me, before they quit the ship in New York when we got back. See, the Old Man filed formal charges against Hanna, down here. And so, Sonny Boy, that's how you got your job in this home without a mother, and if I didn't have a wife and three kids, and only one job, this one, and no chance for another one, I'd go on the beach right now, rather than—"



"But, in th' name o'—"

"Pipe down, if you want to hear it! We had to push off, of course, before the thing came to trial and Hanna was brought up. And now the Old Man's almost nuts; he hasn't heard since, how it came out. They got no cable here, and their wireless station

masts got knocked cockeyed in that last hurric'ne. Now, the Old Man's too scared, and sore, and yellow, to ask him—Hanna—anything about it. I wouldn't myself, if I was him, the rotten dog! There isn't . . ."

Mr. Rumson became silent, at the nudge against his shoulder from the fourth mate, and upon hearing the harsh clash of dialogue coming through the opened wheelhouse windows from the bridge, where the captain and Hanna stood.

"Where the gory, unlimited hell are you heading her for now, you clam-digger?" That, unmistakably, recognized both Mr. Rumson and the fourth mate, was the captain. "This is the same place you piled me up last time, and you're a point too close in, right now!"

A soft sound which was somewhat like that of laughter came from Hanna. "You want to change my course again, Cap'n, after last time?"

"No." That negative was pitched very low.

"All right. Give your own command to the wheelsman, then."

The captain turned; Mr. Rumson and the fourth mate could see his staring bright eyes and whitely drawn face in the darkness:

"As she goes now, quartermaster!"

The big Finn at the wheel was just droning it out in repetition of the fourth mate's repetition when the groaning shock came; then she listed under them, listed back, vibrated terribly for a moment before Mr. Rumson could get to the engine-room speaking tube and the engines were thrown out of gear below. Then, at once, they heard the captain's voice, in a weird, hoarse kind of scream:

"You would, would you, you scum! And in the same place! By the bloody beard of Glory, I'll rip up that license of yours now, with me own two hands!"

"No." Hanna's voice was rather soft, and dim; he was in motion towards the ladder head. "I wouldn't. . . . Because, this here's your ship, and you took me out o' my craft only when that was sinkin'. You're the master in this one; you ordered me here, from on deck, to take your ship in. And you—not me—just gave the command now which piled her up. As for th' license, you fixed that, all right; I lost it last week."

The captain made a mumbling noise, then a rapid rush of movement, as though he were going to keep Hanna from going down the ladder. "No you don't—not yet, you dog! You've tricked me—license or no license, and I got proof! How about that flag you were flying on your halyards, when we first raised you? Pilot's flag, wasn't it? Passing yourself as a pilot then, and you were just out there to catch me, you—you—!"

"No, sir." Hanna appeared to have halted for a moment at the ladder head. "Looks something like th' pilot flag, but it isn't, and all the other boys, the real pilots, saw it on my halyards, when they came out. . . . No, sir; that's my brother's house flag. Salvage business; went into partnership with him, this last week. Never was one here before, and been a bad need, with guys like you coming in here. But, even then, I was out, lookin' for work, when you heaved in. . . ." Hanna made a long, slow and graceful gesture forward into the blackness of the reef with his hand. "Be seein' you later, and soon, Cap'n. But, just for now, keep her 'as she goes'!"

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

(*Continued from page 6*)

To tell you the truth, I have never had much faith in one application cold gun bluers—but I decided to follow the manufacturer's directions to the letter and see what would happen. To make a long story short—the blueing turned out just about perfect, and with very little work at that! In fact that Ballard sure looks like a new gun!

The Minute Man gun blue is manufactured by the New Method Mfg. Co., Bradford, Pa., and the little kit is inexpensive—they'll send it to you for $1. Tell 'em I told you about it!

SECRET RIVER

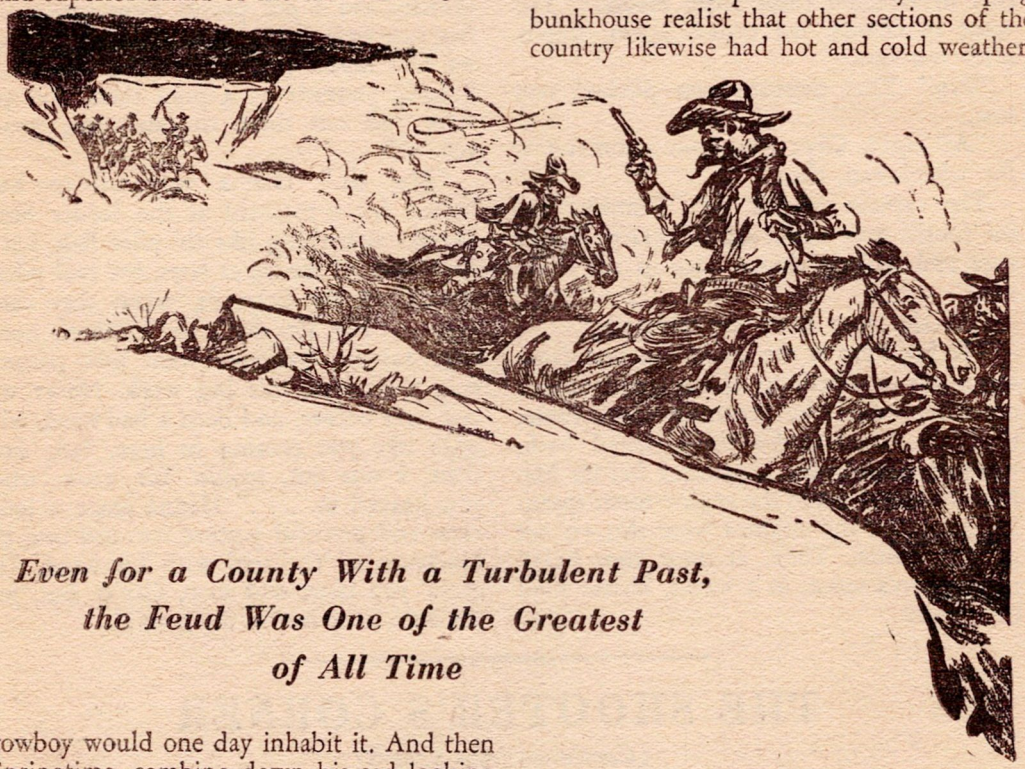
By ERNEST HAYCOX

CHAPTER I

SPRINGTIME POVY

ACCORDING to Springtime Povy, who held original ideas on a number of subjects, the Lord had created the West because He very well knew a special and superior brand of mortal known as the cowboy would one day inhabit it. And then Springtime, combing down his sad looking mustache with thumb and forefinger, went on to amplify and embroider. The West, he asseverated, measured farther from top to bottom than any other known region, and that was to give the cowboy ample space in which to rise when he mounted some wall-eyed bronc that didn't nowise aim to stay on the ground. Furthermore, the West was made broad from corner to corner to prevent the cowboy's expanding thoughts from being cramped or imprisoned. Spring and fall were to give him an idea of how the sweet by-and-by would be like; while winter and spring were meant to haze a portion of the false pride and orneriness from his system.

When it was pointed out by a carping bunkhouse realist that other sections of the country likewise had hot and cold weather,



Even for a County With a Turbulent Past, the Feud Was One of the Greatest of All Time

Springtime built himself a cigarette and thus amalgamated the basic credos of his life. "Yeah, that may be right. But they ain't no heat spells like out here, nor any blizzards as bad. Now why do yuh reckon it was made thataway? Jes' because the cowboy is a wilder, tougher, stubborner animal

than the lily-fingered pencil pusher back East, and the Lord knowed it'd take more severe conditions to haze him to a proper state o' mind."

At about this point Springtime found he hadn't laid the proper foundations for his thesis. There was a regrettable skepticism pervading his audience and since he was nothing if not practical he descended to a more prosaic level. "Well, mebbe I'm wastin' the fruits o' my mind on yuh misbegotten sheep-eaters. I thought yuh could think, which is my mistake. But here—how far is it to town?"

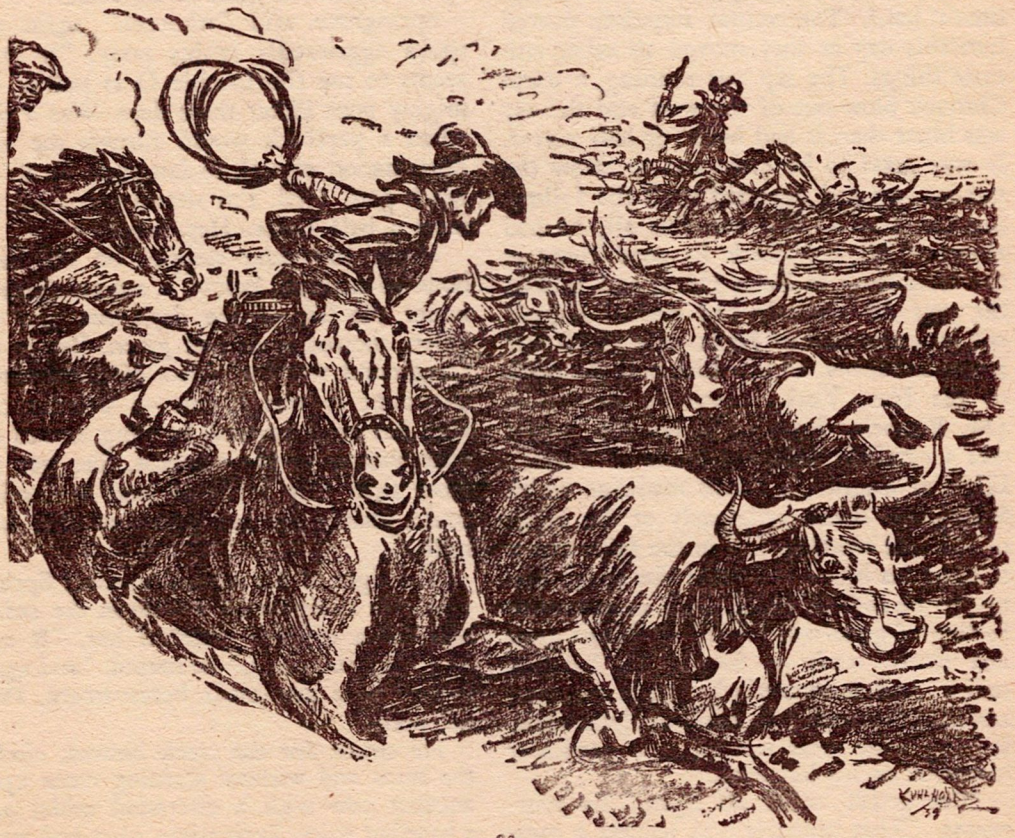
It was allowed, by one of the more substantial members of the bunkhouse, that twenty linear miles lay athwart Roan Horse and the ranch gate.

Springtime seized upon the fact with satisfaction. "Now why do yuh think its that far? Think it was jes' an accident? No, sirree, bob. They ain't no accidents in this world. Them twenty miles was put there so's a Rockin' Chair man could leave Roan Horse comf'tably illuminated and reach home sober. If it was any less distance he'd prob'ly git here in no fit shape for work, which would be very sad. Which illustrates how Providence takes care o' the cowboy. Answer that, yuh limp-footed pedestrians."

There was no answer. Nothing but awe was visible upon the countenances of the bunkhouse gang. Or at least that was the expression Springtime thought he saw. He rose with the air of one who had spread manna before unappreciative ingrates and went inside to prepare himself for bed. The operation was simple and strictly followed range etiquette governing the negligee; he removed his hat, he removed his spurs and he rolled himself neatly into a blanket. But before dropping off to sonorous slumber he heard the reaction to his metaphysical deductions.

A foot scraped, a match flared and somebody murmured softly, "Ain't it hell?"

SPRINGTIME should have known whereof he spoke, for he had traversed that twenty miles many a time and, on the particular occasion this relation commences, he was covering the same territory once



again, homeward bound from Roan Horse in a condition he himself would have described as "comfortably tight, but not too giddy."

It was going on toward sunset of a day in early spring. Borne up in the thin, sparkling air was the odor of sage and of wet earth steaming under the year's first hot sun. The creeks were bank full, the dry washes no longer dry, and on the high peaks could be seen black patches where a day before had been a solid mantle of snow. On the bench the bunch grass was turning green, while along the bottom the cottonwoods and alders had lost their sere and desolate appearance. To a veteran like Springtime it should have reminded him that the years were beginning to roll along too fast; it should have also reminded him that they would presently be lining out on the spring round-up—which was no longer the gay time it once had been when he was a young fellow and thought nothing of eighteen hours straight in the saddle.

But no somber thoughts were in Springtime's head. The vernal impulses moved him this day as they moved all other animate things. The sap was running, a warm Chinook blew out of the west and the sky was bluer than it had been for half a year. It was good to be alive and to know the rheumatism had departed until the following wet season. Nor was this all; he had absorbed his pay check in good cheer at the Double O in Roan Horse and to start the year off properly had decked himself out in a new pair of boots, new gloves and a new bandanna, all of which bore the mark of the New York Mercantile Emporium (M. Fishbein, Prop.). In his hip pocket was a carefully wrapped bottle of Frazer's Elixir of Seasons, a patent medicine which Springtime drank religiously at the break of the cold weather, full in the faith that it thinned his blood and otherwise toned him up. So he rode at peace, with an expansive feeling of good-will toward all things great and small; ready to forgive his harshest critics. And at intervals he struck his chest and said "whoosh," in a rolling, lyric voice, looking with great interest at a particular landmark on his left flank.

"I'm gettin' sober all right," he murmured. "That pinnacle was triplets a minute ago. Now it's twins. Well, I guess I'll be cured in another half hour. Whooosh."

Not being quite ready to hit for the ranch, he veered toward the bench, forded a newly made creek and climbed to higher ground.

STRANGE to say, notwithstanding the mellow kindliness bubbling inside of him, his face presented a sad, austere expression to the world at large. In this respect Springtime was unfortunate. Mother Nature, in fashioning him, had done something to his cheek muscles—had left them stiff and unpliant. Springtime had never been known to laugh; nor had anyone seen anger upon him. He rode through the world, a lean, thin-chested man with hard squinting eyes, dangling, rawhide arms, and a pair of legs bowed beyond the power of description. Yet, in spite of his wooden face, Springtime had his humorous moments and his volcanic moments; the Rocking Chair boys could tell these moments by the drawl and grate of his voice.

Springtime said "whooosh" again and spoke aggrievedly to his pony. "It shore seems to me the Double O is puttin' out mighty poor likker these days. Was a time when a paycheck would furnish me with illumination enough to last right up to the ranch gate. Hell, I'm almost sober an' not more'n half home. Hey, what's that?"

Horse and rider stopped on the backbone of a ridge. Below, a stream sparkled under the last of the day's sun and the alders showed a verdant green. But in the foreground was the object of Springtime's attention; it was a cow—a brindle cow with her head lowered, bawling toward the four corners of the compass. She was not more than fifty yards off and Springtime could plainly see her udder swollen with milk.

The sight of her seemed to sober Springtime. He straightened a little in the saddle and for a moment watched her. "It may be a natcheral error," he mused, "and again it may be a man-made bereavement. Push on, pony."

He struck for the creek bottom, circled the trees and without warning came upon another cow with a distended udder and a bawling voice. Springtime, alert and wary,

started up the side of a hill, sweeping the land as he went. He was a good half hour in making the climb and by the time he had reached the top the sun had fallen into the west, leaving the world a mass of rose and purple shadows. Down on the other side of the hill flowed Secret River, showing darkly in the advancing twilight; a river that twisted and turned and doubled back in the bottom . . . forming miniature islands and dwarf peninsulas. At present it surged along with its snow water, but in another month or two it would be a sluggish rivulet. No matter. Springtime had spent his life in this country and he knew Secret River; he knew its moods and he knew the stories connected with it. Always it seemed a little shaded, somewhat sinister. No river in the county had as many treacherous fords; none could boast of a blacker history. Springtime, running his glance back and forth, could have recalled many a man-hunt along the stream if he had been in a reminiscent mood. But he wasn't. He had spied something dark on the ground, down in a little pocket of the hillside. He rode along and bent in the saddle; presently he circled around it, his half-closed eyes reading sign. In the end he turned his horse to the summit and spent a moment staring into the distance. Out of sight, beyond the bend, was the Streeter outfit.

Springtime shook his fist in that direction and spoke briefly to his horse. "Travel now."

It was dark when Springtime reached the home ranch. The boys were sitting in front of the bunkhouse and as he rode toward them the comment rose in the balmy air, humorous and slightly ribald.

"Here's the vet'ran back from the battle. Light, Springtime an' tell us another o' them goshawful lies."

"Oh slap my wrist Algy. What's them duflickers he's a-wearin' on his han's?"

Somebody tapped the steps and announced, "Frazer's Elixir of the Seasons," whereupon the crowd gravely took up the chorus.

"This remedy guaranteed to cure asthma, dandruff, ear troubles, heart leakage, tuberculosis and allied ills. Taken externally it is a wonderful shaving lotion. Taken internally it is nature's own remedy. No ailing person can affords to do without Frazer's Elixir. Handy alike for gunshot wounds and goitre. Price two dollars the bottle in all drug and hardware stores. Civilization's greatest discovery."

Springtime ordinarily would have halted and blasted them with a few picked words. This time he went on, leaving the comment to trail and evaporate. Bringing up at the porch of the big house he solemnly surveyed the three occupants thereon, seeming to wait for a greeting. Old Jim Bolles chewed on his cigar and said nothing. The schoolmistress ignored him. But young Jim Bolles leaned a little forward.

"Well, Springtime?" he said.

"Somebody," announced Springtime in a brittle voice, "is a-gettin' artistic with the runnin' iron again. I found three-four cows bellerin' fer their calves. And up in a holler they was marks of a leetle brandin' fire." He looked again at the schoolmistress and it seemed some kind of emotion tried to break through the stiff barrier of his face. But the girl stared deliberately over his head and he turned back toward the corrals.

The schoolmistress clucked her tongue, but young Jim was paying no attention to her. Father and son were exchanging glances in the semi-darkness. The old man brought a sledge-hammer fist down on the porch railing. "They're declarin' war on me, eh? Well, by Godfrey, I'll singe 'em! I'll break up that snake nest!"

Young Jim's face was grim; he shook his head in a wistful, unhappy manner. "I guess so. I guess it's got to be. Another range war."

CHAPTER II

FEUD FIRES ARE KINDLED

THE schoolmistress, whose name was Evelyn Fleming, straightened in her chair and put a hand to her mouth. She was very young and very pretty in a pert, self-confident way, with a pair of flashing eyes and a face upon which emotions were continually passing. She had come from the East for the adventure of it and, after the fashion of the country, was virtually a guest of the Bolles' house while she taught

at the prairie school two miles away. But the West had deceived her with its broad and smiling countenance. The romance and the picturesqueness of it did not immediately envelope her and she somehow failed to see the vital, primeval immensity of the terrific winters or the blazing heat of the summers. She was almost too clever, too quick at passing judgments—too prone to judge these people and this land after the standards of the East. And, with the exception of young Jim Bolles, her judgments were not complimentary. For that reason, perhaps, she had never discovered that beneath the slow-moving, kindly-speaking West there was a perpetual play of forces; she had never understood why the men of the Rocking Chair studied so carefully all the insignificant signs on the ground and in the air, nor why both old and young Jim seemed to be forever watchful when they were abroad. So this announcement fell on her ears like a bolt of thunder.

"War!" she cried. "My heavens! War with whom? Are you men fooling with me?"

Old Jim, after the fashion of his generation, was quick to cover up the trouble. His white head bobbed in the shadow. "Oh, Springtime is always bringin' in sad news an' he gets me riled. I'm an old fool, Miss Evelyn. Always shootin' off my mouth. It's nothin' to worry yore pretty head about."

He looked toward his son and got up. "I guess I better do a little figurin' if I expect to keep from bein' foreclosed. Never buy a cattle ranch, ma'am. It's what give me gray hairs."

"I'm going to bed," she announced, likewise rising. "I'm terribly disappointed. For once I thought something exciting would happen around here."

Young Jim waited until she had disappeared upstairs before turning toward his father's office. He shook his head and when he faced his father across the yellow lamplight he was frowning. Old Jim stood in a corner, waiting for his son, lines of anger cut deeply on his blocky, pugnacious cheeks. But he had time for one grim pleasantry.

"What's the matter with you, Jim? When I was yore age I'd a proposed to her, married her, and had a family raised by now. Yo're slow. Can't you see the gal's waitin' to be asked?"

Young Jim flushed, saying nothing. The old man grunted. "You know best when the time's right. Now, by Godfrey we got to singe the cat's whiskers. I've had enough stock rustled offen me. Seventeen head of horses this winter and the Lord only knows how much beef. I wonder if them Streeters think I'm losin' my grip?" He ended by smashing his fist down on the table. "I'll exterminate every damn Streeter on Secret River. I'll burn their houses down and erase every cussed thing they ever built. There won't be no more vermin breedin' in this country when I'm through."

Young Jim said quietly, "We've got to have more proof, Dad. And I don't believe all of the Streeters are bad."

OLD JIM flung up his grizzled head and stared at his son. The two of them made a splendid show of physical strength as they stood across from each other. Each of them had the generous features of their tribe—the heavy chin and nose, the high cheek bones and the deep-set eye sockets from which came the characteristic straightforward, penetrating glance of the family. Here the resemblance ceased. Old Jim had been raised with a generation of grim, heavy-handed fighters who had pioneered and made their own laws, a generation that never would have a duplicate in cattle land. He had been a roistering, dangerous man, hard of heart toward his enemies but generous without stint toward his friends. His own hardships he had laughed at and consequently was callous to the sufferings of others. Now, with the frost on his head and his muscles overladen with fat, he was lord of his domain; a bluff, choleric man proud of his power and ruthless toward anyone infringing on his rights.

Young Jim was half a head taller than his father, broader of shoulder and trimmed down from constant riding and work. Springtime told the bunkhouse one day that young Jim was a better man than old Jim had ever been. "He's got a better head on him and he understands more about the other guy—sorter sympathizes with the under dog. As fer shootin'—he's the best in this yere county, but he'd ruther use his

fists than a gun. When he goes into an argyment he don't like to leave any corpses behind." And whereas old Jim's temper once caused him to roar in glee one moment and thunder his rage the next, young Jim rode on an even keel. He smiled seldom and he looked upon the world with sober, quizzical eyes.

"All the Streeters ain't bad?" shouted old Jim. "What moonshine you been drinkin', son? That ain't like you at all. Listen, when a snake bites a man, he don't go around thinkin' mebbe it was jest one snake that was vicious. No. He goes out and kills all snakes. Which applies to the Streeters. Never a Streeter I knew in twenty years was any good. I'm about to wipe the breed off the range."

"You've got to have more proof," said young Jim. The light gathered in pools around his eyes and the old man, looking at his son, seemed baffled.

"It's a curious way you got, Jim. I can't seem to read you no more. Well, I've got a man at the Portland stockyards and he's sendin' me proof a-plenty. And mebbe the Cattlemen's Association has got a word to say by an' by. Yes, we'll be gittin' proof enough. Don't you worry. Yore conscience won't bother you none when all the cards are on the table."

YOUNG Jim moved restlessly around the room, coming to a stand beyond the rays of the lamp. "It'll be a fight. I see everything smoking up that way. What's the matter with the due course of law in this county anyway? Hasn't the sheriff got guts enough to go in there and take those fellows? Why should there be a necktie party?"

"If you think any Streeter would submit peaceably to arrest you ain't read 'em right," said old Jim shrewdly.

"Maybe so," agreed his son. "Even at that, I guess you old fellows aren't so anxious to do it peaceably."

"Correct," said the old man. He threw back his head and chuckled, his massive body shaking with amusement. "You know the oldtimers, don't you? It ain't pure bloodthirstiness either, boy. We learnt our poker in a tough game. What will the law do? Nothin'. They're too many lawyers nowadays with their tongues oiled and hung in the middle."

Young Jim moved back to the light, squaring his shoulders. "Well, when the time comes I'll have to declare myself."

The elder's face wreathed itself in heavy lines. "This is as much yore ranch now as it is mine. If a man won't fight for his property he ain't of much account."

"I'll fight my own way," declared young Jim. "I'm not going to go into a bust of shooting just because you old ducks want a little fun."

"That's yore final word, eh?" growled old Jim, wrinkling his nose.

Young Jim hesitated. He stared somberly at the lamp and his face seemed at the moment gaunt and careworn. "I don't know, dad, whether it is or not. A man can't get away from his own flesh and blood. We've got to keep the range clear, that's plain, too. I'll stay peaceable as long as I can. If something happens to shove me into this scrap then I'll do as much fighting as the rest of you. But I don't want to be shoved into it, hear?"

"I wish I could read you, boy," said the elder wistfully. "You ain't yellow. I've seen you lick too many men to think that."

Young Jim shook his head and went out of the office. Presently he was riding away in the dark, the old man watching him go and wondering what he was about. And from an upstairs window the schoolmistress likewise watched him; being entirely a woman she guessed whither young Jim was bound. She had seen him ride in that direction too often not to surmise what attraction pulled him away. And since her own heart was set on having young Jim, she flung herself down on the bed and spent a bitter hour.

YOUNG Jim, once out of sight of the ranch, rode rapidly west and north until the trail crossed a creek. Here he struck up along a ridge and gave his horse a loose rein, riding as he best liked to ride—glad to be alone in a world cloaked alike with peace and with mystery. No moon sailed aloft, but the velvet, opaque universe was studded with countless diamond bright star points. Out of the darkness came the rustling rhythm of the small creatures of

the earth and the sighing of the night wind through the occasional pines. Young Jim, relaxed in the saddle, felt the immensity of the heavens and his own insignificance. It should have been a depressing thought, yet it always served to dwarf his troubles; he could never ride abroad like this without catching hold, for a brief second, at the thought of infinity and it always cleared his mind of the turbulence and the uncertainty of the day's work.

He came to the summit and angled down, seeing of a sudden the long, wavering beam of a light. Secret River was down there—and the Streeter ranch. Presently he was in a meadow, across which stretched a fence. He could not see the fence, but the horse came to a stop and young Jim got down and whipped the top strand with his glove, softly. Nearby sounded the half whispered reply of a woman.

"Jim? Stay there. I think Jere's along the river bank watching for someone." A foot struck a rock and a hand fell lightly on the man's shoulder. He took the hand eagerly. When he spoke it was in a rough, almost angry manner.

"When is all this going to end, Nan? Some of these days they'll catch on and then that fine brother of yours will use the horsewhip on you. Lord, it puts me at the end of my rope to think of it."

