Short Stories

May 25¢

A Foreign Legion Novel

Behind The Throne

by

J. D. Newsom

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Short Stories

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 all other countries, $3.30. Price payable in advance. May, 1953. Vol. CCXV, No. 5. Whole Number 1985.

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

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May 1953

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

D. McILWRAITH, *Editor*

Handy Handgun Holsters

MANY handgun owners