"Hush, Jim. It's too wonderful tonight for you to bring up all the unpleasant things. Look, there's our star again. I like to watch for it—but how can people be so foolish as to think the stars have any concern with this dusty, troublesome old earth?"

"I guess we're all kind of foolish, honey. Else why should we be going around like chickens minus heads? Sit down there a minute." He crouched on the ground; a match burst like a bomb and small ray of light shot up from his cupped palm, illumining her face.

IT WAS a clear, oval face with a broad forehead and a mass of black hair that seemed to absorb the light. She was seated on a log, her arms propped out and bringing into relief the sturdy lines of her shoulder, the fine, supple carriage of her body. Gray eyes widened and instantly she had reached forward and covered his palms. "You mustn't do that, Jim! If they caught you they'd kill you! Something's in the air tonight. Everybody's in ugly temper."

"There's only one Streeter I'm afraid of," said Jim.

"Who?"

"You, Nan. I'm afraid you'll stick with them too long. When are you going to let me take care of you, anyway? You're living in a den of thieves."

"They're my folks, Jim. I've got no others."

"Well, I'll supply you with a new set, pronto."

"Jim, I've got to stay! I'm the only woman in that house. Jere's children can't be left with the men. Oh, you're going to say I ought to bring them off with me. Jere would never stop then until he'd ambushed you. I've lived with Jere long enough to know his temper."

"Is that the only thing to hold you back?"

She was silent for a time. Her hand gripped young Jim's fist. "No-o. I can't help being a Streeter. I know what the county thinks of the Streeter men. All bad—always have been bad. But they raised me and I owe them something for that. I guess I must have a little Streeter clannishness in me. Don't you think I haven't argued with dad and Jere about going straight. They just laugh at me until I go too far. Then they begin to throw things. No, it'll just have to be this way until—"

He leaned forward and the girl felt the rising eagerness in him. "Until what?"

"I guess 'until' means always, Jim."

"No, it won't be that long." He was on the point of saying more, but checked himself. They had long ago made a bargain on that point; neither was to give away the plans of their families. But the girl knew what he had omitted.

"Its coming, then? The fight. They'll drive the Streeters out. Are you going to be with the crowd?"

"Lord, Nan, I—"

She stopped him, a cool hand across his mouth. "You will be, Jim. You have always been loyal. That's why I love you. But—I don't fit in. A Streeter and a Bolles? It doesn't even sound right. You're like all

men—think marriage erases all these difficulties. Jim—you had better please your dad and take the schoolmistress."

"I'm damned if I ever will," said Young Jim flatly.

Her answer seemed to come from a great distance. "Well, it's good to hear you say that. Hark."

Water splashed not far away and a figure passed across the light from the house. The girl's lips brushed his cheek, saying, "Stay here until I'm gone. Bless you Jim. Don't take the same road home."

SHE was gone. Young Jim squatted by the fence a drawn-out twenty minutes. She should have passed across that light, too, in her trail to the house, but she didn't. As long as they had kept this secret meeting spot he had never seen her figure in the shadow, never known where she was until she called to him from the fence. There was something uncanny about the Streeter ranch; in twenty years no man had ever trailed a Streeter to his door.

Young Jim drew a breath of relief. She had reached the house safely, for a light appeared once from an upper window and a shade was drawn down. That was the signal he had waited for. Leading his horse along the side of the ridge he fell away from his old path and followed the river's edge a quarter mile. Then mounting he pushed upward and across the ridge toward home, depressed and foreboding. The old truce between the Streeters and the responsible cattle men of the county was about to be broken. He knew that from the very manner his father had spoken and from the air of watchfulness and veiled expectancy hovering about the men he had met in the past week. Nor had the Streeters been idle. Three times recently he had met strangers along the Roan Horse road—characters he recognized on sight; and later in trailing those men he had found their hoofprints going directly into Secret River. The outlaws were growing bolder and calling to their help outside gun fighters. The underground telegraph was full of messages this early week of spring, warning even those not connected with either side. It was only the fool who saw his paradise to be the same happy, untroubled land.

"Meanwhile," muttered young Jim, "what am I going to do? I've got one gun, one head and one heart. No straddling of the fence. By the Lord, I've got to make up my mind one way or the other."

NAN STREETER let herself into the hall of the house by a certain door and stood in the darkness, listening. She recognized her father's husky, hushed voice floating from the living room and the occasional laconic interjection of a stranger. They were laying plans; that much she knew from the way her father slid his words together, piling them one atop the other, but she was much too honest to eavesdrop and after a moment of hesitation she softly opened the kitchen door and closed it behind her. Boots dragged across the floor above—other strangers turning in for the night and at the sound of them Nan's face drew tighter. They were making this old house the resort of cut-throats and man killers, inviting the wrath of the law-abiding element of the county. War would come, soon enough, sure enough.

She went to a corner by the stove where two youngsters were sleeping on a mattress, and for a long spell she watched them, wondering what kind of men they would grow to be. There were some decent impulses in the Streeter family, but it had always seemed to her that this house with its lawless traditions had bent and warped the wills of the men folk. Once, far back, the Streeters had been honest. Then, one of them had turned lawless and since then the dead hand of his acts had weighed heavily on them all. It was as if the succeeding generations had felt the distrust of the community and had lived up to it out of defiance. Sometimes she recognized this in herself, as when she met a sheriff or a deputy in the hills. At such times she had almost to check the instinct to fling a challenge at them and run away. That was what the Streeters had done to her, and perhaps would do to those sleeping youngsters.

She was all the mother they had, she supplied all of the gentleness and care they had known since early babyhood. Passionately she wished them to be upright and decent—to be the kind of men young Jim Bolles was. At times she wondered if it

wouldn't be best to run away with them, start them off in new surroundings. But always she came to face the one insurmountable barrier. Wherever she went she knew her brother Jere would find her and bring her and his children back. After that life would be so much the harder for them all. Jere was that way.

Even as she thought of him, a back door opened with hardly a sound and Jere slid through, his sharp eyes sweeping all the room at a single glance. He was a small man with a dark, drawn face and a narrow, feminine mouth which was forever twitching back and displaying his flashing white teeth. His motions were soft, cat-like and he was eternally watching and listening for tell-tale sounds. The girl, studying him with concealed fear, was struck by the motion that all the latent evil of the Streeter heart and the Streeter blood seemed to have come to a point in him. He had the intuitive instinct of a wild animal, the treachery of a feline, the whims and volatile angers of a feline. And though he was not much older than she, his transgressions and his dissipations had left their print; he lived now on his nerves.

"Where y' been?" he demanded, looking through her with his sharp, suspicious glance.

"Out in the meadow, watching the night," said she. Always, she came as near the truth as she could, for Jere had an uncanny way of reading her voice and her eyes. Tonight he seemed unsatisfied and she thought he knew her secret; she wanted to turn away, but she knew he waited for that weakness and so she stood with her back to the wall, her hands gripped together behind her, matching his inspection with her level, sober gaze.

"Huh. You better take to stayin' inside, kid. It's gittin' unhealthy to be in the open. Where's the old man?"

SHE motioned toward the living room and broke into a protest. "Jere, what are you making of this ranch? All the toughs and bullies in the state are coming here! Isn't it bad enough without them? You and dad must have lost your senses—"

He stopped her with one swift jerk of his arm. He was smiling, a smile that had no humor to it. It drew the sagging lines of his face to sharp ridges and made him seem old and dry and deadly. "No more preachin'," he warned her.

"Oh, I've quit trying. But there is an end to all things, Jere. If you go beyond their patience they will hunt you down and kill you."

"The night's been a-tellin' you things, eh? I guess it's gettin' to be public knowledge. Don't I know they aim to crucify us? Well, we aim to give 'em a surprise. When I get through this'll be a wide open county. They'll be plenty Puritans dead, kid, an' the rest'll be willin' enough to let us alone."

He was mad. She had feared that one day the crazy, reckless lust for killing would unhinge his caution. And now it had come about.

"Meanwhile," he went on, "you take care of things. Feed the guests we got in the mornin'. Me and the old man are ridin' tonight."

"To do what, Jere?"

Again that deadly smile brought up the dry hate in him, the suppressed murderer's instinct. "To start the ball a-rollin' mebbe. Mind yore own business. An' listen; don't try to run out on us. Oh, I know you been honest. Yo're a Streeter, too. But you ain't like any Streeter I ever knew. And I ain't trustin' nobody no more." A finger went swiftly in the direction of his sleeping sons. "I think I'd kill 'em if I thought they'd be the means o' givin' me away. That's fer you to think about, sis."

He left the kitchen. Presently there was a clumping of feet in the hall, a soft word or two; five minutes later she heard the two ride off. Up above the strangers were laughing, and with all her steady quiet courage she felt cold to the bone. This grim house had killed all the Streeter women—it would kill her. Once more she thought of flight. When she looked at the children she abandoned the idea. Turning, she took the lamp and went upstairs, framing it in the window a moment. That was the signal to young Jim. Then she turned down the wick, locked the door and went to bed, her mind traveling wistfully back across the ridge with the solitary rider. All of her hopes and her desires were with him, yet when she came to dwell upon those hopes

they seemed to vanish and leave her the more miserable.

CHAPTER III

DEATH RIDES IN THE HILLS

OLD Jim came to the breakfast table the next morning with an ill-concealed belligerence. He roared at the Chinese cook; when the foreman came in for instructions he bit his words off in the middle; and he glowered at his son throughout the meal. Young Jim returned his treatment with a grin of delight. His father was a poor sleeper of late and the growing trouble with the Streeters only added to the old man's restlessness. The schoolmistress, likewise accustomed to these moods chatted breezily, now and then studying young Jim covertly.

"To hear your father," said she, "it would seem he had been out late last night instead of you."

Young Jim failed to rise to the bait. His grin shortened a little, but he nodded and said he guessed he'd have to get a few wildcats for the old gent to tear apart. Old Jim snorted at this while the schoolmistress, coming back to her target, fired a fresh shot.

"If you aren't tired of the company of a woman, perhaps you'll ride along with me to school. All this talk about war and trouble—"

"I'm sure sorry," apologized young Jim, "but I promised Joe Tatum I'd ride over to his place this mornin' early. I'll have Springtime go along with you."

The schoolmistress said no more, but old Jim bellowed, "Ain't this generation a polite one! In my time a lady's word was allus a command."

"This is going to be a family fight in a minute," grinned young Jim, pushing back from the table. "I'm making apologies all the way around. But I guess you'll have to put up with Springtime this a.m. Sorry."

"If he casts any more sheep eyes at me," promised the lady, not without a note of irritation, "I shall pull all the whiskers out of his mustache."

"Which would be Samson shorn of his strength," said the delighted Jim. He went out to saddle her horse and to hail Springtime; and he saw them both off. The schoolmistress was almost openly hostile toward the puncher, but when young Jim saw the eagerness struggling behind Springtime's frozen face, he could hardly maintain a serious countenance. All the humor left him a few moments later, however, when his father called him to the office.

"Mebbe I'm dense in ways," said the old man, chewing on a cigar, "but that girl made some pointed remarks this mornin'. Are you out skylarkin' at night?"

"I observe the multitudinous faces of nature if that's what you mean," offered young Jim.

"Hell! Get down to facts. Are you a-goin' to marry the schoolma'm?" He stopped short and tried a milder tone. "You see, son, I'm gettin' old. Men like me don't last long. I want to see you established before I cross the hill. They's lots of ways about her I don't cotton to, none whatsoever, but she's smart and she ain't flighty. As fer tolerance toward the ranch hands —that'll be rubbed into her and it won't—"

Young Jim put a hand on his father's shoulder. "You're barking up the wrong tree, oldtimer. In the first place she wouldn't have a slow fellow like me. What makes you think she would? In the second place—" he hesitated growing somber "—I might as well tell you I'm due to be single a good many years. I want Nan Streeter and she's not to be had. Not by young Jim Bolles."

THE elder never moved, but young Jim thought then he had never seen such a flash of fire and fury in his father's face. Still, the old man said nothing for a long, long minute; the fury passed, leaving him a little less florid, a little less erect. Quietly he went to his desk and got his Stetson. When he spoke it was with a gentleness young Jim had not heard since boyhood. "The name o' Streeter is poison to me, Jim, and I reckon you know it. It goes against everything I stand for, every idea I got concernin' fair play. I know the breed from ground up. I know the devil in 'em. I've seen old Anse stab a man in the back—before yore time. I know things about 'em which'd make any upright man sorry to

know. How you come to be mixed up with those folks I can't see. If yore heart is in the girl I ain't got a thing to say, for I know a man's reason can't go against his heart. But just remember this, Jim; every man born of woman has got certain duties. For bad or good, he's got to stand by his kind, pay his debts. It's a matter o' conscience."

He stopped, looking at his son with a quick, shy glance as if ashamed of this much self revelation. Young Jim strode forward and gripped his father by the arm. That was all. The old man walked out and presently was galloping off toward Roan Horse. Young Jim watched him until a ridge took him from sight, then with a heavy heart he too got in the saddle and swung eastward to keep his word with Joe Tatum. The sun curved upward on its course and the day grew hot and pungent with the scent of the laboring earth. Dust rose along the bench where a Rocking Chair man came back from the bronc buster's camp with part of the horse herd.

"I wonder," muttered young Jim, "if he thought I wasn't thinkin' of my debts!"

SPRINGTIME POVY'S face seldom matched his feelings. Habitually it was sad and sorrowful as if the weight of a wicked world rode on his shoulders. This morning, however, there was an internal disharmony which well accorded with that expression. Springtime had gone along with the schoolma'm bathed in a well-concealed bliss. The very proximity of the lady performed such miracles as ten bottles of Frazer's Elixir of the Seasons could not have accomplished and he only hoped that she would turn to him with a receptive countenance so that he might drop a few subtle remarks concerning the inevitable fitness of matrimony. This was Springtime's secret.

The lugubrious cowpuncher, seeing himself as he wished others to see him and entirely disregarding the sorry scheme of things mortal, aspired to be educated. Not an ordinary education at the hands of an ordinary teacher in the ordinary way. He had developed, to make it plain, that fever from which there are few recoveries. The vernal urge was upon him and he struggled dismally to find the suitable words to express it.

But he had been spared the trouble. Evelyn Fleming had penetrated that secret and this morning she had ruthlessly exposed it. In fact she had hauled it out, broke it in twain and then shattered it in such fine fragments that when the wrecking process was over Springtime could not find so much as a forlorn splinter of his grand passion to nourish to his bosom. It may have been that the schoolma'm wanted to leave no sadly pining cowhands in her path, or it may have been that her own disappointment had made her a little cruel. She gave a jab here and a thrust there, all apparently innocent and unrelated, but which left Springtime at the school house door a different man from the one who had started from the Rocking Chair gates an hour earlier.

His wooden face alone saved him. Battered and bruised he sought the solace of the bench, making tremendous inroads on the chewing tobacco and hardly fit for the rest of the day's work. Deep and smoldering resentment was his, from which emerged one pride-salvaging thought.

"I ought to've seen she was set to have young Jim. Shucks, where's my usual good jedgment? But no, I'm like all other foolish critters when it comes to connubial affection. Blind. Plumb blind. Well, if she thinks to trap Jim she'll have her own feelin's tromped on somethin' fierce. Yeah, won't that be too bad."

It made the dismal day seem brighter. For Springtime knew something about young Jim and Nan. Not for nothing had he spent his life on the range.

"So I look like the funny man's idear o' a cowboy, huh? Well, that's what she as much as said. Gosh, the more I consider it the more it stings! It shore takes a woman to stick a man with pins which don't hurt until after they're plumb sunk to the heads. All right, lady, if that's yore story yuh hang to it. But I'll bet ten thousand steers against a buffalo chip yuh won't feel so pritty when young Jim waves yuh farewell."

IF SPRINGTIME had been anything but a gentleman at heart he would have engaged in some tall cursing. But he couldn't swear without in some manner relating the

adjectives to the schoolma'm, and that obviously wouldn't do. Dark and gloomy, he walked his horse along the bench, essaying to stretch his philosophy to cover the catclysm. If he had been a younger man he would have rolled his blankets and left the country. Being what he was, a gentle-hearted citizen with a supreme attachment to his county and to his ranch, he dismissed the thought at once as almost disloyal and took a fresh chew. It was at this point, while applying the oil to his wounds, that he heard the echo of a shot coming off the Roan Horse road over the ridge. Right there and then his own personal troubles sank to the bottom of his head, becoming so much tinsel and gilt in a world of realities. His hand dropped halfway to his gun and he swept the country with a swift, embracing glance. A second shot followed quickly. After that silence intervened. Springtime did some quick thinking. None of the Rocking Horse men were over there. Their chores carried them back on the east range. Young Jim had gone toward Tatum's place and old Jim—

"By the hat that Maggie wears!" swore Springtime and sank his spurs into the pony's hide. They raced up along the slope with Springtime reaching down to get the rifle out of his gunboot. Fifteen minutes brought him to the crest of the ridge where he surveyed the course of the road for a half mile. What first caught his eye was the weaving figure of a horseman on the side of the ridge that shielded Secret River; the man was traveling off as rapidly as his pony would carry him. Then Springtime switched his glance lower and saw a mount he knew only too well standing in the road with the reins still hanging over its neck. Somebody lay in the road near the horse, motionless.

Springtime brought up his rifle and took one chance shot at the fugitive rider, seeing the dust kick up across the little valley. It fell far short of the man and Springtime wasted no more time but spurred recklessly down the angle to the road. He was out of his saddle and on the dead run within ten yards of the figure. What he saw made his loyal heart swell and shrivel.

Old Jim Bolles lay there, his Stetson rolled away and his white head half covered with the powdered clay of the road. He was face downward, one arm forward as if to break his fall, the other still tightly gripping the butt of his gun. A tiny rivulet of blood coursed away from his chest; when Springtime bent and put a hand to his boss's heart it told him too plainly that the bullet had gone home. Suddenly Springtime sprang up, raging. He had caught sight of a second bullet hole entering Old Jim's neck. The murderer had delivered a coup de grace. More than that he had left a piece of paper in Old Jim's hand. Springtime took it and smoothed it out, reading the ill-scrawled words:

Warning, Rockin Chare and all others. If you want to start a fight heres a chance. Leave us alone or we'l strip this valey down to rattlesnakes.

Springtime carefully folded the note and put it in his pocket, for a moment studying the vanishing figure. Pursuit wouldn't be good sense; the man could ambush him too easy, or else reach his hiding place. Anyhow, Springtime knew well enough where that figure was going. It was a matter for action a little later. Meanwhile—

He got old Jim into the saddle and climbed up behind. Whistling to the second horse he started homeward with his burden. As for the schoolma'm, she might as well have never existed for all the thought Springtime gave her. He was sounding the war drums to himself; sedate, homely, dependable Springtime Povy was ready to kill.

YOUNG JIM was still away when Springtime came home with the dead man, for which fact Springtime was mutely thankful. Being intensely shy at heart, like all men of the range, where it came to matters of the soul he didn't want to see young Jim's face when the latter looked at his father. He laid the old man on a bed in the big house, went outside and rolled himself cigarette after cigarette, none of which he troubled to light. And when the younger Jim came riding back around noon he had fashioned the few blunt words necessary to tell the tale. Springtime was wise and he knew from experience that any in-

jury hurt less when it was sharp and sudden; he stood up, looked once at young Jim and turned away his head, squinting at the sun.

"Yore dad," said he, "is dead. I found him on the road, six miles from the school house. Potted by a gent who rode off to'rds Secret River. Here's the letter he left."

Jamming the piece of paper into young Jim's hand, Springtime walked off as fast as his bowed legs would allow, scarcely seeing where he went. Not for several moments did he look around, to find the door of the big house, ordinarily never shut, closed. Springtime sat on the bunkhouse steps and waited.

The dinner hour came, but no cook's triangle sounded. One by one the hands came riding in, and when Springtime told his story they silently disappeared inside, to come out again with their cartridge belts supplied. They got their best horses from the corral, inspected their gear, looked toward the west where lay Secret River, and waited. Silently, impassively they waited for an hour or better, and when at last the door of the big house opened again and young Jim walked across the yard not a soul of them moved.

Young Jim's face was as bleak and as gray as a piece of granite stone. He swept the group as if they were entire strangers. His hand stretched forward and his finger fell from man to man.

"Smoky—you start for Roan Horse. I want the sheriff and the coroner. Jim, circle around by the Thunderbolt and tell Streibig to drop over. Just him, none of his crew. Silver, you ride to the Flying M and say the same to Mike Mitchell. Maxy, same to the Diamond Two Bar. Little Bob, to the Circle Dot. Steve, you hit for Tatum's. And Bill Jones to Bell A. That's all the riding."

As he named them they sprang to saddle and were away, riding low and fast. The sun glinted now and then on pieces of metal gear and presently there was nothing but a haze of dust to mark where they had dipped out of sight. Young Jim turned to the rest. "Limpy, you make the box. Springtime, I want you with me. Now, you boys had better get your chuck. Get on with the work around the home ranch."

Springtime tarried as young Jim walked back to the house. When his boss was out of hearing he turned on the rest of the crew and raked them with a flaming eye, almost hissing his words through his mustache. "They make men out here. Ain't I told yuh so!" He knew without being told what young Jim wished of him and went toward the tool shed and got a spade and a pick. That afternoon he and young Jim dug a new grave up on the hill where the rest of the Rocking Chair dead rested. On the very summit of the plot there was two tall poplars. Under one Old Jim's wife had been laid years before; under the other they meant to put old Jim.

THE underground telegraph was alive that afternoon with a new message. One of the great barons had been killed; war had been declared. From ranch to ranch the news passed, picked up and carried on from the point the Rocking Chair messenger left it. It was the eve of spring roundup, yet work stopped for the moment and men took to their horses and started north toward the Rocking Chair and the rendezvous. The war-like came because they had long been lusting for this very fight. The peaceful came because they knew the time of peace had passed. Not an old-timer within riding distance failed to ride that long afternoon, for old Jim was of their fraternity; he had fought them and he had fought with them in the ancient days. He was a part of the lifeblood and the sinew of the range and as these old ones collected their memories came with them. There were small ranchers in the gathering too, for they saw the challenge as all sober men saw it; the conflict of the lawless with the law they had so painfully erected. If the law fell, they fell.

By dusk it was a good-sized gathering in the Rocking Chair yard and when at midnight the sheriff and the coroner arrived, along with a preacher, it had grown to a full company of resolute, grim-faced men who waited the bidding of young Jim Bolles. The fact that the sheriff was the constituted leader of the county made no difference. This was young Jim's fight and his was the authority. A great fire had been built in front of the big house and two long tables arrayed with tin cups and plates. That

fire blazed high into the opaque night, a beacon to be seen for miles and a challenge to any outpost on the ridge above Secret River. Young Jim ordered the fire for that very purpose.

With the arrival of the coroner and the preacher, the body of old Jim was carried up on the hill and put in the ground. It was a silent, tight-lipped funeral, without a woman, without tears. Springtime, standing beside the younger Jim, recalled the blunt, bear-like character of his old boss and he knew in his heart that this was the kind of an ending he would have liked best; the rough good-bye to one who had lived an open-handed, combative life. He caught a glimpse of young Jim's face as they turned downhill and his loyal soul rejoiced at what he saw. The flint and iron of the Bolles breed wasn't being buried that night. Springtime made for the coffee pot, noting that the sheriff and the ranch owner were going inside the big house for a pow-wow.

YOUNG JIM gathered them in the office. They made a dozen all told and as he looked from man to man he felt a sudden pride in the name he carried and a quick gratefulness at the way they had responded. They had come at the call of trouble, because he had asked them, fulfilling the first rule of the land. He waited until they had all crowded inside, then took the note found on his father's body and passed it to the sheriff.

"Do you recognize that writing?" he asked.

The sheriff bent over the lamp and seemed to spell out each word. "Yep," said he. "I've seen it on bonds to keep the peace."

Young Jim took the paper and after a moment's search passed it to Tatum, his nearest neighbor. "Do you recognize it?"

Tatum went through the same motions, though faster. "I reckon I do, Jim. I've had two-three letters in the same writin'." He passed it back and young Jim gave it to a third man, with the same question.

"It's the identical writin' of a fellow whose name I've seen on a good number bills of lading," said the third.

"Pass it around," asked Jim. "I want everybody to have a look at it." He waited until the paper came back to him, then put a question to all of them.

"Is that the handwriting of Jere Streeter?"

Five or six of them nodded. They were certain of it. The rest had never seen Streeter's handwriting and said so.

"Well, that makes it plain enough, don't it?" put in the sheriff. "But what stings me is that he should be so blamed open and horsey about it. You'd think he was issuin' a general invitation for us to come over."

"That's how it sounds," agreed Tatum. "And mebbe that's his intentions."

"Why, the crazy Piute!" grunted Streibig of Thunderbolt. "He ain't got good sense, even for a rustler. Three-four men could clean his shebang. I took Jere to have more discretion."

"Now hold on," interrupted the sheriff. "Mebbe you ain't aware he's been gatherin' bad men from all points of the compass. I know personal of three other Streeters who drifted in durin' the last week. Also I've seen about four hombres pass through Roan Horse in the same period which I wouldn't trust a busted spur with. What does that mean if not that the Streeters aim to make this their private stampin' ground?"

"I've traced three trails over the ridge," added young Jim, seeming more gaunt than ever in the yellow light. Now and then the rays fell squarely on his eyes and flashed, as on the facet of a diamond.

IT REMAINED for a quiet inobtrusive man from across the Secret River to settle this point. "I guess I can settle that. This mornin' I had my spy glass on their yard and I counted eighteen men and two boys."

"Say twenty active guns, then," put in the impetuous Streibig. "All right. Turn this crowd loose and they'll be took before sunrise."

Young Jim shook his head. "Not that way, Streibig. I know what you're drivin' at. Maybe we'll have to shoot the place to pieces, but it's got to be a peaceful attempt first. Fair play, even for Streeters. There's one or two who'd like to come out of that hole without bloodshed."

Most of them knew who he meant and

they looked away from him, uncomfortable. "We want Jere for murder," he went on. "We think we want him and his dad and the two hands he keeps most of the time, rustlin'. But how about proof?"

"Here," said Streibig, pulling something from his pocket. "I been waitin' for yore dad to start the ball rollin' or I'd acted myself. Here's proof." He shoved an irregularly oblong piece of cowhide into the light. "This mark, as me and my men can testify, was blotched. We caught the critter down in the brakes of the Secret River, runnin' in the Streeter home herd. It bore one o' their three brands, the Lazy L Diamond T. But we shaved the hair off and found the ridges where our own iron had burnt our Thunderbolt on it. See what he did?" To make it clear to all he took his pencil and marked his own thunderbolt brand on a piece of paper. And to illustrate the way the Streeters had changed it he drew three short intersecting lines and produced the Lazy L Diamond T. "There's the proof. Look at it."

All looked at it, though none of them needed much of a glance to see what had been done. The rumor of this had already gone abroad and most of them knew, without being able to prove which brands the Streeters were tampering. Streibig went on. "Why, Jim, yore own brand has been switched, too. It ain't no job to take a Rocking Chair and make a Circle H of it."

Young Jim nodded. "I know it. Dad had an inspector down at the stock yards in Portland watching for that. Said the inspector was sending him proof. It hasn't got here yet."

"Well," said Streibig, "that blotched Thunderbolt is enough to convict 'em, if it's proof you want. As for me, I want that nest of thieves and killers just naturally wiped out."

So did the rest of them, including the sheriff who was heartily tired of being blamed for not bringing them in. They said as much or looked as much. Young Jim straightened, eyes traveling from one to the other. "I know. I guess I've got more of a personal interest than the rest of you boys. But it's on both sides. There's my cards on the table. Plain slaughter won't help me, boys. You can't bring a man to life by shooting ten others. I want the Streeters alive if we can get 'em. Let the law hang Jere, which it will. But if they won't come alive, then we'll get them, dead!" The last word fell flatly in the room. Young Jim's eyes flashed again in the light and the lines of his face stretched like cords and vanished. The light faded. "All but one, boys. I want her alive. There's one good Streeter in that crowd."

Silence again. The sheriff put out his arm and let it fall lightly across young Jim's shoulder. "All right, boy. This is shore tough on you. It shore is. Name yore men."

"My crew and myself make sixteen. You fellows will bring the posse to twenty-eight. That's plenty."

"Let's go, then," said the sheriff.

ONE by one they filed out. As they came from the house the waiting crowd outside stirred and moved toward them. Young Jim, knowing all that power stood behind him, should have been glad. Instead he had the appearance of a man seeing ghosts. He drew a sharp breath and spoke to them.

"I'm obliged, boys, but the posse's picked. Help yourself to the chuck and sleep on the place. Everything on this ranch is open to you, now and as long as I'm alive. If any of you ever get in trouble all you've got to do is ask me for help. As long as I've got a dollar in the bank or a cow on the range, it's yours."

There was a murmur that seemed to be of discontent. Young Jim quelled it by spreading out his arms. The firelight fell fully on his body, on his face. "Stand behind us and let us do it in our own way."

After that there was no trouble. The men of the posse ate quickly, without relish, and gathered to one side. Young Jim rode to the front and said, "Let's go." The twenty-eight of them went down the road, crossed the creek and turned up the ridge, over which lay Secret River and the Streeter ranch.

From her bedroom window the schoolmistress saw them file out of the light into the darkness. She had witnessed old Jim's body go up the hill to be buried; she had seen that blood-red fire leaping toward the sky and the faces of the hundred men

illumined by it—faces in which she seemed to see mirrored the lust and the barbaric cruelty of this grim land. She had heard young Jim quell them with his quiet words; she had seen them eat and drink on the eve of death, noted the glint of their eyes and the hard bulge of their jowl muscles. And it had all been a night of horror to her. Through the veil of prosaic life, through the daily humdrum of routine, of jest and of petty incident had come this smashing, crimson, primitive force. Out of it all stood one great figure—that of young Jim who with his grief locked within him still had a place for a little charity in his heart. So she watched him go. And while the terror of the scene clutched her, she wished she was enough of his kind of a woman to ride with him.

CHAPTER IV

TREACHERY

ONCE again young Jim traveled the trail he knew so well, and once again the unfathomed immensity of the sky, the sweet smell of the sage, and the solace and the mystery of the deep night were wrapping around him and tugging at his spirit. But the old charms went unheeded, the old images failed to rise in his mind. Instead, he kept seeing his father's massive face as it had been in their last talk and he heard his father's voice, saying over and over again, "A man's got his duties to do, his debts to pay. It's a matter o' conscience." Well, he was paying his debts now, paying them down to the last red cent, even though it left him impoverished in happiness. What was happiness, after all, but an illusive shadow which men ruined themselves in seeking? Hadn't everything in this vague world, from the highest star to the smallest form of life in the earth, told him time and time again that destiny marched on regardless of things living or dead? He was but an instrument moved by the supreme force that moved them all.

Had he been a small man, young Jim would have turned everlastingly bitter in the course of the night. Instead, the straightforward simpleness and the sweetness of his nature kept him steady. He had made up his mind to go through with his chore, whatever it cost, while at the same time he meant to do whatever he could to bring Nan Streeter out of the sinister circle of men holding her.

They crawled up the side of the ridge, silent save for the slapping of stirrup leather and the subdued squeaking of gear. Springtime rode immediately behind him and the rest came along at close intervals until they had reached the crest and were halfway down the other side. Here young Jim stopped. Below, in the midst of that black depression, stood the Streeter ranch where usually a light glimmered. Tonight no light winked upward at him; they were all asleep, or they were all waiting for the posse's approach. A horse crunched on its bit and someone whispered. The sheriff pushed alongside, murmuring, "That fence is goin' to make it mean. I've studied considerable, but I dunno whether its best to dismount an' crawl through or open the gate farther down."

"Better crawl through," said young Jim. They advanced with a redoubled caution; a single rock started down the incline would be plain warning to the outlaws, a possible instrument of ambush. Young Jim, seeing the dips and curves of the hillside as though it were in plain daylight, left the trail and quartered to avoid a bow of the river. Presently his senses told him they were at the fence. He dismounted and laid his hand across the top strand of wire, hearing the sheriff grope beside him.

"Better pass the word back to spread out and crawl through," whispered young Jim. "Easy does it. Best to tell off the flank men by name so they'll understand they're to go all around the place. We want it girdled. No firing unless warning's given or the Streeters start it. Better have a countersign, too, or we'll be shootin' each other. Make it 'Rocking Chair' and 'Thunderbolt.' "

THIS trickled back, piece at a time. There was a subdued rustling of sage, a soft dragging of spurs. Young Jim spoke again. "Sheriff, Springtime, Joe Tatum—you boys come with me." He eased himself through the wire and waited a moment until the others had joined him. Ten yards ahead he

brought up against a shed. Touching the men beside him he stopped, listening.

Secret River rippled against the willows fifty yards away; a small wind splashed through the top of a pine. Other than that there was nothing to guide them. Directly in front, making a dim bulk against the shadows, stood the main house, seeming tenantless. Young Jim put his ear against the shed's side and rested thus for five minutes—or until the sheriff began to be impatient. Touching his partners as a signal, he skirted the shed, reached a little path and came to the edge of the house porch.

It had been a matter of ten minutes more or less since the three of them had passed the barbed wire—time enough for the converging flanks of the party to have traversed their respective arcs of the circle. Young Jim studied the ink-black corners of the porch with a hard, quick glance before announcing himself. "Down you fellows. Flat." He waited until he heard them drop. Springtime's protesting mutter floated upward. "Don't be a galoot now, Jim. This ain't no basket social." Young Jim's fingers brushed the butt of his gun; he straightened, stepped on the porch and walked across it, thrumming the door with his knuckles. His voice carried out over the meadow, audible to everybody.

"Open up, inside. This is young Jim Bolles. I want to see Jere Streeter!"

It seemed that the weight of the world converged upon that little porch. In the silence the rustling waters of the river grew noisier to men's ears and every minute sound along the meadow had the effect of a rifle shot. Young Jim waited, hearing Springtime's teeth click on his tobacco cud. The sheriff sighed and rolled along the ground. "You'll git no answer out of that house tonight, boy."

He was wrong. Something groaned inside. A body moved—a woman's voice called through the door. "Jim—go back! Oh, go away before you are killed."

Young Jim leaned against the wall. "Open up, Nan. I've got to see Jere."

"Jere is not in the house. There's no one here but the boys and me. Jim, you are walking straight to death."

Silence. She had never lied to him, yet he understood well enough she would lie to shield him, to prevent the spilling of blood.

"Tell Jere to come out peaceably. I want him. If there's others inside, tell them to put aside their guns. We've got the house blocked. Nobody wants a war, nobody wants a lynching. But we've come to take Jere, your dad and the two hired hands. The others are free to go."

She struck the door with her hand as if to make him believe her. "But there's no one in here you want, Jim. Believe me!"

"Then open the door," said young Jim in a half inaudible voice. "Light a lamp and put it in the hall."

"That's—that's murder!" The words hardly passed through the wooden barrier. Young Jim shook his head.

"Open it Nan. Light the lamp."

He heard her going back. A hinge squealed, something fell to the floor. Springtime growled, "Step aside when that thing opens, Jim. You'll make a good target." Yellow light slid through the edges of a kitchen blind and the hinge protested again. She was at the door, speaking as she turned the key. "Be careful, Jim." Then the portal swung back and she stood before him, holding the lamp behind her to keep the rays from revealing him too fully. He had a word in his mouth, yet it died there. He had never seen her so tall, so straight. Tragedy had made her stately; it had made her beautiful. When she spoke her voice echoed richly down the hall. "I give you my word, Jim. I'm alone in here with the boys. But tell your men outside to take care of themselves."

HE SLIPPED through, with Springtime and the sheriff dodging in behind him. Presently Joe Tatum and Streibig and three or four others followed, closing the door behind them. Young Jim took the lamp from her. She gave the others one quick glance and turned back to him.

"I knew you would come with them," said she. "You couldn't help it."

He nodded, slowly. "You know why we are here?"

"You want my folks for what they have done."

The rest of the men were creeping through the house. Young Jim saw that

she didn't know and he thought for a moment that it was best not to tell her. But when he realized how steadfast she was in staying on and sharing the Streeter fortunes he understood that it needed a shock to weaken her resolution.

"It's murder, Nan. Jere killed my father at noon today on the Roan Horse road."

Of a sudden the house was full of protesting noises and the men were calling from various rooms. Another light flared out of an inner door and Springtime's voice rose in a kind of sing-song profanity. "If this ain't enough to send a man to drink! By gollus I'm sweatin' like—"

"Jim—I'd rather have had him kill me. If someone had only shot that first evil Streeter—"

"It's over now," he broke in roughly. "No man knows how the cards will fall. But this house has seen the last of you. Get the kids. I'll have somebody ride back to the Rocking Chair with you."

He saw her head move from side to side. "It's too late. Why do you want to protect me?"

"You know the answer to that. I'm not changin'. Come."

"What kind of a woman would I be to marry you now?" she demanded with a show of spirit. "If I did the valley ought to tar and feather me. Jim, it's not stubbornness that keeps me here now. But—I've got to see it out. Down to the very end. There's nothing else to do."

"You don't owe the Streeters anything," said he, growing conscious of the passing time. "Will you tell where they went?"

He saw her head move again and of a sudden he knew that he had to smash the spell that held her. It was neither loyalty to her clan, nor pride; it was only that she would involve no one else in the tangle of her life. She too, paid her debts. Young Jim raised his arm. "I give you three minutes to get your things. If you won't go of your own accord then I'm takin' you."

Of a sudden her will seemed to give way. "Oh, then—wait until I find the boys." She vanished into the darkness of the kitchen as the sheriff came down the stairs. "They've scooted," he grumbled. "Worse an' more than that. There's a rheumatic feelin' in my bones, Jim, which is shore a sign of trouble. It's too blamed quiet. They ain't far off, I'll bet a hen. Guess we'll just have to stay put till daylight."

Young Jim heard the children running toward a corner of the house. The girl seemed to be whispering, directing them. Cold air struck him in the face and there was the slamming of a door. The sheriff whirled around, gun half out as young Jim raced to the end of the hall, then into the kitchen. No one there. He tried the back door—and found it locked. The sheriff ran to the opposite end of the hall, swearing. "If this ain't the damnedest mess I was ever in! Say, this door's locked, too. How in hell did she vamoose?"

Springtime popped out of the living room! Streibig and Tatum walked down the stairs, followed by the others. "She's an empty house," announced Tatum. "I guess they lost nerve."

The long silence of the meadow was broken with the sharp crack of a gun and a man's high yell. On the instant the whole clearing flamed with gunplay. The sheriff swung about and galloped to the door. "Come on," he cried. "For all we know they mebbe have this joint mined with dynamite! By Godfrey if this ain't—" The words trailed off to nothing. He had opened the front door and started through. A board two feet away from young Jim showed a splintered furrow; the sheriff coughed once and bowed his head, falling across the threshold. Young Jim saw a hole in the man's head and the quick jet of blood that spurted from it. Raising the lamp high he smashed it against the wall and in the subsequent darkness jumped out of the place, Springtime running abreast of him, Tatum and Streibig at his heels.

NAN STREETER had vanished in thin air; the sheriff was down; war had started in deadly earnest.

"Two dead men I've seen this day!" wheezed Springtime. "Don't nobody be fooled. This is a-goin' to be one hell-bent scrape! Which way, Jim?"

"Down flat!"

The party dropped to the ground all in a heap. "Us charging across the meadow like that might stampede the crowd or draw fire," said young Jim. A bullet struck the

house directly behind him and he raised his voice. "None of the Streeters in this circle, boys. Turn those slugs the other way. Easy on the shells. We've got plenty of time!"

His words carried on up the slope of the ridge and a booming, ribald challenge came back. "Yuh shore have got plenty of time, amigo! Plenty time to die! We got yuh dished right where we want yuh, see? Try an' git out!"

"Which statement," said Springtime, "contains the kernel of truth. Now where in hell did that big bazoo come from?"

"I think they're bunched on the ridge," replied Streibig. "Say, we must've come right clost to 'em when we rode down the slope. Now ain't they sly? It ain't a bad start; no, sir."

"Watch for gun flashes," grunted Joe Tatum. "That fella was talkin' fer advertisin' purposes. They got a joker up their elbows."

"Now I know how Custer felt," said Springtime cheerfully. "Say this ground is awful doggoned damp."

Young Jim's eyes roved through space, catching here and there the purplish red flame of a rifle shot. The firing had dropped to an intermittent sputtering; it seemed to him that the renegades had taken a fixed position along the opposite side of the fence and about twenty feet up the slope. They were not a hundred yards off and spread in an irregular line. How long that line was he couldn't determine, but he had the suspicion that there were some of them considerably out on the flank, reserving their fire in case of an attempt on the part of the posse to skirt them. It was a clever arrangement and it bore the print of Jere Streeter's quick, treacherous mind. He said as much to his partners and heard Joe Tatum's fist thump the ground in anger. "By gum, he'd better be clever. It's his neck we're a-goin' to get."

Springtime had turned himself end for end, making a discovery. "Say, they got three-four men over acrost the river in case we should swim thataway!"

YOUNG JIM likewise swung and presently saw a gun flash up along the rocks. Another angle covered. Jere Streeter had let the posse go unopposed down into the clearing and had posted his men so as to form a more or less effective net around them. The river and a handful of renegades hemmed the posse on the west; while on their east the main body of the Streeters made a semi-circle, both ends of which touched the river. Apparently it was like this; no gun flashes issued from along the river bank, but young Jim, trying to read the whole of Jere Streeter's plan, gave him credit of overlooking no bets. Evidently the renegades meant to wait until daybreak and pick off the posse at leisure.

"We got in here and we can get out," he said to himself. Jere Streeter, uncanny at understanding men's motives, had seemed to bank on the fact that young Jim would want to settle the fight peacefully and would therefore walk upon the house and ask for a parley. "I give him credit," he added. "But what's been done can be undone. We've got a man for each of his men, and a few to spare." He made his arrangements on the spot and offered them to the little group. "If they fooled us, we can fool them. I'm betting their flanks extend pretty well to the river. But we'll have to find a way through. What we'll do is take about ten men each, in two parties. Streibig, you take one party and go north along the river bank. Tatum, you take the other and go south. It'll be right down on your bellies all the way until you're certain you've got some hundred yards behind them. Then crawl up on the bench and circle back so you've got them topped. But don't fire. Settle right down and wait for daylight. When they start firing on us down here, you boys open up from behind. They'll be between fires. I'll send three-four fellows across the stream to take care of those over there. The rest of us'll stick here."

"Sounds like turkey to me," observed the active Tatum. Streibig agreed it was a sound move and got on his knees.

"Take every other man from the circle until you've got your number," said young Jim. "When you get started I'll have the boys do a lot of useless firing to make noise. It'll cover you a little."

The two of them went off without further parley. Springtime rolled over again

and groaned. "I wish I had a cigarette. Jim, did it ever occur to you they's somethin' daggoned funny about this rancho which ain't had any satisfactory explainin'? How did that gal vamoose in the house? Why is it nobody ever tracked a Streeter all the way home?"

Young Jim's arm reached out and fell on Springtime's shoulder. "That's been on my mind the last half hour, Springtime. I've got a hunch which we'll proceed to use in a minute. Nan Streeter's inside our lines. I'm bettin' all I got on it and I mean to find her before daylight. Right now you start to the left and tell the boys to fire up for about five or ten minutes. I'll take the right."

Young Jim crawled straight forward until he reached the nearest man. When he got within speaking distance he heard the fellow grunt and the snapping of a gun-bolt. "Easy," said young Jim.

It was one of his own men, Little Bob. The man swore sulphurically. "I'd rather go down in a skunk's burrow, I'd rather. Christopher! All I hone for is a sight of somethin' solid."

"That's comin'," said young Jim. He followed the line until he collided with Springtime. The two of them crawled riverward, passed the word to the adjoining men of the posse, and crept beyond the circumference of the circle. Water gurgled in their ears. Springtime's voice broke between a whisper and a cough. "Swimmin' the river, Jim?"

"No. Stick close. We're goin' down to water's edge and travel right along the willows. Hold your breath."

THEY dropped down a straight three feet, threaded the willows and dropped another short distance until the wet sand bubbled around their boots. Springtime turned his bootheel against a stone and suppressed a groan. A rifle spat from across the stream, the willows weaved in the wind, and the whole meadow rang with the suddenly concerted fusillade of the posse. Young Jim slid between the bushes, exploring the sandy bluff. Twenty yards along he stopped dead, his ears turned against the breeze; and as suddenly he swung away until he stood almost kneedeep in the water. Something stirred along that shelving; stirred and stopped; a twig snapped, audible even above the intermittent noise of the firing. The outlaws across the stream, stirred by the posse's activity, began pumping slugs into the meadow; a bullet fell into the water with a sharp "plunk" and in a moment a second struck the sand bluff. Still young Jim held his place. Whatever was over on the narrow strip of beach seemed likewise waiting. Springtime's arm crawled slowly downward; the firing in the meadow dwindled—and the willows moved again under a body. Young Jim stepped up on the sand, crouched low and murmured, "Thunderbolt."

Springtime dived past him, water spraying high; flame streaked out in the heavy darkness and a man said, "Come on, yuh yella-belly!" Young Jim, rising, was met with the full impact of another. He brought up his gun, swinging it sidewise for the man's head, not daring to shoot because of Springtime's position. The barrel grazed his opponent's head and was wrenched from his hand by the downward force of its arc. Together they went over into the water, young Jim's face going below the surface. He raised his knees into the bulk atop him, drawing a guttural cry of rage for his effort. Then he was over and up and had hold of a gun. Powder belched in his face and his ears seemed to crack and lose their power. His free fist struck soft flesh and his lurching shoulder caught the man flush under the jaw; the gun was his. This time it struck home and all resistance ebbed. Rising up, he heard Springtime swearing broadly. "Some son-of-a-jackass took me aplenty! I got one hombre! The other fella went a-gallopin' off!"

YOUNG JIM heard the threshing of the fugitive in the willows. Stumbling on, he was slapped soundly in the eyes by their weaving branches and when he pulled them clear the noise of the fleeing one no longer echoed on the beach. Springtime had lost his path and was ten feet behind; and as young Jim cleared the willows a full current of cold air beat against his face—steadier and chillier than that of the night breeze.

He took another pace forward and

was away from it. Turning on his heels he climbed the sand bank, threaded another of the willow clumps and quite suddenly found himself with his head scraping the roof of a passageway leading directly back under the meadows. One stray echo came rolling out toward him.

"Springtime," he murmured, "you stick right here. I'm investigatin' this."

He thought the puncher heard him above the vagrant echoes and the swishing of the brush. Reaching out he felt the sides of the tunnel lead away and he stepped into it and followed its windings.

Within ten feet young Jim was on his knees, the sides of the tunnel cramping around him; it continued to narrow as he proceeded until he was flat on his stomach, hitching ahead a foot at a time. He shoved the captured gun in his holster, fearing to jam the muzzle with the crumbling earth; it was a weird, unsafe place for a man to be traversing, the dampness condensing to a kind of slime along the bottom. He knew, too, that others had preceded him, for he felt the print of their boot toes still in the mud and the furrows on each side where their elbows had gouged.

But he was not prepared for what followed. Inching ahead, he felt a quivering on the ground above and there came to him a faint reverberation of the posse's gunfire.

The breeze in the tunnel seemed to swell and his exploring fingers discovered a sudden lifting and widening of the passageway. He raised himself and stepped ahead, lost his balance on what seemed to be a kind of chute and tumbled over, falling almost the length of his body and landing on a wood floor. A blunt instrument pressed against his back and a sibilant whisper warned him.

"Damn yuh, yo're dead if yuh move. All right, Bill, git a rope. No, wait, this is easier."

Young Jim realized of a sudden he had reached a vault directly underneath the Streeter house; the boards above him protested with the weight of softly moving bodies. Jere Streeter had indeed played his joker.

A gun barrel came crashing down on his head and he fell senseless.

CHAPTER V

JERE STREETER'S JOKER

YOUNG JIM woke in some remote and stuffy room to the sound of a muffled crying. It penetrated the fog of his brain and the violent throbbing of his head and it served to bring the strength back to him; for it was a woman crying and he knew only one woman to be with the Streeters. At the same time he was reminded of an ache in his arms, together with the prickling sensation of sleep along his fingers. He waggled them, discovering that he had been tightly bound, the cord pressing deeper into his flesh as he made an effort to release it. That same rope circled his legs.

But it was not so much his own plight that worried him. He had been in tighter places before without losing his head. It was Nan's suppressed breathing coming somewhere out of the dark. That coupled with the knowledge that here in this ramshackle house a part of the renegades waited for dawn to pour their fire into the backs of his own men. This was Jere Streeter's joker. The treacherous, clever one had slipped along the river bank with a few of his followers and gone through the tunnel; or else he had been down in the vault beneath the house when the posse entered and searched it. Young Jim had no certain knowledge, either, that Jere was with this party of the outlaws, but the more he thought of the situation the more he was sure this would be the very spot the man would choose. For Jere would undoubtedly place himself where the greatest killing would be. And daylight must surely be just below the horizon; the posse had left the Rocking Chair at midnight and that was all of three hours ago. Or better.

Young Jim turned his head to find a hint of the graying shadows and saw nothing but gloom. He rolled over, to strike a wall. Reversing his direction he hit another wall. Then he slid toward his feet, to touch a third barrier. The sound he made seemed all out of proportion to the force of his blow and he knew then they had chucked him in a closet. A closet in a room upstairs, for he could hear the swish of the wind on the eaves above his head.

The crying had stopped, the rifle fire had stopped, nor could he make out any other noise inside the place. It were as if both parties bided their time and saved their ammunition for the bitter encounter sure to follow upon the first crack of light. The thought made young Jim desperate; he hitched himself to a sitting position and after a few preliminary efforts got to his feet, scraping the top of the closet with his head.

Presently he found the door knob and turned about to grasp it with his hands. It gave. He slid out of the closet and stood plastered to a wall, listening. The perceptibly graying light of false dawn came through the windows and he thought he heard a murmuring below him, though he wasn't sure. In such a place the imagination created ghost people and ghost echoes. Young Jim tried to shake the steady ache from his head, fighting with the rope that held him.

AGAIN a faint sliver of a sound. Young Jim collected his muscles, waiting, knowing somebody had entered the room. A sigh, a mutter and then a sibilant phrase, "By the hat that Maggie wore—"

"Springtime!"

Springtime moved with all the stealthiness of a cat. In a moment he had reached young Jim, his breath rising and falling as if from great exertion. He put his mouth to young Jim's ear and though both of them had their lives in pawn he could not suppress his habitual dry humor. "I bet I've died a dozen times in the last twenty minutes. Knowed yuh'd reco'nize my private cussword if yuh heard it—if yuh was alive."

"Which is queer," murmured young Jim.

Springtime's knife sought the rope. "Bein' alive? No. Jere wants private revenge on yuh. I heard it. Yeah. When I lost yuh by the river I stumbles around till I found the tunnel. Come in to the cellar. Knowed then they was some of the outlaws in the house. Streaks back and warns the fellas. Took off my boots and crawled through again. They's about six guys in this place, all posted around windows. That's how I got through the hall without them hearin' me. I ketched Jere's voice a-speakin' about yuh an' I sorter gathered yuh was up here."

The rope fell from young Jim's body and Springtime shoved a gun into his hands. Now that he was with his boss again he forsook all initiative.

"How in hell are we a-goin' to get out of this?"

It had only been a matter of minutes, this meeting, yet it was growing distinctly grayer—gray enough for him to see the bulk of Springtime's body. Standing there, he reviewed the situation. Streibig and Tatum were along the ridge. Springtime's warning should have brought a couple of the posse to cover the tunnel mouth. The rest of the men were in the meadow, knowing that the house held outlaws and probably they had found shelter against the raking fire that would soon come. All they needed was a word to set them going. Well, there was but a single thing to do now; sweep the house clean before the outlaws on the ridge got a fair sight of their target. It was light enough for close fighting; in a half hour the mists would thin out sufficiently to move against the remainder of the band.

He thought of the girl, crouched somewhere in another room and he checked a strong desire to hunt her out. He could not risk crossing the creaking floors and thus give himself away. Bending toward Springtime he whispered, "Cover the head of the stairs. The play's about to get goin'."

Springtime crept back and presently young Jim saw him leaning against the banister, gun drawn. Going to a window he tested the catches; they were loose and the sashes seemed to run free. At a single motion he flung the window up, bent out and sent a shout rocketing across the meadow. "Come on Rocking Chair, clean out the house first! There's six of 'em below! Springtime and me'll keep 'em from coming above."

He heard a high, shrill yell, the first crack of a gun; then the meadow flamed at a dozen different points and the house shook with the replying fire. Springtime was cursing in a round, sing-song voice, flinging his challenge down the stairway. "Come on, yuh tunnel rats! Who's first up to first die?"

THE men in the meadow seemed to have drawn closer to the house and posted themselves near the porch and the lower openings after Springtime had passed the word to them; for their assault marched close on the heels of young Jim's shout. He heard the crash of glass, the thick passionate oaths and the trembling of the whole ancient structure as he raced to join Springtime.

Men were scurrying through the hallway, converging upon it and swirling together in a solid mass. Out of this jam two or three flung themselves and started up the stairs. Young Jim cried, "Thunderbolt," and held his fire an instant. There was no answer to it, save Springtime's rough prophecy, "Here's where somebody goes to hell!" And their guns roared together. The railing of the stairway gave and the oncoming figures spilled over it, back upon the heads of those below. Flame and fury swept that gray space; somebody was crying like a child down there, and somebody spent his last breath in a vicious, unprintable farewell. The posse had made a breach. One moment the guns roared and figures were locked together; and then it was deathly still and young Jim heard men drawing deep breaths, queerly relapsing to half whispers.

Young Jim started down the stairs. "Springtime, you rummage the rooms. Nan's somewhere about. Bring her outside of this slaughter pen." He tarried long enough to strip off his coat and fling it back to the puncher. "It's dead cold out. Put this around her!" Then he was collecting the posse. "Cover the lower floor, boys. Let's see what we've got. There's a lamp in the kitchen. Jere ought to be among these dead ones."

Yellow light guttered and revealed the hall, glinting on a pool of blood, on the faces of the dead and the crippled. Young Jim's eyes raced along the five men down and he shook his head in a sharp, angry manner when he saw one of his own men, Little Bob, sprawled lifeless. Old man Streeter, Nan's father, was right at the foot of the stairs, one arm lying upward on the steps; two unknown men, part of the Streeter reinforcements, were likewise dead. And another of them sat with his back to the wall, nursing a shoulder and looking at them all with livid hate. But nowhere could he see Jere Streeter. The ringleader had fled—that much was certain as members of the posse came back from their search. Young Jim found the trap door leading down into the cellar and threw it open, passing the lamp below the floor and swiftly scanning the pit. None of the crowd had had time to go that way evidently. He dropped the trap door and stationed a man by it. "Maybe Jere started through the tunnel. We'll find out. Now, back to the clearing. We've got some more eggs to fry."

THEY had crushed a part of Jere Streeter's army. The taste of blood was in their throats as they came running out of the place and faced the ridge along which the main body of outlaws waited. Morning fog swirled heavily above their heads, rising inch at a time, shutting off one party from the other. But the fight in the house had made those on the hillside uneasy and a sporadic and aimless volley of shots began ripping along the meadow turf. Young Jim collected his men and pointed toward the line of loose rock and rubble just beyond the fence. "Dig in there, boys. Don't push 'em yet. They've got the long end of the teether on us. Just spread out and get set. Streibig and Tatum will open in a minute. That's all the notice we want."

He turned, to find Springtime coming out of the house with Nan Streeter and the two lads. And though the blood in him was hot, the sight of the girl seemed to chill him to the marrow. That clear proud face he had worshipped was marked with bruises that were deep blue; her wrists as she held them out were bleeding. Springtime looked at his boss with the face of a wild man, exclaiming, "I'm in favor of slicin' somebody inch at a time, the black, snake-hearted buzzard."

She stumbled and young Jim sprang forward to hold her; he saw her dark eyes filled with a horror and her mouth quivering with pain. "Nan!" he muttered, huskily. "Who in God's name—"

She tried to smile, but failed utterly. Her lips formed a phrase. "Jere—he's out

of his head—he thinks I've betrayed him. Jim, I'm weak—oh, so weak!"

Young Jim's face turned bleak. "He got away from us, Nan. Lord help you, girl but I'm going to kill him with my own two fists! No gun, you hear? I'll find him and break him with my hands!"

A sudden swelling of rifle fire warned him. He turned to Springtime. "You take care of her, oldtimer. Don't leave her, understand? If we push these fellows back, you get her and the kids on horses and make tracks for Rocking Chair."

Springtime looked at him almost pleadingly, but young Jim shook his head. "It's a special favor I ask, Springtime."

"Oh, well," said the disappointed cowpuncher, "live an' let live. Mebbe I can put in a bullet or two anyway."

Young Jim ran to the fence and ducked through. A bullet chipped a rock at his very feet and he dropped flat, looking up in time to see the edge of the mist rising. Like a curtain above a row of rifle barrels. He shouted "Streibig—Tatum! Let's go!"

These two wings up on the ridge had already started; young Jim began to crawl along from boulder to boulder, hearing the *ping* of a bullet pass. him. Coming to better shelter, he scooped out a little earth and looked along the rising ground. A Stetson showed above a rock—an old ruse that failed to draw his fire. Presently the Stetson dropped down and a gun barrel poked around the rock. Young Jim took careful aim just above that barrel and held his breath. A head sidled to view; young Jim fired and saw the barrel drop to the ground.

THAT shot seemed to unleash the latent savagery of every man along the ridge. The whole valley reverberated with crack of the guns and the high yells of challenge and answering defiance. Young Jim's line of men blazed away putting a barrage over the heads of the outlaws, at the same time working forward along the slope. They would have suffered severely for this had not Streibig's and Tatum's parties, high above all others, swept the outlaws with a sure, unerring accuracy. This caused the outlaws to swing and divide their attention.

Save for this nutcracker arrangement it would have been a long-drawn debate, an all-day sniping of opposing factions. But the outlaws, once so sure of themselves, felt the weakness of their position and young Jim began to see a shifting and a sliding off along the flanks. Tatum, on the south, likewise saw it and being a man who chafed at all form of restraint and whose blood had long boiled at the thought of the injustice and lawlessness along Secret River, he suddenly popped up from his covert and swung his hat above him for all the world to see.

"Come on, let's make this a fight! They're a-runnin'." His party scrambled out of the rocks to a man and began galloping downward upon the outlaws, guns flashing.

Young Jim lost no time. He too, rose from concealment and pressed upward. There was no need for him to urge his men; they were abreast of him in a moment, ducking, weaving, firing on the run. All that had gone on before was but a child's play to this. The scum of the earth, the sweepings of the county opposed them; men who fought with a price on their heads. The fire withered the short stretch of hill and young Jim, now and then sparing a glance to right and left, saw some of his men go down; always it tightened his throat and sent raging hot words to his lips. He clawed at the great boulders in his path, reached a depression and leaped at an outlaw crouched in the bottom of it. Flame and smoke spat in his face; his arm quivered and he found himself sprawled atop a figure that neither moved nor spoke. He rested a moment on his hands and knees, the dead one frowning at him; when he got to his feet the whole scene had changed.

The posse had broken the resistance, smothering the renegades between converging walls of bullets. To his left, a dozen of Streeter's men stood together, hands in the air.

On the other flank gun fire cracked where three or four individuals went on, but these were swift-ending affairs. As he watched he saw the posse close around them, heard an abrupt command. Young Jim stared from man to man, searched the

silent figure huddled on the ground, failing to find the face he wanted to see.

"Damn the man! Why don't he stay and fight it out?"

BUT Jere Streeter, who seemed always to have one more trick up his sleeve, had wriggled free, leaving the crowd to its fate. The last shot cracked across the meadow; Streibig and Tatum were herding the prisoners together, none too gently, while some of the Rocking Chair men traversed the slope to find their dead. Of a sudden everyone looked worn and dispirited; the fighting edge evaporated in the chilly morning air. Shoulders drooped and words were spoken in a kind of monotone.

All but Tatum. He turned to young Jim, still afire. "We've lost five fine fellows to herd this riff-raff! Somebody ought to pay for it, Jim! By Godfrey, I'm for linin' out some of 'em—shootin' 'em down!"

"You don't mean it, Joe," said Young Jim, shaking his head. "You're just talking now to hear yourself."

"The job's done," put in Streibig, passing a hand across his bloodshot eyes. "I ain't a bit sorry, either. What'll we do with the critters?"

"Herd them along to the Rocking Chair," said young Jim. "We'll rest there a spell and—"

He said no more. Far to the south his glance had been arrested by the figure of a man spurring up out of a depression. Young Jim raced toward the horses, both Tatum and Streibig at his heels. He waved them back. "It's my fight! I'll finish it alone!"

He reached his horse, swung up and galloped by the gathered men. Springtime shouted something from the house and seemed on the point of leaving the girl. Young Jim waved his arm toward the Rocking Chair. "Take her there, Springtime! I'm ridin' alone!"

In a moment he was out of earshot. At the top of the ridge he caught another short view of the fugitive and he knew it was Jere Streeter's thin, wasted body, swaying in the saddle.

He bent low and urged his horse to a steady gallop. Over the crest they went, meadow and river and all of the men dropping away behind.

AND as he pursued Jere Streeter he knew that but one of them would ever return; it could be no other way. Jere could not be taken alive. As for himself, he was glad of it. Young Jim had aged during that memorable night; something had happened to him. He had started from Secret River willing to turn Jere over to the law, willing to let the impersonal machinery of justice deal out punishment. Now, he knew that the law had no meaning for him; he, who had always opposed his father's rough and ready manner of settling trouble by direct action, was about to adopt those very tactics. He recalled a remark his father had once made.

"The law is fine, Jim. It keeps a balance in this here world. But remember one thing; there's a code in this country which the law can't touch. When one fellow passes the lie, or when he deliberately lays down a challenge to a second party, that second party is a yellow dog if he tries to screen himself with the law. Oh, I know the East calls us a bunch of highbinders because of that code. But they don't live like we do. The law protects 'em at every point. Out here we've got to protect ourselves in lots of things. Courage and a reputation for never backin' down is something you've absolutely got to maintain. Once the roughs an' the toughs an' the gun toters know you ain't got sand in yore craw they'll make life so mis'able you might as well pull out of the country an' go to clerkin'."

He had accused his father more than once of clinging to outgrown ways. Today he recalled the elder had been wise. Here was a thing he, young Jim, had to settle with his own hands. There was nothing else to do.

Over the eastern rim the sun was breaking, lighting the land with a rose flame. A creek ran away toward Secret River, all a-sparkle; the alders along it were emerald green. In the distance a scattered band of Rocking Chair stock made dun colored blotters against the earth. And as he breathed the clear air, redolent of pine and sage and upshooting grasses he knew of a sudden that all he was or ever would be came of the West and belonged to the West. He was part of it; it was all of him. He could never be a mere spectator to its beauties,

a critic of its ways; he had to live according to its rules, abide by and uphold its codes.

He passed down a bank, up the farther side. He threaded a stand of pines, forded a creek, and came again in the rest of the ridge. The land turned rugged and rocky and after an hour or two he found himself on the far edge of the Rocking Chair range. The ancient ice-cap had left its scourings here; massive pinnacles of stone, great mounds of granite material thrown about to form odd figures. It was a stretch of country that matured nothing but rattlesnakes and afforded protection only to men like Jere Streeter. But to his kind it was an ideal refuge.

Young Jim was never in doubt as to the renegade path; for at intervals he saw Jere ahead of him, gradually dropping nearer. It was as if he had meant that young Jim should see him and be drawn on, that he meant to fight it out. And when at last young Jim saw him draw up four hundred yards away and wheel about he knew the man was choosing his ground and casting back on the trail to discover what odds were against him. Then Jere got off his horse and fired a shot, the bullet falling short. After that both horse and man were out of sight.

Young Jim got out of the saddle and left his horse beyond bullet range, himself marching forward without attempt at concealment until he had approached within less than a hundred yards of Jere Streeter's natural barricade.

"If you were looking for the posse, amigo," he muttered, "I hope you're pleased. We'll scrap it alone."

Another shot struck the rocks in front of him; he forged on, stolidly, pressing straight at the renegade. But within fifty yards he swiftly sidestepped and fell behind protection. He heard the renegade mocking him.

"Losin' yore guts, kid? Come on! I'm here to be took! The buzzards are a-goin' to have a feed!"

YOUNG JIM rested a moment. This was no ordinary opponent. With all his boasting, his open display of contempt, he would use his canny hand. Not for an instant did young Jim suppose Jere Streeter would wait behind that upthrust wall of rock. He would be sliding around, one side or the other, trying for a certain shot.

"Now," he murmured, "I think he credits me with some intelligence. He'll probably figure I'll inch ahead in a more or less direct line, because he knows I'm anxious to close up. Therefore he'll try to crawl around closer and drop a shot on my back. But which way will he come? Right or left?"

To the right the rocks formed a series of continuous pockets and barricades. It would be extremely easy for Jere to come along that way. To the left it was less rugged and from it the average man would not be apt to expect trouble. Young Jim, understanding Jere Streeter's trickiness, his feline mind, knew it would be in keeping with the man to choose the less probable way. So, hitching his belt tighter, he swung toward the left and began an infinitely slow advance from depression to depression. One particularly elevated rock behind his new path worried him, as it commanded every move he made. But within ten yards he had dropped into a deeper rut of the rocks and was completely shut off from inspection. He could not be absolutely sure Streeter had not watched him choose his course from this vantage point and he stopped and debated switching toward another point of the compass.

He decided against it, willing to match boldness and eager to come against the man. Young Jim could be cautious only so long as he refused to think of Nan's bruised face and his father's head, pierced with a bullet and dirtied with the clay dust of the Roan Horse road. Then he turned utterly savage and refused to heed the voice of reason. He throttled a desire to rise up and scramble on; all that saved him then was the memory of Jere Streeter's sharp and evil face. The man would pin him down with one bullet and ride away—probably to find his sister and inflict other bruises.

SO HE stuck to his angling and dodging from shelter to shelter, halting every few feet and laying an ear against the surface of the rocks to listen. He knew this was almost a futile thing to do; Jere

Streeter would make no sounds, commit no mistakes. When the man exposed himself it would be to make a kill. Young Jim came to a V-shaped pathway between rocks leading into something like a crater. Gathering his legs beneath his stomach he shot across and downward; and as suddenly leaped backward. The instrument of death had been at his very face, coiling a mottled body and spitting hate from a red mouth and brilliant eyes. Young Jim circled away and left the snake alone.

It left his nerves jangling and he stopped to pull himself together. "Between the two of 'em," he muttered, "I'll be dead of excitement before a shot settles it." The sun stood well above the eastern rim, a flaming forecast of the day's heat. Morning's wind had died and already young Jim saw the shimmering of atmospheric waves rising off the rocks. The sweat rolled down his cheeks and stung his eyes, waking in him a strong desire for water.

Water was tantalizingly near, yet out of reach. In his creeping progression, he had swung close to the borders of Secret River. Ten feet would bring him to a point where he might see the shadowed ribbon of water down below—a drop of thirty feet, not quite sheer, yet steep enough to make a man climb as he would climb a ladder. Young Jim wiped away the beads of sweat and moved to another piece of shelter, from which he commanded a long narrow vista ahead.

It was such an ordeal as he had never before gone through and for all his steady courage he could not prevent the steady constriction of his nerves. It grew to be almost like a neuralgic pain; the nerves of his neck twitched and he found himself looking behind with an increasing frequency. He had reached that pitch which causes men to see and hear things non-existent. And it was one such reaction that sent him clawing for his gun, whereupon he made the startling discovery that he had no gun. Somewhere along his tortured path it had fallen out; he guessed his swift jump away from the snake capsized it from the holster. The discovery sent his plans a-crashing; yet singularly enough, it steadied him. That very queer thing known as the cold courage of desperation took hold of his nerves, shook him together once more.

"Well, I said I'd break him with my hands. Now I'll do it. Damn the man, where is he?"

Out of the question grew the answer. Rather the hint of an answer. He could lay his senses to no tangible warning nevertheless there was that same flaring of his instinct to self-preservation, the same prickling of flesh he had known a few hours before when he had stood bound in the Streeter house and felt the presence of Springtime in the room. It is a quality known to all wild animals; in man it is quiescent through centuries of disuse. Still, it comes to them at certain supreme moments as it came to young Jim. Just beyond him, he was sure, lay Jere Streeter, waiting to strike.

He was so sure of it that he gathered all his muscles, pulled his legs beneath him and prepared to shove himself upward and over the rock that concealed him. That was the power of his warning; on the edge of acting he exerted all of his will to hold himself back and he marshalled all the logic of the situation to persuade himself to stick in his shelter and let the other man act. Yet his muscles grew tense, collecting force for the spring. If Jere Streeter was on the other side of the rock, did the man likewise know that he, Young Jim, was within arm's reach? It seemed likely, knowing how abundantly equipped Streeter was with animal instincts. If that were the case he would be launching himself at the muzzle of a gun. If it were not so, and the renegade hid elsewhere, he would only be exposing himself to fire.

THAT was as far as he managed to reason. Then he had thrown his big body out of the shelter, up to the top of the rock and down into the adjoining hollow. Jere Streeter's slender body sprawled like a reptile on the ground; as he fell, shoulders foremost, he had one flashing view of the man's face, drawn and dry and deadly. The thin lips were drawn back and the beady eyes were stabbing him with hate. Another snake coiled to strike. Young Jim smothered him; a gun exploded, but young Jim felt nothing of the bullet. Swinging

round he got hold of the gun, wrenched it free and threw it far over the edge of the cliff. He was struck twice with incredible swiftness and force; the breath came belching out of him and Jere Streeter writhed clear, clawing like a cat.

The man was beyond arms reach, groping for a rock to smash down on young Jim's skull; young Jim heard the hysterical whistling of Jere's breath and, swinging his feet like the jaws of a vise, he pulled the man down atop him. He was struck again and again before he could bring up his own arms and bind them around the renegade's body. He rolled, rose to his knees, at the same time slipping one hand upward to the thin neck. Then they were both on their feet and Jere had wriggled free and was backing away. He was apparently without bones and joints—nothing but elusive muscle. Once again he bent for a rock, this time securing it. Young Jim dodged and closed in, striking a sledgehammer blow with all the weight of his body behind it. He felt a snapping, heard a cry; as in the same dreadful nightmare he saw the renegade staring at him out of a crooked face, whirl like a top and then vanish from sight.

Young Jim braced his feet wide apart, feeling the hard pounding of his heart. Up in the sky was a blood-red ball of fire seeming to overspread the sky. He shook with a kind of ague and his whole body drooped in weariness and disgust; the killing instinct ran out of him like sand from a funnel. Stepping forward he spent a glance down the sides of the precipice and turned away. One sight was enough. On the way to his horse he got the gun; the rattlesnake was still there, but he had had enough of killing for one day and he left it alone. Stumbling on, he got into the saddle and turned homeward.

"Go along, boy. Secret River's got another secret to sing about. It's a day I don't want to remember."

BUT the valley was clean from then on of the sinister influence of the Streeters. Never again would men look westward over the ridge and shake their heads in troubled contemplation. An evil growth had been rooted out; the rich rare air would be the cleaner for it, the sun would shine the brighter. The country could go back to its peaceful, humdrum ways.

It was a long somber ride home. Once there he found the posse waiting for him. Going to the bunkhouse, he spoke to a pair of his men. "Ride again, boys. Go over to Secret River bluffs, down to the three ducks. Jere Streeter's there."

Then he started for the house to find Nan. Inside the door he was confronted with the schoolmistress; and with all her short-sightedness, her lack of ability to read this country, she was woman enough to read Jim Bolles at that moment. Read him through and through as he put his hands on the table, dead tired of flesh and of spirit. Nor was the story pleasant to her. Too clearly she saw she could never share this man's life, never claim his loyalty or affection. Perhaps it made her reckless of her words, perhaps it made her unconsciously cruel. Throwing back her head defiantly, her black eyes widening, she spoke in a sharp, satisfied manner.

"You won't find Nan Streeter," she said, "She's gone."

CHAPTER VI

THE FAREWELL

YOUNG JIM'S head fell a little forward; he passed a hand across his eyes, speaking in a slow, soft drawl. "Where did she go?"

"How do I know?" demanded the lady. "I'm not her guardian. She made Springtime hitch the buckboard and take her toward Roan Horse."

Young Jim was nodding; a light flickered and faded in the deep wells of his eyes. "I guess it's the only thing she could do. The only thing she would do. And didn't she say anything—leave any word?"

The schoolmistress watched young Jim for several moments. Perhaps she had read wrong; it might be he would change. But she could find no comfort for her in that tight-set, gaunt and wistful countenance. "She said a few things," admitted the lady. "Oh, yes, your black-haired outlaw woman—"

Young Jim's words fell across the room

like a whip-lash. "Madam, don't go beyond the mark!"

"—said something. But first I had a word. What right has she with her past, being that kind of a woman from that kind of a family, to ask shelter of you! What right has she to want your name? Why, she'd be an anchor around your neck. You are one breed. She's another. Yes, I told her that! Of course she wants your name. It would be just like her to want to save herself from all she's got to face!"

"And what did she say?" inquired young Jim in a curiously gentle voice. The knuckles of his fists whitened as he gripped the chair.

The schoolmistress's eyes flared from the memory of that interview. "Tiger woman! She's just that. She stood just where you stand and looked at me! I thought she meant to kill me! Then she said—here's something to flatter your vanity, Jim Bolles—'I have no claim on him. I'm not worth him. But neither are you. I hope he sees you as I do!' " She flung herself toward the stairs, almost crying. "I'm leaving in the morning! What a horrible, savage land! I never want to see it again. I never will!"

Young Jim ran out of the door and toward the corrals, throwing a word to Joe Tatum. "Joe, you take the prisoners to jail. I have got to go to town, now!" He roped and saddled a fresh horse from the corral and galloped down the Roan Horse road.

He saw Springtime first. Springtime leaning on the hotel porch in town and talking to a middle aged woman. The puncher saw him come and motioned gravely to the upper part of the hotel. "Room ten," said he. Young Jim went in, walked up the stairs and knocked. He heard a slow voice summon him, and the next moment he faced her.

The young boys were sleeping on the bed and she put a finger up to warn him. "Hush, Jim. They haven't had rest for so long."

The bruises showed on her cheeks; there was pain in her dark eyes. Even so, young Jim thought he had never seen a fairer, finer woman. There was metal in her that no Streeter could claim, a calm fortitude and resolution untainted by the treachery and narrowmindedness of the Streeter training. Alone of her kind she was straightforward, clear-eyed. Young Jim tried to say something—and failed. In the end he put out his arms.

"Nan," he said, brokenly, "there's the blood of your family on my hands! I can't ask you now! But, by the Lord, I love you!"

"Hush!" Light flickered through the somber shadows of her face. "Jim, what would I be doing to marry you now? A Streeter and a Bolles! You couldn't carry the load."

"I can carry the world, if you're with me! This is the West, Nan. Folks won't harbor malice against you. Tomorrow is another day. As for me—"

She whispered a single word. "Jere—"

HE SAID nothing, but she saw his outstretched hands and she understood. She knew then that never, as long as she lived, would young Jim tell her the whole story. As for him, he saw the mingled pain and relief in her face and he understood that whatever her thoughts might be, she would keep them to herself. They were alike.

"I—I don't hold it against you, Jim," she whispered. "It is better that he is dead. All he has done in this world has caused nothing but grief. Oh, Jim, I'm sorry for you!" Then she came a little closer. "I'm going to Gaskell this afternoon. They want a waitress at the hotel."

"I hate to think of you working—"

She stopped him and something like her old spirit came back. "I've got to do it my own way, Jim. I want to show them I'm straight. I want to feel I'm doing something. I've got my debts to pay."

The very words of his father. He dropped his arms. "Wherever you are, Nan, you know you've got me. You'll always have me. Now or fifty years from now. But I guess there's no hope for me, then?"

She was watching him, seeming to memorize the lines of his gaunt, sober face, the heavy rumble of his voice. For perhaps a minute she was silent. Then:

"Jim, if you feel the same a year from now—"

"I'll feel the same always, Nan."

"Then come and get me when the time is up."

For the first time a slow smile crinkled

around his eyes. "This world is worth livin' in now. Nan, I won't wait a minute over the time. Maybe not that long." He looked wistfully at her, then turned to the door. "Work to be done."

"Wait, Jim!"

He swung back. She came to him and her lips brushed his cheek. "That's to bind you. Lord keep you, until then."

Young Jim groped out of the room and stumbled downstairs. Bright sun drenched the streets and blinded his eyes so that he passed within five feet of Springtime, yet didn't see the puncher. But he heard Springtime's voice and a woman's answer. Going to his horse, he started home.

DUSK was falling on the Rocking Chair; purple shadows swirled around the buildings and over the yard. A light glimmered from the bunkhouse and the drone of talk floated out from it. Down past the barn came the groan of the gate and the thud of a horse's feet. A shrill yell went rocketing out into the semi-darkness as Springtime wheeled a buckboard over the space and stopped at the porch of the big house. He was coming back from Roan Horse and he was not coming alone. Beside him, filling somewhat more than her half of the seat, was the lady he had met on the hotel porch. A lady as old as Springtime and with the determined, assured air of one who had willingly fought the battles of life and perhaps had launched a few conflicts of her own. And as the boys came out of the bunkhouse and young Jim stepped on the porch, it was observed by all and sundry that when Springtime handed her down from the buckboard she favored him with a possessive, victorious glance.

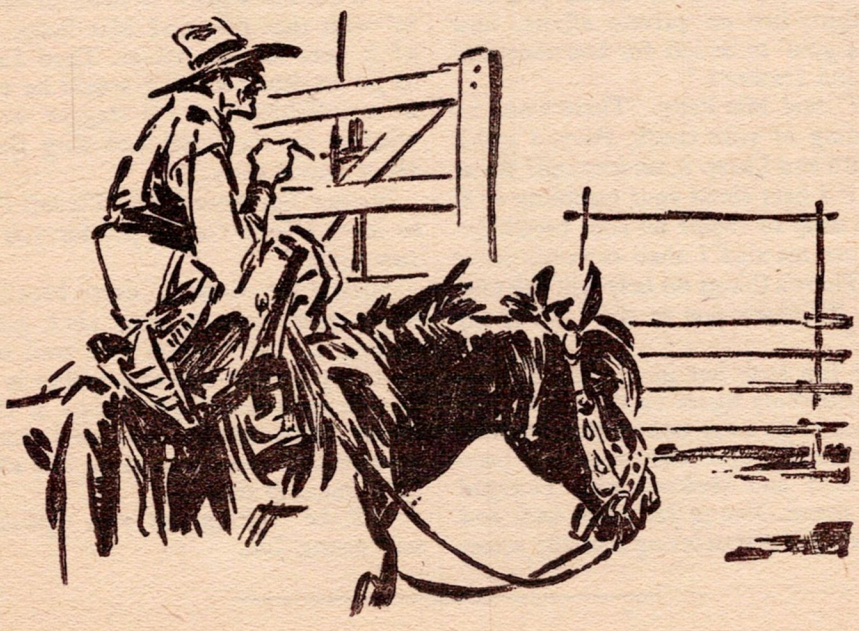
Springtime cleared his throat and spread one hand outward. "Introducin' Miz Clarabelle Petty. Miz Petty is my affianced bride. As soon as I have collected my possibles and drawn my pay we will return to the civic confines of Roan Horse and have the nuptial ribbons tied in the knot, which, though it may slip, never parts."

"La," said the lady, "what a fool you can make of yourself." She swept the yard with one grim glance. "So this is the outfit you work for?"

"Welcome to Rocking Chair," offered young Jim, coming forward. "You've had a long ride. You are welcome to stay the night, or as long as you please."

"Thanks," said Miz Petty. "I'm accustomed to be treated as a lady and I'll accept with pleasure."

The schoolmistress had come downstairs and now stood framed in the door. Springtime went through the introducing again. Then he stated, in a tone that exuded satis-



faction, "My affianced is a schoolma'm. Yep, she's a schoolma'm."

"That is very interesting," said Evelyn Fleming, dryly.

"Interestin'?" snorted Miss Petty, sizing up the situation. She was not a dull woman and Springtime's manner with this pretty girl leaning against the door, indicated some kind of private retaliation. "Shucks, it's dull as dishwater. What's interestin' about a room full of brats? Any idiot can teach. I did for ten years and nobody ever put me on a pedestal."

Springtime moved uneasily. "I met Miz Petty purely by accident," he explained. "But I knowed her over in Robey County a long time ago. We went to school together."

Miss Petty struck him with a deadly glance. "Oh, it wasn't so long ago, either. My stars, you'd think we was old folks."

AN OPPRESSIVE silence fell upon the group. A small sigh seemed to come from the ranks of the bunkhouse crew. Springtime tried again in a jocular vein. "Well, an education shore is a wonderful thing. A man ought to have it. He shore ought. Now, apple blossom, here's a problem in arithmetic which I need help on. If a man is to get fifty dollars a month workin' in the livery stable, and he owes ten dollars on a poker debt, seven an' a half to a bartender, thirty-five on private affairs, how much is a-goin' to be left for housekeepin'? Never mind fractions."

"Hmf!" said Miz Petty. "There won't be any dividing of your check, Povy. I get it each month and I keep it, understand? What is more, if I hear about your gambling or if I smell a drop of liquor on your breath before we are married I shall certainly leave you flat. There's things no lady will tolerate. Mr. Jim, I'll thank you to show me to my chamber."

Young Jim took her in, leaving Springtime a melancholy figure on the porch. The crew began to go away one by one, hurriedly as if something ailed their faces and presently a wild and choking wail emerged from the corral. Young Jim came back and found Springtime wandering moodily across the yard. He put an arm on the puncher's shoulder, speaking gently.

"Listen, Springtime. No man ever played one woman against another and came out with a whole shirt."

"I allus knowed there was a catch in this education rigamarole," muttered Springtime. "Well, I promised her I'd run in double harness an' that promise stands. Come to think about it, did I pop the question to her, or did she jes' sorter tamper with my gentlemanly instincts an' inch it out o' me? Funny, I can't seem to recollect."

"I'll miss you, Springtime."

"Yeah," said Springtime in a muffled voice. He looked up along the bench, his eyes gleaming with the reflection of his cigarette. "Roundup is about due, ain't it? I suppose some damn blacksmith-handed guy will be a-ridin' my string."

Silence. Suddenly the cigarette made a glowing arc in the night and fell with a shower of sparks. "Jim, as a personal favor, will you lend me fifty dollars?"

"Done," said young Jim. "More if you want it."

"No, fifty is ample. It'll be money well spent. Did yuh hear her say she'd throw me over if I touched cards or drink?"

"The words as she spoke them," agreed young Jim, "were simple and distinct."

"Well, I'm a-goin' to town in the mornin' with that fifty and Miz Petty. Twenty of it goes on faro tables. Then I'm goin' to git so drunk a hawg would be ashamed o' me. Whichupon I'll stagger under her window by the hotel and sing that song about Annie Gray."

Young Jim moved off. "I'll tell the cook to leave a little for supper for you tomorrow night."

Springtime drew a deep breath. "It's shore queer how a man ain't got sense enough to know when he's well off. But no heavy handed son of a barber is a-goin' to ride my string." He looked at the vanishing figure of his boss and across his wooden face came something like affection. "It's roundup time."

"I'll be waiting for you, Springtime," said young Jim.

Trappers Stick Together—Even "Wild Horses" Can't Pull Then Apart

MULESKINS

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

BURR KANE rode into the Slicker Trading Post driving two loaded packhorses westward toward the Windfalls Mountains. Luck was with him, apparently, for he found that the trappers of the range were nearly all at the old ranch settlement, talking things over in Gunlock Burney's repair shop, figuring things out for the winter fur campaign, and they knew from the make of the loads that the newcomer was good. Shrewdly they noted his 160 pounds weight, trim figure, hard-drawn features and straight-looking gray eyes.

"I'm looking for open trapping country," he said. "I heard that the Windfalls wasn't all taken up."

"Plenty of room, more country than fur," Gunlock spoke for the boys. "It's a long ways back. Nobody's been working up Cloudy Creek Basin for quite a while. Some claims there are reasons. Others say that's just a notion."

"On the Geological Forest Folio seems like Cloudy Creek'd be the nearest and easiest country," Kane remarked. "What's the matter of it?"

"Nothing the matter of the country," Gunlock said, while the boys sat around, listening with deceptive lack of attention. "The boys jes' don't hanker for it. Moneta Shade, here, has his lines up t' the south end, Blue Holt and Casper Joe, these boys, are over north. You're a trapper—you know when boys get to know their country, have their camps built, they don't move around much outside."

"It's been trapped?"

"Oh, yes, down to 'bout five years ago—good camps, but prob'ly the line trails'll need brushing out for windfalls."

"I'll sure be glad to take up country that hasn't been worked over for four or five years," Kane exclaimed. "The Park Line don't come down into the creek basin does it?"

"Oh, no—line is along the summit range," one of the men said. "That's about all there is to it—kinda clost to the Windfalls Park is one reason t'ain't none too popular. You see, it's kinda on the d'rect trail up over the divide."

"Oh-h—um-m—" Kane hesitated, "I reckon all theh is to it, a trapper's supposed to mind his own business as regards what's going on in the state game refuge, or whatever they call it."

"Well, yes—'course—" one of the others assented. "You might put on blinders an' kinda don't see any too far ahead of you, neither."

There was a short, wry chuckle around the group. They sat in a sort of glum, thoughtful silence as they stared at the

floor. Some of them rolled their eyes and gazed at the newcomer, watching from under the brims of their hats, but Kane was unfolding the topographical survey sheet which he had cut into rectangles and pasted to fold on cheesecloth. The map showed the timber country in green, and the altitude in brown lines, streams and lakes in blue, and red boundary lines marked the state park area.

Then the men drew up around the map and began to tell the stranger the features. They could tell about where the old Cloudy Creek trap line had been run, and one of them could tell about where the line cabins had been built long ago. The last occupant, Tan Vandick, had made some changes but he had pulled his freight five years ago and since then Cloudy Creek was known as hard luck country.

"The only trouble you'll likely have," Gunlock said, "is in your otter sets. Beaver run all over, and if you catch a beaver they catch you—up to two years in the pen an' a thousand fine. If they catch you, maybe they give you a timber-belt slave job."

"A slave job?" Kane exclaimed, "I don't just get you. I never trapped in these timber belts before. I've worked in Bad Lands, Green timber in Minnesota; one year in the way-back bush of Canada. I don't aim to make any mistakes. I know how beaver'll get into otter spring brook sets, of course. They even come around otter slides. I'd hate to get into trouble on account of otter sets. I don't see—what's a slave job, anyhow?"

"Well, yo' know'f yo' hold up a stage on a road, an' you're caught maybe they put you to repairing that road," one of the boys said. "An' if you do a fur-law violation back in the green timber, maybe they'll handle you easy—an' give you a muleskin proposition. If you catch a beaver, likely you'll have to trap ten or twenty just so's to make yo' sick of havin' vi'lated once."

"Muleskin proposition?" Kane frowned, "I don't get that—"

"Muleskins are illegal beaverskins is all he means," Gunlock explained. "It's just one of those ways of saying things that get to passing around, sometimes."

"I see—" the trapper from outside said thoughtfully. "You say you have to trap ten or twenty more beaver—and it's against the law to trap one? What are you giving me—a rigging?"

The men sitting around did not answer. Perhaps they had said too much. Gunlock, even, hesitated to speak on the subject, but finally he braced himself as if his remarks took a real effort.

"That's a fact," Gunlock said. "That country is away back, and mostly you must handle your own propositions. If you are caught with a beaver, even if it's an accident in an otter set—well, you know there are two kinds of game wardens—State and fifty-fifty reward seekers. And then there's another kind—they get the muleskin on a man and make him keep on trapping illegal furs or go to the pen for what he done by accident. 'Course, the more he traps, the tighter they got him. That makes him a slave trapper."

THE big-time trappers rode out from the Slicker Trading Post three days later. On their maps colored pencil lines gave each his trapping country. Burr Kane was to have Cloudy Creek Basin, due west, the portal a deep canyon through a wild, forested ridge. The inner fastnesses of the Windfalls loomed in waves of granite, cliffs of vast height and dark timber belts. Blue Jack Holt and Caspar Joe turned off along the pied-mountain roadway to the north and south ends of the great range. Moneta Shade and Steel Cammon kept on to Red Brier Fork, through the canyon, accompanying Kane to the main cabin which Tan Vandick had built for his line at the foot of the Cloudy Creek Basin and abandoned five years before.

They found the peeled spruce, pine-shingled cabin in good condition. The common utensils were in place with staple supplies protected in jars and metal against squirrels, mice and porcupines. Blankets and robes were slung in netting bags made of chicken fence and mosquito bar.

In the morning they headed into their own countries. Shade went north to Cabin Creek, Cammon south to Horsethief Canyons, driving packed burros, while Burr Kane headed a burro up Cloudy Creek, prospecting the vast and beautiful land.

Kane had gone nearly three miles when

Moneta Shade suddenly appeared ahead of him in a long, narrow, grassy glade. He had his rifle over his shoulder and obviously he had left his pack animals over the creek divide in Cabin Valley. Kane, wondering, kept on to the trapper, a dark, stocky, rather stolid figure.

"Howdy—forget something?" Kane greeted, smiling and looking with keen gray eyes.

"No, that's just it—I didn't," Shade said, hesitating. "You're a stranger in this country. I don't reckon yo' got any idee what you're up against. 'Course, 'tain't none of my business."

"The fur isn't plenty, but I'll make expenses," Kane replied. "I saw two dark mink down the line—and otter sign. I know weather, too."

" 'Tain't that," Shade twisted uneasily. "I'd get killed, myse'f, if anyone knowed I fair-warned you. I'm serious. Yo' life ain't worth a penny. You ain't fooled everybody, and yo'r bein' so innocent 'bout muleskins is sho' suspicious. I'm kinda new in this country—but I know what *you're* up against."

"You'd despise me if I turned back, Shade," Kane said flatly.

"Not knowing what I do, I wouldn't." The trapper shook his head.

"Old man, just why did you let me know—what you think you know?"

Shade took off his hat, wiping sweat from his brow on his sleeve, glancing uneasily into the edges of the tall timber.

"I sure despise the scoundrels you're after," he said. "I know yo' ain't turnin' back. I know yo're good. I'm tellin' yo'—I want yo' to believe me. I don't believe in crooked trapping—"

"If I stay you'd have to be my enemy?" Kane asked.

"Why, no, not between us, I won't," Shade hesitated. "Likely, though, I'd talk dif'rent around. If you kill somebody—don't brag it. They won't if they tuck you back in under a lot—they'll forget, too."

"I'll have to watch out for Cammon—Bluejack—"

"No, not any of us," Shade denied. *Trappers* stick together—"

"Reckon I get you," Kane said. "I'm staying, old man. I'd like to trap this country. How can I manage it? You know how a man is. I can't pull my freight."

Shade chuckled. "The hell of it is, don't you see, you're *square*," he said. "You jes' gotta keep *that* secret."

"Oh, they haven't anything on me," Kane grinned. "That being so, I'd like to stay here without being a damned fool doing it. What is the real proposition, Shade?"

"If yo're staying—well, it's *muleskins*."

"Ah—wild horses, eh?" Kane nodded wisely, and Shade looked at him with a queer expression, then turned on his way again with a quick, "S'long—good luck!"

The main Cloudy Creek Valley led straight up to the Windfalls Park Divide line. In the Lost Pass, the head spring of the Cloudy was less than a hundred yards from the mountain back tarn or pool in which Pretty Water River started on its way through the natural wild museum set aside for the public, whose creatures were the great solicitude of several state departments, and in no state was a possession more precious than the wild life of Windfalls Park.

Cloudy Creek Basin was beautiful. The whole of the Windfalls Mountains should have been included in the park, for it was worthless for domestic purposes, its wildlife a potential treasure. In the Pass Kane found the runway used by deer, elk, bear, pekan, cougar and minor creatures crossing the range. There, too, were muffled hoof tracks of pack animals of raiding outlaw trappers going into the forbidden area.

Kane found hidden in the wilderness the five cabins which Vandick had built on his line. These with the main camp at Red Brier Fork comprised the stops. The trapper in laying out the Cloudy Creek fur domain had shown how good he was. His trap cubbies at every fur runway were of stone; his landmarks, his caches, the country remained intact. Until Kane came to the north end he found everything exactly as Vandick had left it.

THE North End camp was a dry cave with a cribbed peeled spruce wall half-cabin front, the fireplace at the side. The site was on a bench, almost like a ledge and hidden in a cluster of dense, stunted spruces. Hundreds of square miles of the

Cloudy and Cabin Creek basins were visible from the bluff. The trap line followed the foot of the slope through miles of lodgepole pines.

The moment Kane entered the cave he sniffed musk, and beyond the canvas-tarp partition was a nearly quarter sphere-shaped cave in which he found the answer. Dozens of dry castors, perfume stock worth dollars an ounce hung revealed by his flashlight. The discovery gave Kane pause, for it was ominous. That stuff wasn't there by accident.

"I'll stay with it," he decided before sleeping that night. "Perhaps this is the break I'm looking for. They've got me for beaver-possession before I've run a trap. That ought to please the fifty-fifty fine splitters."

When Kane arrived at Red Brier Forks again, his prospecting had uncovered all the cached traps. He had distributed them at the sets which Vandick had used, cut new well-sweep poles and forks, and baited the places where cubbies were used. Mindful of the warning that he make his otter sets where illicit beaver would not spring the steel jaws, he needed all his wildcraft knowledge coupled with skill.

The line route was the best possible, the grades long and easy, the range traversed with the minimum of climbing, scaling and scrambling. Vandick had gone five miles around rather than risk a slide rock and he had kept down from wind-swept summits in timber. To a stranger the land seemed at first to be just a terrific tumult of stone and tangle of dense forest, but the trail opened pretty routes through it.

Vandick had played wolf, having a wind-swept open between each hidden cabin and the trap trail. Kane had to laugh, for at the side-jumps ten or fifteen minutes of wintry gale covered footprints in the snow and only in a rare calm the ruse might be discovered. Instead of driving his pack animals to the camps, Kane left them down on the line, carrying their burdens on his own back to the cabins which were hidden off-side in the ravine and cluster. Thus one following the hoofprints would find none of the shelters. The new claimant hung up deer at each camp for winter meat, cut wood and made all snug.

The first big snow that looked as if it would stay caught Burr Kane going his first round on foot after having made his sets. The blizzard had held off till late November. When he came to the North End camp he had more than $160 worth of fur on stretchers behind him, and forty-five dollars more to pull onto hardwood boards that Vandick had left, beautifully long, narrow, smooth cut, in each camp.

Kane carried an ash-splint pack on shoulder straps and a pair of light caribou string snowshoes prepared for this storm. Later he would have to wear big ones in the loose fluff until wind and sun packed a good crust.

WHEN he headed into the dwarf spruces that hid the camp the short day had faded, the blizzard wind was sweeping through the bristling twigs of the forest canopy, but only drafts of chill zephyrs, thick with falling needles of fine snow struck along the ground slope.

The cabin was dark. He stumbled to the door and dropped his pack onto the wash-bench, whistling with relief and leaned a moment against the door jamb as he pulled the rawhide latchstring and shoved the door open. Dragging his feet, he reached the hearth and drew shavings, kindlings, small sticks from the pile always left so that when he came dead tired, he could make a fire though he had to crawl to the place. Unscrewing his matchbox, he fumbled a moment, thumbed a head and thrust the flame into shaved pine knot stuff. Sitting like a bullfrog, he watched his fire grow.

Presently the light chunks caught and he heaved on a pine stump, squirming back as the heat increased. Snow had melted on his face and some on his shoulders began to steam. He pulled off his shirt as he knelt, and rising to his feet took down a dry woolen shirt with red and black inch squares to put it on. Then he stiffened, sniffed and turned to look around for the first time. He had caught a whiff of cigarette smoke.

"Looks like you've had quite a pull," one of two men remarked.

"Why—ah—" Kane took their measure, "I reckon."

Grins died from their faces. A big, chesty, square-faced man sat beside a tall, gangling, slimly built companion on the table bench, their automatic pistols in their hands. Both were *good,* capable, ready citizens. They wore gray riding breeches, gray shirts and stiff-brimmed, low-crowned, peaked gray hats. Laced moccasin boots, wide, brown belts, empty holsters were also alike. Well they might be ready for trouble in that camp redolent of fifty pounds or so of castor musk, illicit perfume stock.

"Looks like I got visitors," Kane said.

"Sure do," one said cheerfully.

"If you don't mind, I'll light a lamp and get supper," Kane said.

"Suits us," the lank man said, "We'd had it ready only we kinda thought you might be coming through. We'll help. You better lay aside that meat-pop of your'n—if it's all the same to you."

KANE unbuckled his British officer's belt, and with the .22-auto' dangling low carried it to the table. One of the men drew the clip and emptied the chamber, and also unloaded Kane's rifle.

"Nothing but twenty-twos?" one asked, puzzled.

"I'm trapping," Kane answered, "a big gun banging scares foxes, the cats, and anything else for that matter. If I was hunting it'd be different."

"Don't you use big bait?" the stockier man asked, curiously.

"I kill venison for meat—no running shots of course," Kane answered. "Personally, I use whatever fur is eating for my bait. Depend a lot on medicine—anise, rhodium, fish-oil, catnip—"

"What's that porcupine in the Cabin Creek cubbies for?" the lank man asked.

"Pekan—fisher, you know."

"They eat fisher?" the stockier man exclaimed, surprised, "Why, I didn't know that."

'Course, anybody in bounty hunter uniforms wouldn't know much about such things," Kane remarked. "Why should state men know anything?"

"Hi-i," the lanky intruder shouted, patting his companion on the back, "A man sure betrays his iggerance if he talks too much."

Kane grinned, but it wasn't a happy expression.

"How about it—you going to make trouble?" one asked.

"Oh, I know when I'm licked," Kane assured them.

"We'll take your word for it," and so they prepared supper. Kane brought in three big steaks of venison from his meat box, cut thick before freezing. One of the men remarked what a good idea it was cutting up ready for use before it froze.

"You sure know your stuff," the men remarked now and again, as they put on coffee, mixed flapjacks, set the table.

After supper they stretched before the fire, lying on an old grizzly bear skin and two winter horse hides. For a time there was no talk. Kane presently sat up cross-legged, the others following suit. Then the thicker-set man remarked, " 'Course, we're official—you know that."

"I ain't hoping anything different," Kane answered.

"Looks like a good winter, catching."

"For you, likely," Kane grunted, "Glad you feel that way."

"How 'bout those castors?" one asked after chuckling a moment.

"A lot I've got to say about them—now."

"You've had hard luck, that's all," the taller said, "Maybe no real friend sent you to this cabin. How about it?"

"Listen, old man, don't talk like that about people I know," Kane said angrily. "Not especially can any damned dressed up blue-hide, samson-hair, flea-bit uniformers talk about a full prime, glossy stuff; compared to fades, shedders an' spongy summer stuff, give me clean firsts in man or beast."

"You know you're up against it, don't you?" one said, hotly.

"Hell, yes."

"Would you rather be up against it in green timber, livin' out or take a four-five year stretch inside, making big rocks small, braidin' hair for fun an' tobaccy money? We got you for two hundred beaver—now."

Kane blinked, narrowed his eyes, giving the two a sidelong glance. The men watched him.

"I don't get-cha," Kane said slowly. "I'm a stranger in this country."

"Iggerance let you into Cloudy Creek," the stocky one said, "You c'n sure trap. Maybe yo're welcome if yo're sensible."

"Then you're phony, uniformed setups to scare somebody?" Kane jeered.

"Don't fool yourse'f," one snarled, as both reddened in the firelight, the lamp having been blown out to save oil. "My name's Chert Tuohy an' he's Sinjer Cruzan. Here's Special Deputy Bounty Hunter papers, all right. If we say the word, over the line you go. The only question is if you've got sense."

"I can't proposition you," Kane said, "Just like I said, I trap."

"Good sets, too," Tuohy said. "Yo' got 'nough musk stocked to start a perfume factory, 'sides medicine. That's a big season's work already."

"Them castors is dry," Kane said, "Caught last year or before that."

"We got you for possession," Cruzan said. "That's enough for us. Would you do the right thing, now?"

"What else could I do?"

"Now yer talkin'," Cruzan said, glancing at Tuohy, who nodded. "We ain't mean fellers. We don't care if you trap. Hell—go anywhere, catch anything, but at the same time you got a good thing here. We don't get paid much. Nobody's trapped Cloudy Creek since Vandick skinned it. You're making big money, even if you don't know the country. It's all up to you. We just run around. We never bother to trap. We're int'rested in muleskins—spring primes. The rest is up to you—the pen or slave-trappin'."

"How about my winter take—straight stuff?" Kane asked.

"You get the idea—you're bright," Tuohy exclaimed. "You keep that. Be best if you sold it open at Slicker. Gunlock'll buy it, pay good. We don't care about that."

"But that late trapping?" Kane asked. "I'll be all through by the time muleskins are prime."

"That's just it," Tuohy grinned. "You jes' do some spare time work for us, see? You work through the spring thaw into warming up for us, or you go to court for violatin'—castor possessing. You know what country judges do to anybody caught at flat-tails. You got to produce, though. You've had experience. Get results or over the line you go. That's our way of enforcin' in this country, making violators serve time."

"A man ain't much choice, looks like," Kane shook his head. 'Course, I'd get in deeper; instead of just possessing, I'd be trapping."

"Don't come any Philadelphia lawyer stuff on us," Tuohy warned, sharply, "Think it over. Come morning, you'll say *yes* or *no*."

"All right, boys," Kane sighed, "I'll figure on it. Looks awful good over the Divide in the Park."

"Not for you, 'tain't," Cruzan declared. "We got that all took care of right. Keep your nose out of there, minding your business, keeping this side the signs in Lost Pass. The way we do is patent you here in Cloudy Creek Basin, same as others are licensed around. Don't try any tricks on us, get me? You're out on bail, yer own recognizance, that's all. Come spring, and yo' serve time on our account."

"Get the idea?" Tuohy added. "We let yo' finish the winter on yer own. That's real liberal. By good rights we c'd claim in on that catch, too, but we're good fellers."

"Sure looks like," Kane nodded.

"How'd things look down Cloudy?" Cruzan asked, eagerly. "Reckon theh's many in the dams—houses, through the workings? How many do you reckon you c'n pick up there?"

"You mean muskballs, castors?" Kane asked.

"We mean muleskins," Cruzan declared. "Castors are just sidelines."

IN THE morning, Kane emerged from his boughs, robe and blankets, while false dawn was still flashing. The uniformed men wriggled to keep their eyes on him, but this was early for them. Besides, the cave-cabin was chill and uncomfortable until the fire was flaming again.

Fourteen inches more of snow had fallen; it was still coming. Kane summoned his guests to sourdough buckwheat cakes with bear-venison sage sausage, wild honey-

comb, with coffee and condensed cream. They ate slowly, sipped at leisure, and smoked afterwrads. They'd have to sit the storm out, anyhow. The two were anxious to learn what the trapper had decided to do.

"I could find plenty of witnesses," Kane said. "Any trapper'd swear those castors are old, dried out all summer. You've no case."

"No case?" Tuohy snarled hotly. "No trapper in this country'd dare testify for *you*. We got 'em sewed up tight. Why, we c'n prove anything we want against anybody—against you."

"That's the point," Kane said, "if I tie in with you, don't make any mistake. What's the split on muleskins, anyhow?"

"We just take them," Cruzan said. "They ain't no split."

"Like hell," Kane exclaimed. "You can't hold trappers down like that. Don't tell me that. What does the trapper get?"

"Why, we just wondered what you'd say," Tuohy interposed, reluctantly. "Generally, it's a four-way divvy, all evens."

"And you were going to leave me out for a three way?" Kane jeered. "Or did you two figure you could split mine two ways?"

"You don't think we'd snide anybody, do you?" Tuohy demanded, indignantly, and Kane laughed in his face.

"You won't cross me up," the trapper said, "I'm a free trapper, and don't forget I can see you a long way before you can me. Now I figure the Basin'll yield up to two hundred muleskins—that's four grand at twenty per. I work fast, and that'll take a lot of handling."

"You c'n deliver them green," Cruzan said, eagerly. "We hire a good handler to clean an' stretch. Good handling makes fifty percent better price, if done right."

"That's something like for I hate handling," Kane said.

DURING the blizzard Kane made it plain he had to know just who was and who wasn't reliable, and just how reliable, making it understood he never worked with anybody halfway, but only the whole hog. He would leave it to anybody who knew if he wasn't all the way, seeing things clear through, right.

"Did you find all of Vandick's camps?" Tuohy asked.

"How do you reckon I found this one?" the trapper asked, "Those castors sure had me guessing. First I thought I'd ship them, but then I figured if I stayed with them I'd get hep with good sidelines."

"Be'n sure bad if you'd shipped them." Cruzan declared. "Them's our'n—private. Inspections would have picked yo' up. Easy to git in, but we got yo' sure corraled—don't try any dirty, cheatin', tricky stuff. If a man figures he c'n wallop for himse'f, he's handled. Musks ain't none of your business. Hang up the musk for us, personal. All yo' sit in on is muleskins."

"Yeah? Where'd I be if somebody came that couldn't be fixed?" Kane asked indignantly. "That's a nice bunch inside—all that risk on me. And show me if you c'n get better prices than I can."

"The kind that can't be fixed ain't around these parts," Tuohy chuckled. "We c'n handle anybody. If a yeller pup sticks his nose in, we take care of him, ourse'ves. Why, when the fur traders investigated, all we done was invite them to kiss the affidavies they collected *good by*. Legislators, governors, officials are all alike to us. A good wildcrafter can fool them all easy, if they ain't had personal experience and can't read signs. They never get back where we op'rate through you boys."

"How 'bout chiefs, superintendents—ain't they liable to roam around promiscuous?" Kane asked.

"We put blinders on 'em, an' trot 'em around," Cruzan laughed. "Take this new Windfalls Park boss, Laramie. He's a comical jigger, an amateur sport, soft nature lover, them things. Nothin' practical. Tuohy an' me took 'im for a walk. We actually showed him things, an' he didn't know he'd seen nothin' a-tall. He swallered it when we called squirrels *marten*, he did, actually. A Clarkes crow made him happy all day. Iggerant, he didn't even notice old trap-set breaks in dams. He was sure enthusiastic about beaver cuttin's where they hadn't been none to work in two-three years. He don't know skinned country when he sees it. If he'd seen anything—well."

"You must have caught 'em up, if they're that scarce," Kane said.

"We take ev'ything, clost," Cruzan explained. "What we tell the boys is that a dollar in the pocket's worth a hundred after we're dead."

"Then, too, your jobs won't last forever," Kane suggested. "Somebody is liable to get onto the racket."

"*What?* Reckon you don't know who's back of us," Tuohy laughed. "We ain't missin' any bets. Don't worry about that. If a man gets smarty, we got the goods on ev'ybody an' all we got to do is take you, or anybody to court, an' to save you, you couldn't get a man to hang the jury even. That's how tight we sew things up. Even judges can't get by us. We don't care who they are, senators or supervisors, if we can't buy them we can fool them, and what's a trapper more or less, anyhow?"

"Me, f'rinstance," Kane remarked, softly.

"Oh, well, hell—that wan't personal. You're dif'rent, Kane."

WHEN the visitors took their departure to look the boys over in Windfalls Park, they complained about the hard snowshoeing and at being obliged to break their own trails through the loose fluff over Lost Pass. Kane not only covered his own line, but visited around among his neighbors. The Windfalls trappers at his suggestion all met together for a party at the Government cabin on Old Man Pond, near the Divide in the Park.

The boys who were handling the Park proposition were in with the rest, seven on that job which even the outside trappers called "ungodly." Two were fugitives from justice, and five had been caught violating on their own personal hook, and so had to "work it out."

"How'd they frame you, Kane?" Candle asked, " 'Course, 'tain't none of our business."

"We're all in the same boat," Kane answered. "You know I came into Vandick's line—I knew him. The North Side cabin had more beaver castors hung up to dry than a Hudson Bay post. Sure was a musky camp. One night I came in, dog-tired in that first lasting snow. I just made it. When I built the fire, there sat two fellows in uniforms. 'Course, they had me dead to rights on possession—reckon you know what happened. I don't often beg, but I know when I'm framed up, right. I knew then what some of the boys meant, shading off on my coming into Cloudy Basin. The two men claimed to be Chert Tuohy and Sinjer Cruzan, and that they'd rather do business in muleskins than have good fellows fined, so they could get fifty-fifty on the fines. Talk about Free Trappers!"

"They're crowdin' ev'ybody hard," Dummond said, morosely. "The trouble is, they get the goods on a feller if he's vi'latin'. If he ain't breaking the game laws, they frame him. The first time they got me, it was by sticking a beaver into one of my otter sets. Any way they work it, they make a trapper a slave. An' then comes the break up in the spring, they take all the hides, ev'y one a vi'lation—an' dicker with a crooked buyer. They give back what they call twenty-five percent—but they ain't got more'n fifteen plunks for a muleskin in years, to hear them tell it. I know for a fact the boys working open country've be'n gittin' up to $24.50. 'Course, all our crooked furs is routed through the legal an' license country they keep open. My gosh—they let ten thousand hides go through that one patch, which ain't big 'nough to have a hundred beaver on it. Crooked buyers pay $1,000 each to keep it open, too, they tell me."

"I swore last year I'd never stand for it, but the longer a man stays the more evidence is piled up against him," Cammon said. "Well, 'course, it's better slave-trappin' six weeks than doin' honor-camp road building days an' chained ankle sleepin' nights, let alone stone cell living the year around."

"Jes' the way I feel about it," Shade echoed. " 'Course, this is my first year here—I never dreamed it was that bad."

"What's your proposition, Kane?" asked one of the boys.

"A trader I know'll come to Slicker," Kane said. "He'll establish a trading post, with Gunlock, who won't lose anything. He'll take all the open-season furs, probably twenty-five percent above the buyers frame-up. All we do is spread down all the open season furs, and we get straight prices and the two slave drivers can't fix him in. With him is a perfume field buyer. He dickers with Tuohy and Cruzan—and then

the same buyer meets them on the muleskin proposition, but by moonshine, of course. They get paid more—they've been beaten down by the combine buying muleskins, themselves. Now they get a look in. If anybody squeals they don't dare make a stink, on account of the kind of a crooked deal it is. Where we come in is Tuohy and Cruzan got to pay us a real twenty-five percent on our whack—not any snide ten percent like they've been doing. And if you boys all come in, the buyer'll add a five percent bonus to all of us on the winter take, besides on the muleskins, too."

"How'll that work out in dollars?" Cammon asked.

"Instead of fifteen dollars on beaver, you get twenty dollars to thirty dollars—split four ways," Kane answered, "that's crooked money and always hot stuff to handle. But on the legal-season furs, it means fifty percent more than you'd get from the buyers. That's what a trappers' trading post does for you. Some trappers get twice as much for furs by combining that way and all selling to honest auction buying."

"Lordy—but that'd be real money," Shade remarked. "I'd get $1,200 instead of the $800 we usually figure."

"And don't forget," Kane said, "all the goods they've got on us is goods on them, too—"

"You're taking chances—one of us might squeal on you," Shade said, sharply in genuine warning.

"I'm willing to take the chance on you boys turning down a half higher rate on your winter catch," Kane answered.

WHEN the boys had had their big feast, their get-together party, they all scattered back to their lines, grimly determined. They passed the word around that anyone who blabbed on Kane must die. They followed their trails, picking up fur, skinning and stretching it, and cleaning the hides and pelts already on the boards. The passerby in the open wilderness could have seen no sign of the trappers having been organized by the rascals. In the Windfalls Park, of course, the signs that forbade hunting, trapping, or other destruction of wildlife were just so much bamboozling of the public and neither the chance visitors nor honest higher-ups could know what was going on, except by following trails.

Kane visited Candle at his line along the eastern boundary of the great outdoor natural history museum, and the old-time outlaw welcomed him.

"Summers I'm kind of a day laborer out around," Candle said. "Winters I putter along my lines. I do purty good. Jes' during springs I'm a slave trapper. Them scoundrels would turn me in for a reward, if they knew of one. I told Tuohy and Cruzan about a beaver-pocket over here on ten miles of meander ponds. The hogs are going to trap there themselves. Of course, I cain't say a word, either. Once in the pen I'd never get out alive—not in fifty years."

"I'd sure like to see that country," Kane said.

"Shade said I'd oughta tell you," Candle said. "I'll take you."

Killer, bandit, fugitive, Candle was questionable. Kane knew that the old-timer was helpless, yet desperate. Kane would never forget the strange subtlety of the man's vocie. Such a sound could mean much or nothing except an abiding hope of some kind. Candle knew things about deep mountain wilderness Kane had never dreamed, strategems, hiding places, trail covering, blind tracking. The wonder was the wilderness blackmailers had not been killed long before—uniforms protected them.

The beaver-pocket was a peculiar formation of folded up and pinched off valleys, access to which was only by a tiny entrance hidden amid a vast tumult of forest-covered ridges. Even the park line patrols had overlooked the valley.

"I thought one time I'd never mention it," Candle said, quietly, "but when I heard yo'd come I reckoned I would. I told Tuohy an' Cruzan. Now I've told you, too, Burr Kane."

"I won't disappoint you, I hope," Kane assured him.

Spring came. The midwinter primes had had their day when gloss and shimmer shone in the pelage. Then rubbing, fading, early-shed began. Burr Kane took up his traps after middle January and in early February Cruzan and Tuohy came barging in.

"What the hell've you quit for?" Cruzan demanded. "The breedin' season s the best trappin', usin' scent baits."

"Every litter through Cloudy Basin'll average two more pups if we don't disturb them after the rut begins," Kane replied. "I'm going to make a better catch next year, too."

"Who said you'd be here?" Tuohy sneered. "Maybe we'll license somebody else, if we ain't satisfied."

"If not me, some other good fellow," Kane grinned, imperturbably.

" 'Course, if yo' make good moonshinin,' yo' c'n stay on," Tuohy said.

"Don't worry about that," Kane said, easily. "I began learning fur where you left off. You don't even know how to sell, let alone conservation."

"Maybe you c'n tell us how?" Cruzan said, eagerly. "One of the boys said—no matter which one. You got Eastern connections?"

"What if I have?"

"Well, now listen; we c'n use you right—" Cruzan said.

KANE followed down the streams of the Cloudy. Years of peace and plenty had given the beaver there normal increase in numbers. He had not exaggerated when he said two hundred could be taken. In fact fur-hogs could have stacked up ten or twelve packs. He made elaborate sets, but under each trap pan he jammed a block to prevent the trigger being released. He broke out dams, fussed with swimways, messed around at houses, but he caught none of the living, protected mammals.

Instead he gathered beaver the others caught, moonshine-hijacking, and distributed these around in his sets so that when the two watchful overseers of the trappers came through, they found him apparently doing big business. The two kept tabs on everybody, besides spot trapping themselves through the hidden valley beaver fur pocket they thought they had taken from Candle. Here and there, Tuohy and Cruzan even lifted beaver and left sign to make believe the victims had pulled themselves loose from the steel jaws. Thus they "Johnny Sneakemed"—stole—five animals their own sets had seized and drowned, each of the skins carefully marked by knotted fur, guardhairs and other identification tricks against the day of reckoning. Kane in pretending to violate amassed the exhibits that might be useful for evidence. His camera showed the scamps setting traps, and then the beaver caught at the scene. He was a queer slave trapper.

Traveling night and day, Kane moonshined, hijacked and double-timed. Thus he made up his own big quota by playing at fur stealing, a game many fold more dangerous than that of the forced slave trappers who raided the Park under the auspices of the rascals to escape the other penalties they had incurred. Kane even took the chance of bringing away Johnny Sneakem pelts from Moneta Shade's district.

The spring-prime beaver lasted late. Kane had accumulated facts and proofs beyond his hopes. His winter catch was at the main cabin at Red Brier Forks hidden out. His last hijacking trip took him over into Steel Cammon's country, and he felt that he had made his getaway when, as he came down off the Divide between Cloudy Creek and Horsethief Basin into his own territory, he walked around a spur and met Cammon and Moneta Shade. The two appeared in the shadowy wilderness on the icy snow, now thawed down and covered with bark dust and shed needles of evergreen trees.

"Looks like yo' been visitin," Cammon remarked.

"I sure have," Kane replied.

" 'Tain't the firstest time yo' didn't find me home," Cammon said, grimly. "Jedging by the tracks it ain't."

"That's so," Kane admitted without cavil, "I've cleaned up clear from Candle's and the Rickeys, on beyond, into here."

"Just what's the big idee, exactly?" Shade asked.

"I'll show you," Kane drew, from his pocket a home-sewed, buckskin wallet, and showed them the photographs he had taken. Steel Cammon was the more demonstrative, he chuckled, grinned, uttering low whoops. Then the two glanced at each other and turned to Burr Kane.

"These all you got like this?" Cammon asked.

"All—that was my business."

"Where'd yo' git them? I don't know that canyon," Shade said.

"Candle found it, and those two blackmailed him out of it."

"An' yo've got the guts to shove this proposition of your'n through, Kane?" Cammon asked, his voice tense. "You're framing back on them!"

"I've come this far—I've been here ever since last autumn—is that right?" Kane asked, "I risked coming, and I haven't changed any."

"That's sure so," Cammon said, nodding. "That's all we wanted to be sure about," and Shade added, "Well, good luck and s'long. Count on us if you need our backing."

The two turned back and Kane stood for a few minutes breathing heavily, listening to the crunching of their footsteps on the snow. He hadn't fooled those trappers around him. They had given him a long chain to twist himself up in and then let him go.

KANE cut down to Red Brier Forks where he made up his own private bales of legal furs. The dried castors and beaver pelts, *muleskins* he had cached out, waiting for the grafting deputies' orders.

The warm spring wind had evaporated, melted and carried away the snow. The streams were up. Spring odors were in the air. The trappers' cabins all through the range reeked with the scents of their craft, the sweet beaver musk castors strong in the mountain outlaw dens.

Sinjer Cruzan came up from the wheel-road end.

"We're after the muleskins," he said brusquely. "Didje bring down the dry musk, too?"

"Sure 'nough," Kane assured him. "Can't you smell 'em?"

"Can't smell nothin' else," Cruzan chuckled. Sure sweet. Some gets sick of it, but I never do. How 'bout that good market for musk?"

"Nothing in it for me, you said," Kane answered.

"We'll split three ways on that, if you can make us a price," Cruzan said.

"I can do lots better'n the three-fifty list," Kane said. "Enough more to make you a higher rate, besides my scale. It'll go three grand."

"How 'bout the muleskins, too?"

"The men I know handle everything by airplane," Kane said. "They travel together, a perfumaire and a peltry man, both specialists. They'll be around. I don't sit into the pow-wow, understand. What I don't know about your dickering can't hurt you. I'll introduce you if you want. I stink enough of the musk without having the hides pinned onto me, too."

"We'll tend to all that, private," Cruzan grinned. "You boys had all the risk of catching. We'll take chances on the bootlegging. What luck'd you have, 'shinin' the muleskins, anyhow?"

"A good fair take," Kane answered. "I got two hundred and three—"

"Why—that's good—an' your first year in this country." Cruzan said. "Some of the boys fell off, considerable. Sure thick in Cloudy Basin."

"I c'n do better when I know the country," Kane said. "Makes quite a wad. Want delivery now?"

"We'll pack 'em down on your burros to the truck," Cruzan said. "Tuohy's with it. We be'n selling to some field buyers, but those fellers thought we had to sell to them. They gouged us down too hard. If yo' got men c'n handle a big proposition, we'll dicker."

"Those others'll have it in for you," Kane said. "I don't want to get mixed up in a fight among you fellows.,'

"Fight? Say, what we c'd tell if they chirruped, huh!" Cruzan laughed. "Yo' don't need to worry. You're in *right* with us, now."

SOME $16,000 worth of legal season furs were spread in the Slicker Trading Post shed for the buyers to bid on. Sorted out, it looked like a lot of peltry. Prices were down a little, but the catch was up a bit, for the Cloudy Creek Basin had become a fur pocket with no trapping in it for several seasons. The buyers even winked at each other when one of them puttered over a few skunks, bluehide badgers and pale coyotes badly handled by two ranch school boys.

And the cheap little skin-gamesters whis-

pered, taking the assembled trappers off to one side, sniffing at them; "Say, now, you got muleskins, ain't you? Don't tell me, *no*. I smell the musk, sure I do."

They even threatened to have them inspected, if they weren't given a look in. One field agent prowled around.

"Where the hell's Cruzan an' Tuohy?" he demanded, but no one knew.

"They must be around," he insisted, "They always are. Listen, I'm from Bergin, see? Get me—*Bergin.*"

The trappers just grinned at him. They were standing together, now.

"You tell him to go right straight to hell," Kane jeered, and the field agent backed up, absolutely, utterly dazed. Nobody ever told the big Bergin, or even his man Gursky, to do that—not meaning it.

"Say, mister, who are you?" the agent demanded, asking Kane.

"I'm just the trading post master, that's all—smell?" Kane lifted his fur collar to the man, who sniffed, blinked and led the boss trapper out behind the automobiles.

"Say, now look't," Gursky whispered, anxiously. "Where's the muleskin proposition this year? I make it right wit' you, see—private. Is it them two strangers—did they butt in, heh?"

"Sure they did," Kane whispered, seriously. "They made a straight offer, twenty all through."

"What—twenty? We never paid but fifteen."

"Well, they reached the bounty-uniformers," Kane said.

"That's funny, and maybe them dirty double-crossers think they can get away wit' it," Gursky said. "I better get Bergin to come. C'n you stall things off, like a good feller, till the big boy gets here. He felt something coming in his bones. He's waiting by the phone in Elkid for word from me. He can't afford to lose the muleskin business. It's the rich-cream profits."

"Well, he's needed bad to break up the business," Kane assured him. "The boys got a trading-post agreement this year."

"That will ruin our profits, almost," the agent sighed. "And where shall Bergin meet those damned skin-gamers?"

"The Bear-Paw brand outfit. You know it?"

"Sure. Hell, yes—we done moonlight trade there, lots; just wait."

The trappers had combined their whole winter take of furs for the trading post. The fur buyers had to dicker with Kane, who was the post master, and the legal prices were up sixty percent on the combine proposition. The fur buyers looked at each other, finding species and grades of the Windfalls Mountains country all sorted together. Instead of what to the trappers was a $16,000 catch, they had $25,600—which they prorated among themselves, according to the count of the skins.

Then toward night, when the legal-fur catch was sold, Bergin came pounding in in his big twelve-cylinder car, swart, olive-faced, shiny skinned and blank-eyed, looking for trouble. Would they double-cross him, eh? He jerked his finger at his field buyer, Gursky, and they headed over to the Bear Paw with Kane. Bergin started to tell Kane what he thought of the trading post and him a dirty trouble-maker, but Kane slapped his face so hard that the prints of his hand were on the pudgy little man's cheeks.

"But, mister, I don't mean nothing. I just want to do business," Bergin said. "Let's don't get excited. Let's be friends."

"Talk like a friend, then," Kane said.

Real moonshine glowed on the log house, pole fence, creek bottom and sod-dobe shacks at the Bear Paw. A faint yellow glow and wavers of red indicated the sitting room light, and Bergin burst in upon Steel Cammon, his wife, Moneta Shade, Singer, Chert Tuohy and Cruzan. At sight of Bergin the two blackmailing bounty specials gasped. They looked at Kane, whose face wore a serious look of warning. They hadn't expected to have to deal with Bergin and Gursky—only with the independent buyers who had bid the legal catch skins up so high. Nobody could tell which furs came from the park and which from the open country. But anyone could tell a crooked beaver.

CAMMON, Shade and Mrs. Cammon listened, leaning back, while Bergin told the double crossers they couldn't back down on him, because he had them dead to rights in their crooked business. And the

two men, goaded to desperation pulled their guns. The fur buyer backed up, holding his face, which was already smarting from the slap.

"Don't talk to us," Cruzan said. "We got you a thousand which ways you damned old fur pirate Johnny Sneakem. We'll bury you out in the sand if you open your head."

"Let's be friends," Bergin urged, "I tell you, now we get together right. I meet anybody's price, everybody's price to you. I give you a real price, now. I give you *better* than anybody's. Put up the guns. I made a mistake. Don't you make a worst one. Come, let us do some good business, like we done for ten years—eh, boys?"

Accordingly the three, with Shade and Cammon went out into the patio and over to the tool shed. A two ton truck held the things that Bergin wanted, bales after bales, Hudson Bay standards of eighty pounds each, but they called them muleskins. Bergin's voice purred, squawked, exclaimed, urged, yelped, protested—but, still, it was all right. He knew how the boys were feeling. As it was, he would lose money, but rather than lose their business, he would pay, this time. In the past they had done well by him, and he took big chances—he had heavy expenses meeting the exactions of higher ups and such outrageous transportation charges. But live and let live—that was his proposition. So he paid down the price, by an electric flash light—$25.50 straight through, which was, he would leave it to God and man, ten whole dollars and fifty big cents more than ever he had paid anybody before for, well, muleskins. And no hard feelings, and he had a drink to seal the bargain, right. And so the currency was flitted out around, taken by hands from the shadows and then the shadows slipped away—except Tuohy and Cruzan who stood with the money hugged into their chests and Bergin who rubbed his hands fondly over the bales which were now his, by purchase, legally, with full responsibility and all. "Don't trick me again," Bergin said sharply.

An automobile's headlights suddenly snapped on.

"Hands up, you three," a sharp, hard voice said. "You're under arrest for felony —taking, possessing, trafficking in beaver —"

TUOHY and Cruzan felt their guns lifted out by some one who came up behind them. It was Burr Kane.

"Turn and turn about, boys," Kane said, "you wished two grand or so in dried beaver musk onto me—framing me."

"Who are you?" Tuohy gasped. "We're —we're shaping this case up—you see we're —we're putting this case through—"

"No—you took the money and you divided it," Kane said, "I'm the special investigator sent in by the State and Wild Life Investigations, to find out why these magnificent streams protected by law and these parks, supposed to be game and wild life refuges, are being skinned. These are Headquarters men behind the shotguns —"

"Look who's here," one of the two hold ups chuckled. "Would you believe it—what's your name?"

"Moneta Shade," the man answered. "Superintendent Danton to you, Kane."

"What—Danton?" Kane exclaimed. "You son of a gun—you ordered me onto this assignment—trading me out of the Bad Lands on the Missouri for this job. And you gave me fair warning when I came in—"

"I wondered if you knew what you were up against."

"I knew—"

"Not—not *the* Superintendent Danton," Bergin gasped. "And I be'n trying to reach you—meet you—make it right with you ever sinct you was loaned by the Government but—"

"Never mind," Danton reassured him. "You'll make it all perfectly all right, now. All you have to do is confess judgment, $1,000 fine for each and every beaverskin and throw yourself on the mercy of the court at two years each for each skin—don't forget that the law says the terms must be served in sequence, up to and including the first twenty skins or so."

"I don't forget—I know it already. But —but where's the money I paid to those—those tampt violators—"

"Listen," Kane said, and when they cocked their ears they heard the galloping

of horses' hoofs out in the frosty spring night.

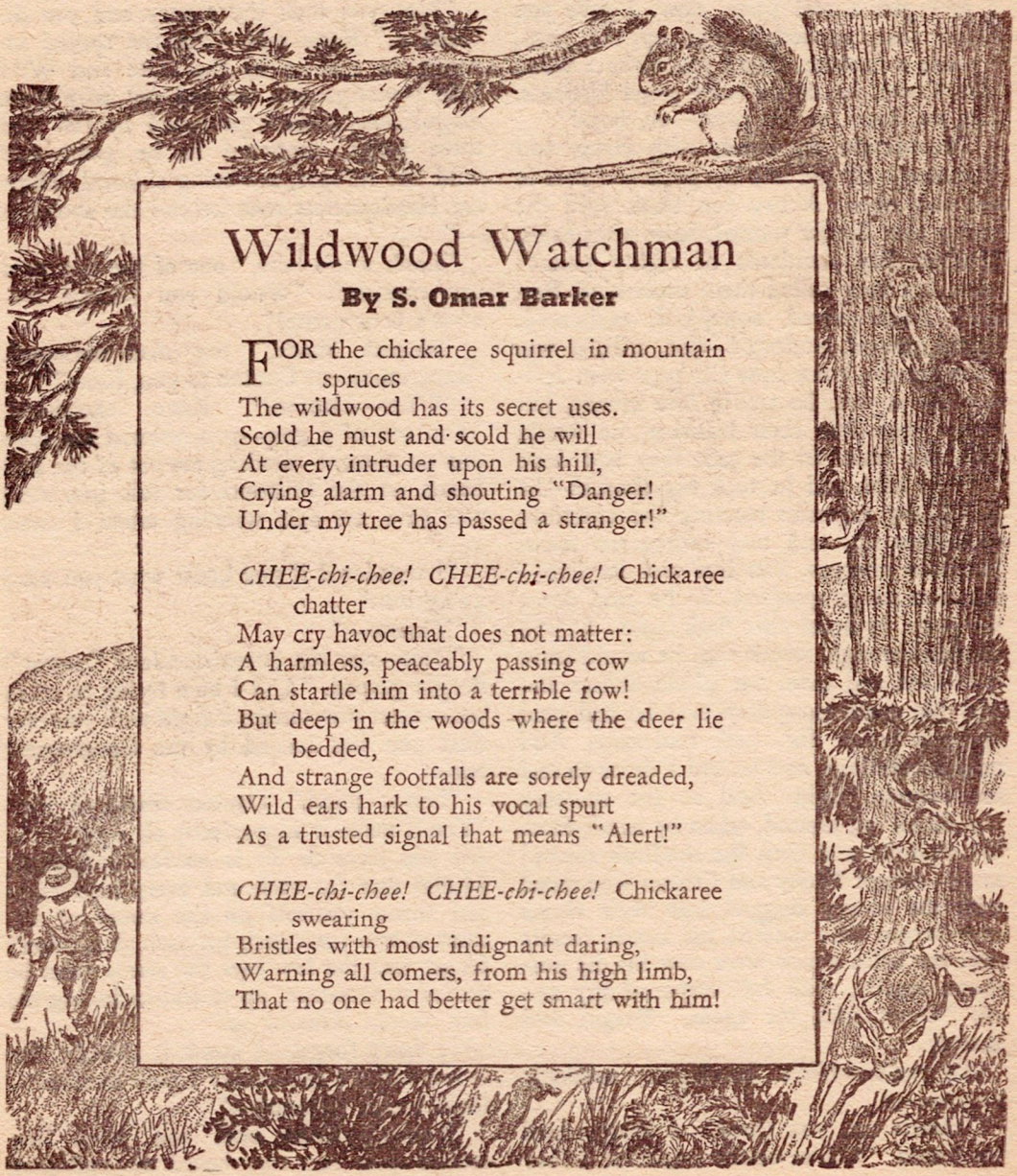
"But—but I could testify against them," Bergin said. "Me and these—these two fellers. Those trappers—look what they done—"

"If they testify you'll be convicted for slavery," Kane said. "You know that's the law—when you go in for that kind of stuff. If you want us to, though, we'll—"

"Oh, no—don't." Bergin gasped. "I guess I retire from such a business."

"I wouldn't," Kane said, "with the fur laws and conditions right in the Windfalls, we'll take $200,000 worth of fur there instead of $20,000 or so a winter. A crook gets one tenth as much business as he might get in the fur country, if he played the game straight."

"Well, we'll take him to the County Court," Superintendent Danton said. "Come along, boys."



Wildwood Watchman

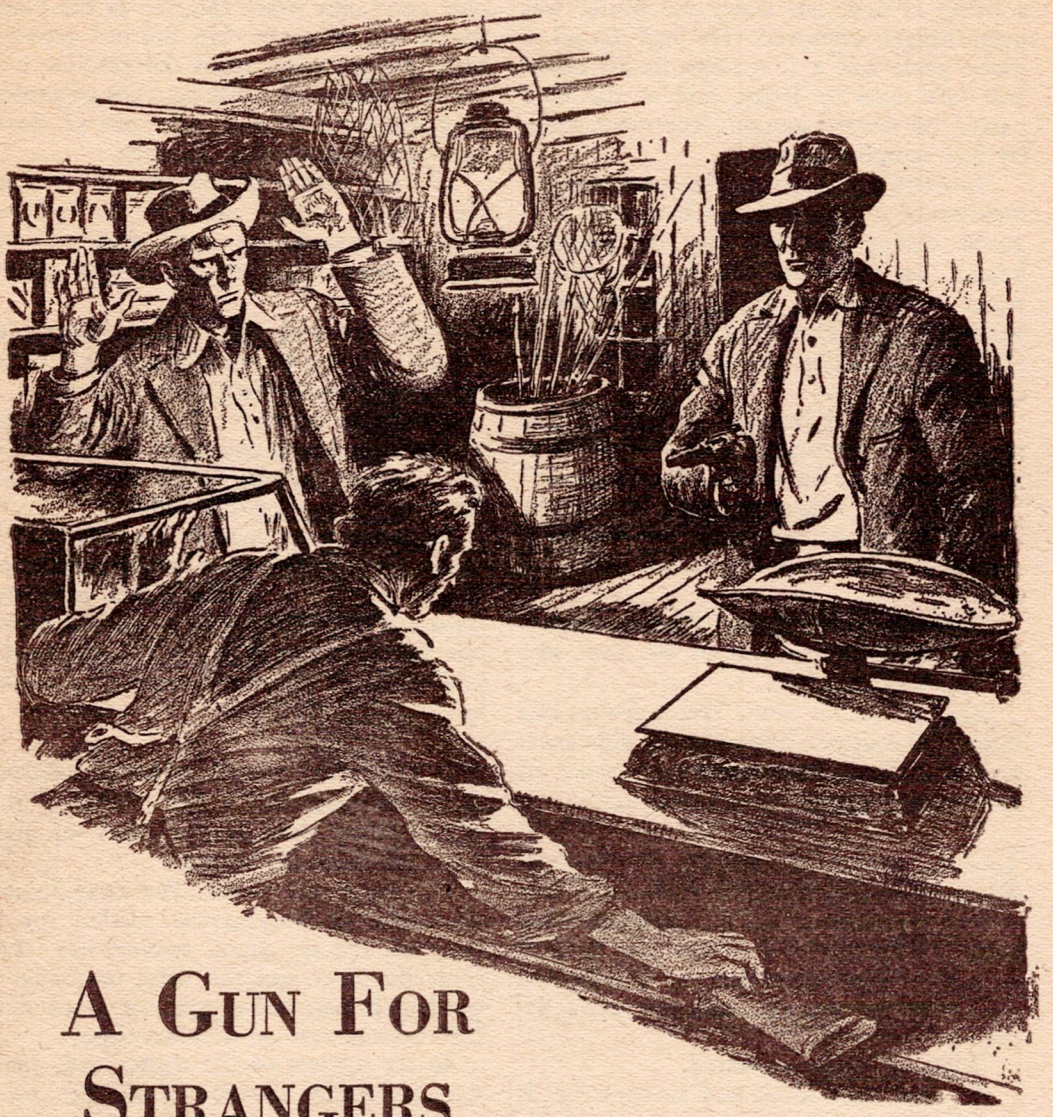
By S. Omar Barker

FOR the chickaree squirrel in mountain spruces
The wildwood has its secret uses.
Scold he must and scold he will
At every intruder upon his hill,
Crying alarm and shouting "Danger!
Under my tree has passed a stranger!"

CHEE-chi-chee! CHEE-chi-chee! Chickaree chatter
May cry havoc that does not matter:
A harmless, peaceably passing cow
Can startle him into a terrible row!
But deep in the woods where the deer lie bedded,
And strange footfalls are sorely dreaded,
Wild ears hark to his vocal spurt
As a trusted signal that means "Alert!"

CHEE-chi-chee! CHEE-chi-chee! Chickaree swearing
Bristles with most indignant daring,
Warning all comers, from his high limb,
That no one had better get smart with him!

"It's a Gun I Sell to Strangers. It Shoots Crooked—Good Hold-up Insurance."



A GUN FOR STRANGERS

By SANDING MORE

NEWS travels fast up and down the river bottoms. Sometimes it seems as though one tawny sand-spit whispered a story on to another, or that the willows on the island waft the gossip along.

In his shanty boat store below Rogansville, where he lived and did business with rivermen, clammers, and pearlers, Janky Hutton had heard the story of Pete Munsell's death long before Rick Ferguson came in.

Rick was buying supplies, bacon, butter, flour, salt, and pepper. When Rick first came to the river country, he himself was the subject of the news. Every detail of his doings was observed and passed along—the shack he bought on Slumber Island, the

poor way he fished, the trouble he had clamming. He had had a hard time making a living at first, but when the winter was over, things improved. He had found a globe pearl and a few slugs in his clams that he'd sold to Janky, and as the days passed on toward autumn, the river country had accepted Rick.

Now and then there had been some vague mention of a man who had been with Ferguson during the first day on Slumber Island, but the man had never appeared again and mention of him was therefore becoming rare. Thus Rick had passed from the stage of being news to the stage of carrying news.

"Pete Munsell bumped himself off last night," Rick remarked. "They found him shot through the head with his own pistol."

Janky laid a bag of flour across the counter before he answered. "He was murdered," he said then. "Pete had plenty of money."

"Didn't seem to have," Rick answered. "They couldn't find any in the boat and nothing was disturbed."

Janky shook his head. "Peter always had some," he insisted. "He and I are old timers on the river and we don't put money in banks where somebody can steal it."

RICK carried an armful of groceries outside and dumped them in a box toward the stern of his flat-bottomed river boat. "I'd be careful if I were you, Janky," he said. "This depression is driving the crooks out of the city and you can't depend on strangers."

"I know," Janky answered.

His eyes were black and sharp as beads as his wizened little hulk stood beside Ferguson, his shoulders drooping, his gray hair tousled over his head. He examined the boat as though it were a prospective bargain.

"Good boat," he said. "You got a new one."

"Yep," Rick nodded. "Better fill up that can with gas and oil."

He stepped toward shore, then lingered a moment. "You still got that old pearl-handled six-shooter of yours, Janky?" he asked.

Janky nodded.

"Better keep it handy then," Rick said.

The riverman stepped around the shanty boat and Janky heard the slap of the plank which led to shore. He finished stowing away the groceries, filled the gasoline can, threw a canvas over the supplies to protect them from the weather, and then sat down outside the door facing the river.

The last gleam of twilight rose beyond the distant bluffs. Already the willow-thicketed islands lay dark with shadow, and a wind crinkled the surface of the river.

Jank observed the sullen water for a long time, then eyed the clouds rising higher and higher with promise of rain.

Slowly he let the old arm chair down with a dull thump and went inside to light the kerosene lantern which was the only illumination for the dim interior.

From the shelf beneath his cash drawer, Janky then picked up a pearl-handled revolver, glanced at it for a few moments, looked into the chambers at the cartridges, and finally placed it out in the glass show case where it was readily visible to anyone who entered the store.

IT WAS dark outside when he returned to his chair and a few drops of rain were falling through the shaft of light from the kerosene lantern.

The levee was silent. Far away inland, the town of Rogansville carried on its business, but no sound reached the levee. Only the river and the wind combined to produce a low, sullen murmur as of some infernal communion between them.

In the shadow of the shanty boat, Janky was practically invisible from the river, and he continued to sit there until he heard the sound of foot-steps on the plank leading from the levee to his boat.

Slowly he got up and went inside. He blinked slightly as Rick Ferguson opened the farther door, and a stranger followed him into the room.

"Janky," Rick said, "I want you to meet an old friend of mine. Comes from a tough town, but we used to work together, so don't mind him. Jim Delevan."

Delevan held out his hand and Janky nodded. "Understand you do some pearl-buying, Mr. Hutton," Delevan said. "That's

my business and I came down to look up a few."

Janky shook his head as he eyed Rick, and then motioned toward some jars of pearl slugs that stood on his shelves. "That's all there is on the river now."

Delevan nodded. "Did Rick tell you about the find he made yesterday?" he inquired.

Janky shook his head. "I bought a pearl from him last spring," he said.

While he spoke, Rick fumbled in his shirt pocket for a small chamois bag and slowly produced a globe pearl that even in the lantern light gave forth a dull, throbbing glow.

It was a pearl that would make any pearl-buyer look twice. "Thought I'd surprise you, Janky," Rick said.

Janky's eyes examined the gem shrewdly, and he glanced at Delevan. "How much do you say it's worth, Mr. Delevan?" he asked.

"About a thousand as it is—maybe a couple of thousand if it's matched."

"I'll give you five hundred tonight, Rick, and another five hundred next week," said Janky.

Ferguson hesitated. "Well, I've always wanted to sell Jim something, but he never seemed to want it."

The pearl-buyer waved his hand. "It's a good price, Rick," he said. "I'm not looking for that kind of a pearl. If I want it later, I'll come back and buy it."

DELEVAN dismissed the matter and while Janky drew a wallet from his pocket and counted out the money in twenty-dollar bills, he strolled over to the show case. "I'd like to see that old blunderbuss," he remarked as he pointed at the pearl-handled revolver. "That has some pearl on it that interests me."

Janky took the gun from the case, extracted the bullets and handed it to Delevan.

"Four dollars," he said.

Delevan picked up the bullets. "Rick's going to take me out into the islands and I might as well have something to do a little target-shooting with," he said.

He handed over a five-dollar bill and Janky moved back to his cash drawer to make change. He was returning the dollar bill in change when he looked up.

Delevan's face wore a smile as Janky held out the dollar bill, but the muzzle of the old six-shooter pointed straight at the store-keeper's chest.

"It's all right, Janky," he said. "Just hand over your dough and nothing will happen."

The dollar bill fluttered from Janky's hands as he tore his eyes from Delevan to look at Rick.

"Stick 'em up, Rick," Delevan ordered next. The gun pointed in his direction and Rick's hands went up.

"Jim, you can't do this," he said. "Janky is my friend."

Delevan chuckled. "You're my friend too, aren't you? You brought me here, didn't you? Stood me to a drink, too, so there'll be witnesses, and if anything happens because old stick-in-the-mud here doesn't mind his business, it'll be your fault, won't it?"

"How much you want?" Janky asked slowly.

"All you've got," Delevan snapped.

Janky bent down under the counter, but as he did so, Delevan stepped over to watch him, backing up meanwhile in order to cover both Janky and Rick.

JANKY glanced up at him, his hands still under the cash drawer and what happened a moment later was too quick for a single pair of eyes to catch. A sawed off shot-gun appeared in Janky's hands, but as it did so, Delevan fired point-blank. Two shots came from the pistol before Janky pulled the trigger on the shot-gun.

The roar of the heavy shot-gun load filled the house-boat. The gun dropped from Delevan's hand and he crumpled to the floor, his mouth opened in a sickly grin.

Janky swung the gun around to take in Rick Ferguson, but that individual was holding his hands high as though they had been turned to stone in that unnatural position.

One look at him and Janky lowered the shot-gun. "Guess you ain't his friend after all, Rick," he said slowly.

Still holding the shot-gun, Janky moved over to Delevan, noted the blood pouring from a huge hole in his abdomen and then stooped down to retrieve the six-shooter.

"Was you up there at Pete Munsell's with him last night?" he demanded.

Rick shook his head. "I don't know a thing about it. I used to know Delevan, and when I found that big pearl I wired him about it, because I'd promised to let him see anything I got."

"Better get the sheriff and coroner then," Janky said.

Rick hesitated. "He missed you, eh?" he demanded.

Janky blinked. "Come here," he said. He pointed with the six-shooter to an old tin can over the doorway. "I'm aiming at that," he said, "and I used to be a good shot."

He pulled the trigger, and the bullet splintered the wood of the roof, twelve inches above and to the left.

"It shoots high and to the left," Janky observed. "The barrel is bent." Then he smiled.

"It's a gun I sell to strangers. When they find out it shoots crooked, they bring it back and I return the money. It is good hold-up insurance."

Rick smiled. "It worked," he said.

IN THE excitement, Janky hadn't paid much attention to Rick Ferguson, but the strange way in which the riverman spoke, made him pause and suddenly step back.

"I thought Delevan was your friend," he remarked.

Ferguson's face seemed to darken. He set his lips firmly as he looked at the corpse.

"You want to know, Janky?" he asked.

Janky nodded, and the other went on. "When I first came here," he said, "I had a brother. After we bought the shack, Ed went back to Chicago for some things he wanted. I told him not to go because he and I had agreed to clear the slate and start a new one. There are some things I expect the police would like to know about us."

Ferguson hesitated. "Ed never came back," he said finally. "I traced him and found out that it was Delevan who put him on the spot. But Ed and I had promised each other we'd quit the rackets—even if something happened to one or the other of us, the one that was left was to go straight."

Janky nodded agreement. "That's right," he said. "And so you got Delevan down here, maybe to drown accidentally?"

Rick shook his head. "No," he said, "I told him about your carrying cash around, and I knew the beer racket was so tough, a few hundred dolars would look like fifty grand did to him once. The bootlegging business is shot since beer came back."

Janky stared hard at Rick.

"I knew you could shoot," he went on. "And one day when you were out, I found out you had a sawed-off shot-gun under the counter."

Janky's face hardened still more. "But—but, if the pistol hadn't shot crooked—"

Rick interrupted him. "You've forgotten that you sold that gun to me once," he said. "I tried it out and found out what ailed it, and brought it back. That's why I asked you about the gun. I figured you'd sell it to Delevan, and I knew Delevan always did his killing with the other fellow's gun. He forgot that little point once and almost had his neck stretched. He's been more careful lately."

Janky's eyes were blank. "That's right," he agreed slowly, "that's right."

Rick smiled. "Besides, if he'd made any movement to use his own gun, I'd have shot him myself," he said, as he pulled a small automatic from a shoulder holster, then slipped it back again.

Janky grinned amiably.

"That's good," he said. "I see now, and so I guess maybe we get the sheriff, eh?"

As Rick hesitated, Janky raised his eyebrows. "Or maybe, he has your picture, eh, and I should better go myself!"

Rick shook his head. "No, I'll go," he said.

HE SLIPPED out the door, and Janky heard his footsteps on the plank going to shore. He went to the screen and saw Rick's form moving off into the gloom of the levee, then he came back and sat on the counter while he pushed a new shell into the shot-gun. He decided that there would be time enough to clean it tomorrow.

Then he went to look out across the river, but the mist was still settling and the rain was falling.

A moment later he returned, bent down over the body, and his hands passed quickly

through the pockets, then slipped under the shirt around the neck and extracted a small bulging bag. Janky was careful—there was no blood on his hands, and he opened the bag under the lantern.

"Ah," he said. "Ah." The bag was filled with pearls.

Then he started and made a quick move to slip the bag into his pocket.

But a quiet voice spoke from the shore door. "Put up your hands, Janky, and don't move."

Janky half turned in time to see Rick Ferguson opening the door. "You didn't think I'd be fool enough to let you get away with those stones, did you?" he asked.

Janky said nothing, but he shivered as he saw Rick take out a pair of handcuffs and slip them on his wrists.

"Delevan just happened to want to show-off a little and he showed me those pearls," Rick said quietly. "It would have been all right except that I knew old Pete had them a few days before he was shot."

He swung Janky around and with the muzzle of the gun pressed into his side went through his pockets.

Then he flipped open his leather jacket and revealed a silver badge. "I just neglected to tell you about that, Janky," he said, "but I came over here to find out about the Hendrickson murder last year, and got something that looked like you. No evidence to convict, of course, but now that you've admitted you knew Delevan's gun wouldn't shoot straight, I've got a fairly good case. You were robbing a dead man you'd shot so he couldn't squeal."

Janky's lips moved but he didn't speak.

"Sure, I know you and Delevan worked that Munsell case together. That is, you found out Pete kept the pearls on him, and told Delevan. I was just kidding you about that wire, because I happen to know you went thirty miles down the river, last Sunday and sent one to Delevan yourself, I've got a copy of it. It said something about 'good duck-fishing'."

Janky found his tongue. "And you—your brother? That was a fake too?"

"No," Rick answered. "That was the truth, and I figured hanging was too good for Jim Delevan."

Janky shook his head. "I won't admit a thing," he said.

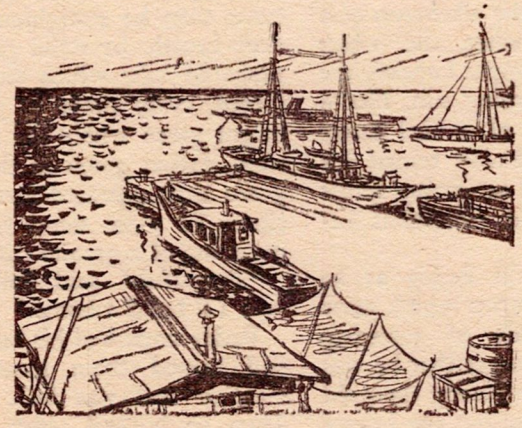
"You won't need to," Rick assured him. "I'll tell the judge everything he needs to know. Glad I found Delevan so easy when I got to Rogansville. I might even wish his gun would have shot straighter."

Janky Hutton shivered as Rick indicated the door.

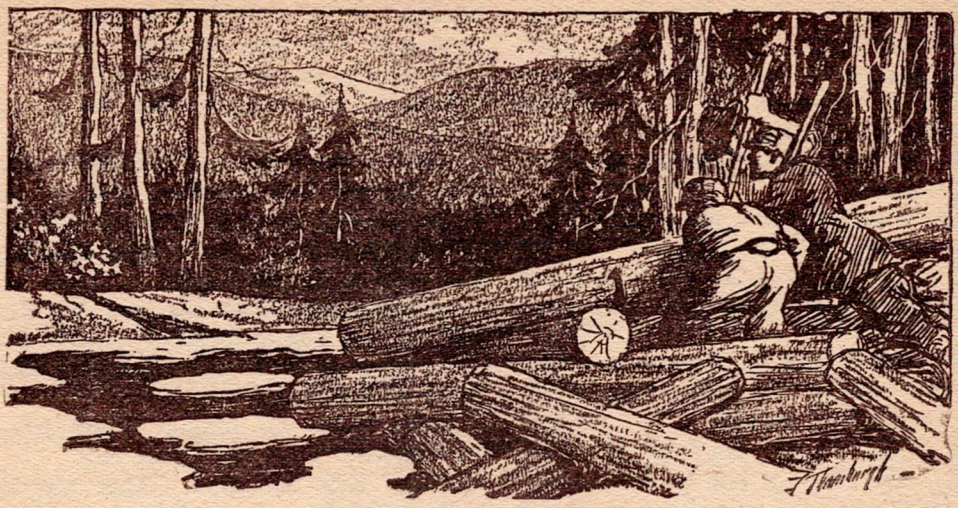
"The pearl," he whispered hoarsely. "You borrowed that from Jim to find out where I kept my money?"

Rick smiled. "That's what Delevan thought," he agreed.

The wind murmured sullenly as he ushered Janky out into the gloom.



"Trees Are the Thing," Was What Paddy O'Ryan Thought.



GREEN GOLD

By REGINALD C. BARKER

FORTY years ago, Paddy O'Ryan built the first cabin on the shore of Blue Lake, in the Salmon River Mountains, of Idaho.

Paddy was twenty-one; a gray-eyed, stockily built lad of Irish extraction, whose restless spirit had urged him to seek fortune in the West, and whose love of trees had been inherited from a long line of ancestors who had lived and died among the green hills of Connemara.

Paddy was on his way to the gold diggings at Florence when Blue Lake burst suddenly in view, late in the afternoon of a windless summer day, when the water gleamed like burnished copper beneath the slanting rays of the westering sun. Not a sound, not even the call of a bird broke the brooding silence as Paddy reined his saddle horse to a stop, and sat gazing across the lake at the green-clad mountains beyond.

Something stirred within Paddy as he gazed at the steep slopes upon which grew thousands upon thousands of towering green pines and firs. He forgot that he was on his way to seek fortune among the gold diggings; he forgot all else but the beauty of the scene before him. As if touched by the magic wand of one of the "Little People" of whom his Irish mother had often told him, Paddy's restlessness left him and he felt suddenly at peace. Dismounting from his horse, he strode to the edge of the lake, and stood looking down into its depths; looking down at the reflection of the green-timbered mountain behind him. Thousands and thousands of tall pines he could see deep down beneath the surface of the water.

Paddy looked at the reflection a long time; then he straightened up. Drawing a deep breath, he stood gazing at the green-timbered hills which surrounded the lake. Green, every shade of green met his eye; bright green where the sunlight struck the trees, darker green in the shadowy defiles, green that appeared almost black where a clump of pines stood ranked beneath the overhang of a granite cliff.

"Beautiful," said Paddy softly. "Right here I'll build a home."

Paddy unpacked his horses, hobbled them and turned them loose in a mountain meadow that was lush with green grass. Then he pitched camp, built a fire, and

supped off two rainbow trout which he caught in the lake.

EARLY the next morning, the sound of an axe disturbed the brooding silence as Paddy cut logs out of which to build his cabin. It was the first cabin he had ever built, and lacking experience, he made many mistakes, so that the cabin wasn't much to look at when it was finished; but to Paddy it appeared to be the most beautiful cabin he had ever seen.

For ten years he dwelt on the shore of the lake, his only company his horses, the wild creatures of the forest and the green trees he loved. Little by little, Paddy learned the ways of the woods, for living alone he had plenty of time in which to think. Out of his thoughts he built up a simple philosophy in which he found happiness.

As the years wandered on other pioneers settled on the shore of the lake, and Paddy saw hundreds of his beloved trees felled to make homes for the new arrivals. A wagon road was built across Paddy's green mountains, and freight teams hauled building material and other supplies to the shore of the lake.

A townsite was surveyed, dwellings, stores and a schoolhouse were erected, and Paddy's little cabin became lost among the larger buildings of the growing mountain settlement. And because the new town straggled along the southern shore of the lake, which extended nine miles to the north, it became known as Lake View.

BECAUSE Paddy was the first settler, and because he was well liked, he was invited by his fellow citizens to become mayor; but he declined on the ground that he did not care to engage in civic affairs. He was advised to go into some kind of business, but he was not interested in business. He could have made money in several different ways, but he did not seem to be interested in accumulating a fortune. He found his joy in the lake and in the green woods by which it was surrounded. And slowly it began to dawn upon Paddy that things were becoming altogether too crowded to suit him. Quietly he watched the steady growth of the new settlement, and quietly he filed a claim on six hundred and forty acres of growing timber on the west side of Gray Mountain, where it slopes down to the shore of the lake. There among his trees, Paddy built a new cabin, and there he went to live, with a yellow Irish terrier pup whom he called Shamus.

Shamus was ten years old when he died. It was the year Matt Jameson and Luke Quayle bought the stumpage of several thousand acres of timber surrounding the lake, and built a small saw mill at the edge of town. It was operated by steam, and the fires of the boilers were fed by dry yellow pine, and the edgings and waste from the mill.

Matt Jameson was a large, jovial-faced lumberman from the Michigan woods, with years of practical experience in logging behind him. Luke Quayle stood six-feet-four in his brogans. His head was long and narrow, his eyes slightly crossed, and his big, hooked nose overhung lips which were almost as thin as the blade of a saw. To Luke Quayle trees were merely a means of making money, and he gave orders to cut every pine that would make a stick of lumber.

Paddy watched the denudation of the mountain slopes with worried eyes, and refused point blank to sell his timber when Jameson and Quayle offered to buy it at a price that would have made him independent.

"I don't need money," said Paddy. "I'd rather see my trees growing than to have the money they would bring me. One time when I was guiding Doc Payson on a hunting trip, I was telling him about my trees, and Doc said, 'If you find happiness in watching trees grow, Paddy, you are a lucky man; for where your treasure is there will be your heart also.' "

Luke Quayle told the story around town, and it was repeated with variations and exaggerations. Little by little, people began to look upon Paddy as being "sort o' queer," which is a way folks have when they meet somebody whom they cannot understand.

But Paddy didn't care; or, if he did care, he did not show any resentment; just went his way with his thoughts, and let them say what they would.

A few years after the starting of the logging operations, Paddy owned the

only standing timber on the east side of the lake. It was surrounded by cut-off lands, covered with dry slashings, and criss-crossed with logs and tree-tops which had been found unsuitable for lumber. During the summer months, the slashings became as dry as tinder, awaiting only a spark to set the woods ablaze.

Nobody ever discovered how the fire started. Some said it was caused by a bolt of lightning; others thought a hunter might have carelessly dropped a burning match after having lighted his pipe; but a whisper went around that Jameson and Quayle knew more about the fire than they chose to admit. Everybody knew that Luke Quayle had bitterly resented Paddy's refusal to sell his timber.

The rumor reached Matt Jameson's ears, and the lumberman sought Paddy out and asked him whether he thought there was any truth to it.

"If I thought Luke set fire to the woods to get even with you for not selling out to us," shouted Jameson, "I don't know but what I'd kill him."

"It's probably just the talk of people who don't like Luke," said Paddy. "Better forget it, Matt. Killing Luke wouldn't give me back my timber."

However it was, no effort was made to check the fire, for at that time there was no forest service. When at last the autumn rains extinguished the conflagration, Gray Mountain was a blackened waste, dotted with thousands of stumps, and Paddy found himself the owner of six hundred and forty acres of dying trees, most of which, by the following spring, were quite dead.

Among the tall, needleless skeletons of his pines, Paddy built another cabin. Around it he cleared close to an acre of land which he sowed to the seed of the yellow pine, gathered by himself from the hoards of squirrels.

Most of Paddy's first sowing refused to germinate, for it is not easy to grow pines; but little by little he profited by his mistakes, and at last he had the satisfaction of sitting in front of his cabin every evening watching his seedlings. Paddy used to say that he could see them grow, but nobody believed him.

After one outburst of anger, Paddy never spoke about the fire; but it was easy to see that it had affected him greatly. He began to keep even more to himself, and slowly he developed into a taciturn, though kindly recluse, whose chief pleasure seemed to lie in watching over his pine nursery. He let his beard grow until it spread like a fan across his chest, and spent much of his time clearing more of his land and sowing it to the seed of the pines he loved.

PADDY was nearly fifty when Jameson and Quayle had a quarrel which resulted in the dissolution of their partnership. Shortly afterward, Luke Quayle conceived the idea of making Lakeview into a pleasure resort. With his share of the money he had made at lumbering he built a summer hotel above the lake, which he named Lotus Land.

Nearly all the idle men in town helped to build the hotel, and Paddy was one of them. For having aided in the building of almost every log structure in town, Paddy had learned more about fitting logs than most men will ever know. Every evening after work was over, Paddy would row across the lake, and go home to his cabin in the big burn.

Soon after the completion of Lotus Land, the district surrounding Blue Lake was proclaimed a National Forest. A ranger station was built near Lakeview, with Dave Gregory as district ranger.

Automobiles came to Lakeview and pleasure launches began to appear on the lake. The forest service built a row of cabins along the west shore, just above the new hotel, and rented them to tourists during the summer months at very low rentals, much to the annoyance of the owner of Lotus Land.

With the coming of the city folk, Paddy began to earn quite a lot of money by taking out fishing and hunting parties. Between times he prospected, and worked in his pine nursery. During the winter, he cut and sold wood from his dead timber and earned a little money by trapping furs.

LAKEVIEW and the new hotel boomed for a few years, then hard times struck the settlement, and few tourists arrived. Those who did come, preferred to rent the

forest service cabins, rather than to pay the exorbitant prices demanded by Luke Quayle for hotel accommodations.

Finally Lotus Land was closed up by Luke Quayle. He took up his abode there alone, and turned to hard liquor for consolation. Little by little, the tall, gaunt, resort owner developed an evil temper and a harsh tongue, which led to his being shunned by everybody in the settlement.

After the hegira of the tourists, Paddy devoted more and more time to prospecting, and one day he struck a rich vein of gold-bearing ore.

Paddy was so surprised that he could hardly believe his own eyesight. Picking up a chunk of gold-splashed quartz, he sat down on a log. Holding the specimen in one gnarled hand, he gazed across the lake. The Flying Squirrel, a launch owned by Dave Gregory, the ranger, was heading back toward town, with a flag fluttering from its taffrail. Paddy sat looking at the specimen of ore for some time, turning it over and over in his calloused hands; then he dropped it into a pocket and rose to his feet. He spent the next few days staking out some claims.

A few months later, he sold his claims to a group of capitalists for fifty thousand dollars.

When folks asked Paddy how he felt since he had become a rich man, Paddy would fumble his beard and blink uncertainly.

"Mighty uncomfortable," he would say. "I feel like I'd robbed somebody."

One day, some months after his strike, Paddy was in the office of the Blue Water Hotel in Lakeview, and a number of loungers were quizzing him. Among them was Sheriff Muldoon, a wizened little man, with a gray mustache, and eyes like gray steel.

"I suppose you'll be leaving us before long, Paddy," said the sheriff. "You'll be wanting to see New York now, and maybe London and gay Paree."

Tim Savage, the corpulent hotel proprietor, leaned across the desk and removed a stogie from beneath his mustached lips. Luke Quayle, over near the window, paused in adding up figures on a sheet of paper. A newspaper, open at the financial page, slipped from his bony knees to the floor, as he looked toward Paddy.

"I'm not thinking of leaving the hills," said Paddy. "There's no particular reason why I should leave. I've plenty to eat, the lake and the trees for company, the songs of birds for music, and friends to wish me well. What more can a man ask of life?"

Luke Quayle turned a sour face toward the woodsman. He looked upon such talk as childish, and he spoke with a sneer in his voice.

"Don't talk like a fool, Paddy. You could double your stake if you had any sense. Why don't you buy Lotus Land from me?"

"What would I do with Lotus Land?" asked Paddy in surprise. "I don't know anything about running a summer resort. Besides, it broke you, Luke."

"Business is picking up now," said Quayle. "You don't need to know anything about the game. All you got to do is to charge high prices, and sit back and take the money."

"I'm not worrying about making any more money, Luke," said Paddy mildly. "If you think money is still to be made out of the place, why don't you start it up again yourself?"

Laughter followed Paddy as he passed out of the office and clumped up the board sidewalk toward Donnegan's cafe.

JIM DONNEGAN, white-aproned, red-faced and burly, gave him a cheerful greeting.

"Now that you are a rich man you ought to sit at the table I keep for traveling men," grinned Donnegan.

"I'll sit at the table where I've always sat," said Paddy. "I can see the lake through the window. I like to look at it while I eat."

The dining room filled, and evidently Donnegan pointed out Paddy to some of his guests; for half whispers reached the woodsman's ears. He could feel people staring at him behind his back.

"That's Paddy O'Ryan, the man who struck it rich."

"A million, they say. Wonder if it's true."

Matt Jameson, who owned the sawmill,

which had lain idle for years, strode over to Paddy's table.

"Like to talk to you soon as you've eaten, Paddy," boomed the ex-lumberman. "Got a proposition that may interest you."

Paddy's gray eyes twinkled as he glanced up.

"So the fisherman remarked to the trout," he said drily, "but it was a long time before he caught it."

Jameson greeted the sally with a jovial laugh, and laid a big hand on Paddy's shoulder.

"Drop around at my place after a while," he urged. "I want to talk to you."

As Jameson left the dining room, the daily auto-stage from the city rolled past Paddy's window. A few minutes later, a boy entered the dining room with a bundle of newspapers which had arrived on the stage.

"*Daily News,*" he shouted. "Forest camp to be built at Blue Lake!"

"What's that, son?" asked Paddy. "Here, give me one of those papers and keep the change." He handed the lad a quarter. Then he spread the paper over his empty plate and cup and spent the next half hour reading.

Paddy was strolling up the street with the folded newspaper beneath one arm, when he met Luke Quayle, who had been awaiting him.

"Come up to my place with me, Paddy," requested Quayle. "I want to talk to you about buying it."

"I don't know," said Paddy dubiously. "I told Jameson I would be down to see him right soon."

"Don't tell me you are figuring on buying that old rattle-trap of a mill!" exclaimed Quayle harshly. "It isn't worth the powder to blow it into the lake. Besides, you don't own any timber, and if you did, you couldn't make any money out of it, the way the market is now."

"I'm not thinking of going into the lumber business," said Paddy mildly. "I'm not thinking of buying Lotus Land either; so there is no use in talking to me about it."

"It won't hurt you to come up and look the place over, anyway," persisted Quayle. "You might change your mind when you hear my price."

"All right," said Paddy. "Just to be accommodating, I'll come with you. But I tell you right now, Luke, I'm not interested in buying."

LOTUS LAND was a mile above town. It was a four-gabled log structure, two full stories in height. It stood on a high point of land on the west side of the lake, and faced Gray Mountain. Luke Quayle had invested thirty thousand dollars in the building of the hotel, and for a time had made a good deal of money. But for years the windows of Lotus Land, with one exception, had been boarded up, and all the chimneys, save one, had been covered to keep out the rain and snow. From the highway which had been built around the shore of the lake, a narrow trail led through the underbrush which had grown up around the building. Nobody used it but Luke Quayle on his daily trips to and from town.

Rusty hinges creaked as Quayle opened the front door and led the way into an immense room with a beamed ceiling. A great stone fireplace extended almost across one end of the room. Red, blue, orange and green pennants, left by summer tourists, lent touches of color to the bare walls, but the tables, chairs and floor were gray with dust. In one corner a small table, supporting a half-empty bottle of whiskey and a glass, stood beside a bed that was untidy with tumbled blankets.

Luke Quayle half-filled the glass with whiskey, which he swallowed at a gulp. Then he sank into a creaking mission chair and drew the back of a hand across his lips.

"The place don't look like much now, Paddy," he said, "but it wouldn't cost you much to put it in shape. What with water being piped from the springs on the hill, two bathrooms, sixteen bedrooms, a sun porch and—"

"I helped build it," Paddy reminded him. "What do you figure the place is worth?"

QUAYLE rubbed his long chin with trembling yellow fingers, and tried to look as if he had not spent hours figuring out just what he could let the place go for. He took another drink, coughed harshly, then replied in a voice that was slightly thick.

"Fifteen thousand dollars cash, which is just half what it cost me."

Paddy crossed the room to a big window. Absently stroking his graying beard, he gazed across the lake. Beyond it, he could see his burned trees standing on the side of Gray Mountain.

"Fine view," said Paddy half to himself. "Pity the fire killed off my timber."

Quayle scowled at the woodsman's broad shoulders. He tapped the floor restlessly with the toe of a boot. You should have sold your timber when you had the chance," he said. "Serves you right that it burned."

"Maybe the fire taught me something that I would otherwise never have thought of," said Paddy thoughtfully. "Anyway, grumbling never made a hill green."

Apparently Quayle did not care to pursue the subject, for he turned again to his bottle and poured himself another drink.

"I've taken in as much as five hundred dollars in a week when times were booming," he said. "Five hundred dollars a week!"

"That's a pile of money," said Paddy. "What did you do with it, Luke?"

"Played the stock market and lost every dollar," muttered Quayle. "That's why I'm offering you the place for a song. You'll never get another chance to make money so easily."

"I don't suppose I will," said Paddy. "But then it would cost a great deal to put Lotus Land in shape again. Seems to me like it's pretty well run down."

"Tell you what I'll do," Quayle stared at his empty glass. "I'll let you have a ninety-day option on Lotus Land for five thousand dollars cash."

"Seeing that I never heard tell of an option, I don't rightly get your meaning," said Paddy. Stroking his beard, he gazed out of the window, as Quayle went into detail.

"I think I get the idea," said Paddy at last. "You want me to hand you five thousand dollars for the privilege of keeping other people from buying Lotus Land for the next ninety days. If I didn't pay the balance of the purchase price on time, you'd hang on to the five thousand, and you'd still own Lotus Land, while I'd be that much out of pocket."

Paddy turned around, and Quayle's eyes, slightly bloodshot at the corners, flickered, then dropped beneath the childlike gaze of the woodsman.

"You don't need to look at me that way," muttered Quayle. "There's nothing crooked about it."

"Maybe not," said Paddy gently, "but when I buy anything, Luke, I pay cash on the nail."

HE TURNED again to the window and gazed across the lake at the big burn. The tall barkless trees gleamed like gold in the glare of the westering sun.

"I'll have to be going now, Luke," said Paddy.

Quayle staggered a little as he followed the woodsman toward the door.

"You aren't still thinking of buying the sawmill from Matt Jameson, are you?" he asked.

"Not right now," replied Paddy. "Not right now, Luke. Mind you, I'm not saying that I may not buy the mill later. But then a man has a right to change his mind."

"I'll hold my offer open for a while," said Quayle. "Give you time to think it over."

Paddy looked straight into the taller man's eyes, but with a muttered oath, Quayle averted his gaze.

"You may as well sell it to somebody else, if you get a chance, Luke," said Paddy. "If I had wanted Lotus Land, I could have bought it from Matt Jameson by taking over the five thousand dollar mortgage he holds on the property. I happen to know that it is overdue. Matt told me that he is broke and needs the money. But that wouldn't have been right, according to my way of thinking. If I'd taken Matt up on his offer, I'd have beat both him and you out of a lot of money. Maybe it's good business, Luke, but I don't do business that way."

"You old fool!" Quayle turned and stared incredulously into the quiet gray eyes uplifted to his own. "Do you mean to tell me that Jameson tried to doublecross me, and that you refused to buy a property that is worth six times the amount of the mortgage?"

"Of course, I refused," said Paddy in-

dignantly. "If I'd done a trick like that, I could never have looked you in the face again."

With that parting shot, Paddy returned to town, where he had a long talk with Dave Gregory.

"Yes," the slim young ranger told him, "the government is going to establish a reforestation camp at Blue Lake. The logged-off and burned lands of Gray Mountain are to be cleaned up and reseeded to yellow pine."

"It took the gov'ment a long time to get started," observed Paddy. "If they had begun reseeding right after the fire, the new growth would have been six feet high by now."

"I guess you are right, Paddy," said the ranger. "I see you have an acre of second growth pine of about that height around your cabin."

"And five acres of three-year-old seedlings close to a foot high," added Paddy. "Dave, I had enough pine seedlings on my property to replant all the burned land on Gray Mountain. Every bit of time I could spare since the fire, I've been clearing my land and sowing it to yellow pine."

A few days later, the first contingent of reforestation workers arrived at Lake View. Under the command of army officers, they established a camp on the east side of the lake, a few miles above town.

DAY after day, Paddy might have been found watching them at their work, talking to the men, and freely offering them the benefit of the knowledge he had gained during more than thirty-five years spent in the woods.

At first they took him for an ordinary mountaineer, and laughed at his quaint philosophies. Paddy might never have gained much attention had it not been for Dave Gregory, the ranger, who at last convinced the forestry officers that Paddy was the most expert woodsman he had ever met. Thus it happened that presently none of the officials thought of taking an important step in the work of reforestation without consulting the gray-bearded woodsman. Paddy told them where to plant seeds and where not to plant them; he showed them insect pests which infested the young growth, and spoke of the injurious effects of too much sunlight and too much shade. He explained why seeds would never germinate if planted where the humus had burned down to the limit of its depth.

One day Paddy escorted the forestry officer in command to his own pine nursery. Major Williams looked with amazement upon the acre of six-foot pines among which Paddy's cabin was completely hidden; and nodded approval when he saw five acres of Paddy's land planted with twelve-inch pines which he had grown from seed which he himself had gathered.

"Damn it, Paddy!" exclaimed the major. "You must have half a million seedlings there."

"There are quite a lot of 'em," agreed Paddy mildly.

Major Williams removed his hat and mopped his florid countenance.

"Do you mean to tell me that you seeded six acres without any help?" he asked. "What was your idea? You couldn't possibly have foreseen that the time would come when reforestation would become an actual fact."

"Anybody with half an idea could have seen it would have to come sooner or later," said Paddy. "But I just did it for the love I bear all growing things. You should have seen the mountain when I first saw it. As far as a man could look there was a sea of green pines. It pretty nearly broke my heart when the fire killed my timber. You'll think I'm kind of queer, I guess, when I tell you that I call living trees 'green gold of the mountains.' "

The forestry officer stared hard at the uncouth figure of the woodsman, then he offered his hand.

"Pity there are not more men like you, O'Ryan," he said bruskly. "It would have made our work easier."

The next day Major Williams sent a long wire to the forestry department in Washington, D. C. He was in the Blue Water Hotel awaiting a reply, when Matt Jameson and Luke Quayle met face to face in the office.

Quayle was the worse for drink at the time, and he swayed slightly on his feet as he stepped up to Jameson.

"So you tried to sell me out to Paddy O'Ryan for a measly five thousand, did you,

Jameson?" he said thickly. "You queered the deal when I could have got my price and paid you off, you old—"

The quarrel waxed; the voices of the two men grew louder and more angry. Suddenly Quayle drew a revolver and shot Jameson through the heart.

Before the men in the office could recover from their astonishment, the killer backed out of the door, revolver in hand. Behind the desk, Tim Savage the proprietor stood with eyes bulging, as he stared at the dead man on the floor.

"It was a cold-blooded killing," said Major Williams, when Sheriff Muldoon arrived in response to a telephone call. "Jameson never had the ghost of a chance."

The sound of the shot had been heard, and soon the office was crowded with men, among whom was Dave Gregory, the ranger.

"Quayle has taken my launch and is headed up the lake, Sheriff," he said. "There isn't a boat here that can catch the *Flying Squirrel.*"

"We'll get him," said the wizened little sheriff. His eyes swept the crowd, and came to rest on two young mechanics in greasy overalls.

"Bill Keene," said the sheriff, "and you, Ed Johnson, take your fastest car and drive around to the head of the lake as quick as you can. Two of you other men go with them. Follow the highway around the lake to the summit and try to head Quayle off. Chances are that he'll try to cut across the mountains toward Florence. Take your rifles with you.

"You other men come with me. We'll take the sawmill launch and try to keep Quayle in sight, so that we can see where he makes a landing. Bring rifles, all of you."

DAVE GREGORY was right about his boat being the swiftest craft on the lake. The sawmill launch never got within half a mile of her, as, with her bow splitting the water and a narrow wake of white streaming astern, the *Flying Squirrel* sped across the clear blue water.

At thirty miles an hour she raced past Lotus Land, and up the lake toward a shore of yellow sand which sloped gently upward toward the big burn on Gray Mountain.

Spurred on by fear of capture, Luke Quayle thought only of reaching the cover of the timber ahead of his pursuers, and he drove the *Flying Squirrel* ashore with such reckless speed that she buried her nose deep in the soft sand.

The sawmill launch was coming up fast, and erect in the bows, with his rifle to his shoulder, the sheriff pumped shot after shot at Quayle as he sprang ashore. A bullet pierced the gas tank of the *Flying Squirrel,* and a burst of flame and smoke leaped upward into the still air.

As the pursuing launch reached the beach, the posse sprang ashore and ran across the sandy cove. Behind them the *Flying Squirrel* was enveloped in smoke and flame.

"Scatter out," ordered the sheriff. "We'll try to close in on him from both sides."

The line of grim-faced men spread to right and left in a human crescent that embraced the burned-off land. The underbrush was so heavy the tracks of the killer were soon lost. Nearly an hour passed before a member of the posse announced with a shout that he had found the imprint of a boot heel in a damp patch of ground.

"Quayle can't be far off," said the sheriff, "and by this time Bill and Ed will have reached the summit with the car, and will have him headed. Keep your eyes open for more tracks, men. We can't afford to let him get away."

But in spite of their best efforts, they found no more tracks, nor any sign of the hunted man. Luke Quayle seemed to have vanished into thin air.

For two hours, the posse kept on with their search, but the underbrush was thick, the ground was strewn with dead leaves and covered with trailing vines, and in some places carpeted with springy green moss upon which a man's boots left no visible imprint.

Urged on by the sheriff, the line of men pushed on up the mountain. Breathless from their arduous climb, with clothing torn by contact with clumps of wild rose bramble, grimed from head to foot from rubbing against the fire-blackened stumps, and with sweat trickling in streams down their faces, they suddenly emerged from the underbrush. In front of them stood a

thicket of green timber; second growth pines standing so close together that a man could hardly push a way through them. Above the pigmy green forest towered the hundred foot trunks of a few living trees, sole survivors of the great fire.

"It is Paddy O'Ryan's pine nursery," said the sheriff. "We'd better go to his cabin. Perhaps he has seen Quayle."

The posse pushed their way through the pigmy forest, and came at last to a low-roofed log cabin. In front of it Paddy was sitting in a rustic chair, which he had constructed out of crooked branches cut from the tops of fallen pines. The woodsman's powerful arms were folded across his chest, so that his gray beard flowed over his gnarled hands. On his face was the quiet, benignant look of a man at peace with the world.

Paddy glanced up as the sheriff stopped in front of him. Then he rose to his feet and stood looking wonderingly from face to face.

"What's wrong?" asked Paddy mildly. "I heard you coming some time back. I saw the *Flying Squirrel* heading up the lake, with the sawmill launch right behind her. Then the *Flying Squirrel* ran in so close to the base of the mountain that I lost sight of her. What was all the shooting over?"

"Matt Jameson was shot and killed by Luke Quayle," explained the sheriff. "We followed Quayle across the lake, but lost track of him after he reached the shelter of the underbrush."

PADDY nodded his gray head from time to time as he listened to the account of the killing; but he denied having seen anything of Luke Quayle.

"That's what comes of thinking so much about making money," said Paddy soberly. "I might have helped Luke out if he had told me the truth about Lotus Land; but he tried to make me believe that it was without encumbrance, not knowing that it was I who loaned Matt Jameson the money with which to obtain a mortgage on the property. Matt Jameson offered me the sawmill in payment of the debt he owed me. Seeing as I need a sawmill, I took it, for five thousand dollars was all it is worth."

"Never mind about that now, Paddy,"

said the sheriff. "The question is, have you any idea what has become of Luke Quayle?"

Paddy seemed to consider as he gazed across the tops of his pine nursery at a giant pine which towered a hundred feet into the air. The needles on the crown of the tree were a sickly yellowish green in color, which showed that its death was very near; and all the way down the columnar trunk the bark hung in tattered gray folds. Near the top of the tree a pair of red headed woodpeckers were hammering away in search of insects.

"I've been watching those little fellows for quite a while," observed Paddy irrelevantly. "Don't ever shoot a woodpecker, boys. They are death on the insects that feed upon pines."

The sheriff shook his head as he looked at Paddy. It seemed useless to question him further.

"We may as well scatter out again and take another look for Quayle," said the sheriff. "It'll be dark inside of two hours."

Gray head bent to one side, Paddy seemed to be listening. Then suddenly the woodpeckers flew away, uttering startled cries.

"Guess I'll come along," said Paddy mildly. "Luke Quayle might try to kill me if he found me here alone."

Slowly the woodsman strode in among the second growth pines, with the sheriff following at his heels. The posse scattered, and now and again the silence was shattered by an oath, as green needles whipped a man across the face.

PRESENTLY Paddy reached the tree upon which the woodpeckers had been working. Stopping, he laid a hand affectionately upon the gray bark, and waited until the sheriff joined him.

"I can remember when this tree was green," said Paddy. "Looked as though it would outlive a dozen like me; but it won't last much longer now. What with the fire, and the insects and the dry rot, it is only a rotting shell, with a hollow in it large enough to conceal a man."

Something in Paddy's voice caused the sheriff to glance sharply at him, but the woodsman's face was guileless as that of a child. The sheriff's eyes wandered to the

base of the tree. On a patch of bare ground in front of a black hole in the trunk, he saw tracks left by hobnailed boots.

The sheriff's hand dropped to the revolver at his hip, but before he could draw, before he thought to utter a word, the silence was broken by a muffled report. Then something could be heard slipping to the ground, and a pair of booted feet slid forward out of the hole in the dying pine.

"How did you know Quayle was hiding in there, Paddy?" presently asked the sheriff.

"I didn't know for sure, but I thought he might be," replied Paddy, "when the woodpeckers got scared and flew away. I've learned to observe little things through living so long alone."

The sheriff called in his men and gave orders to carry the body of Luke Quayle down to the launch. Then for a while, he lingered near Paddy's cabin.

"The forestry officer said he thought he might be able to arrange for me to sell what pine seedlings I don't need to the government," said Paddy thoughtfully. "I have close to half a million of them."

"I'd sell all of them if I were you, Paddy," said the sheriff. "Even at a cent a piece, you'd make a pile of money."

Paddy gazed across the tops of the second growth pines which rank below rank sloped down the mountain in front of his cabin. His eyes wandered farther, farther still until they rested on the quiet waters of the lake, gleaming now like burnished gold beneath the rays of the setting sun.

"I'll need a good many of the seedlings myself, Sheriff," he said. "I'm going to have the sawmill set up this side of the lake, and log my burned timber. The fire and weather only soured the sap wood. There'll be thousands of feet of sound lumber in the yellow hearts of the pines.

"It's a fool idea," said the sheriff. "You can't make money out of it, what with paying for labor and all."

"Maybe not," said Paddy. "But I've had it in mind ever since the fire. After I've had my six hundred acres cleared, I'm going to have my land planted to seedling pines, and raise me a crop of green gold."

GAME LIFE

By HARVEY KELLY WILSON

AFTER living in a new and unsettled region for six months or more, and seeing the change in the wild animal life, we wonder just what effect the habitation of man has upon that life.

When first we come in and build our cabin by the spring, the fresh game signs are so thick that we expect to see moose, caribou, deer and bear in every glade and thicket, but the days pass and never a fresh sign do we see, within the radius of a half-mile around our home. It seems as if the wild life has all left that region, when we came into it.

Yet as we are crossing a ridge two miles from our cabin at midnight, we hear a crash which comes from a hundred yards or so distant and know that a moose has winded us and has started on his way. We ride through miles of bush and do not see large game of any kind, yet we know that it is all around us, quietly slipping away at our approach. If we want a partridge for our supper we must go a hundred yards or more from the cabin for it. Even then it is a case of hunt-with-care.

Spring comes and we run into dozens of mother partridges with their chicks, and they hiss and run at us with ruffled feathers and extended wings while their chicks are scurrying away in every direction and hiding beneath the grass, leaves and logs. We laugh and try to make friends with them, but they do not want our friendship.

We make the rule when we first locate, that "we will not shoot a gun close around the cabin." After a time we notice a change. We eat supper to the sound of fluttering partridges as they are fluttering in the poplar trees feeding on the buds of poplar trees, which, in the country *north* of fifty-five, grow buds the year around.

We hear them fly and light upon the roof and upon the log pile in front of the door, fifteen feet away. Also, we learn that they are very fond of lettuce, and we are forced to build a tight sapling fence around and over our small garden, if we wish to have some of the said lettuce for ourselves. We find them nesting within twenty feet of the place, and feed them dry bread, and they act like old, gentle setting hens. At strawberry time, we pick from one end of the patch while the mother partridges with their chicks feed on the other.

Going to the spring early one morning, we see where a moose has come in during the night for its drink, as it used to do, before we came there to live. We see moose trails running on each side of the cabin, not over seventy-five yards away, and know that they are passing there each night. While standing outside close by the cabin one night when the dark has settled down like a blanket, we hear a twig, or dry branch snap close by. As we listen without making a move we hear something slipping through the bush.

Upon going out and looking, the next morning, we find that a large moose had passed within thirty feet from where we were standing the night before. There is no doubt in our mind but that he must have winded us, and we wonder why he did not go crashing away, as the one had done when we were crossing the ridge.

We take our ride through the bush and see a wolf as it slips along by the edge of a heavy bush strip. It throws its head up, winds us, and trots off, as we come up. In an open place along the trail we see a cow moose with her calf.

We find that the bear are ranging close in by the cabin. In fact, we have to go and get a hide to tan, now and then, in order to keep our horses on the picket ground, for our live stock does not like bear in any form and will break its picket ropes at the scent of one. Then it is a case of spending a day or so trailing them out.

Noticing this change, in the way that they act when they have become accustomed to us, we can not help but think, that wild animal life likes to range around the habitation of man.

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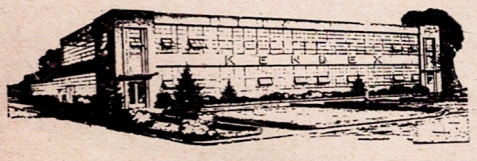

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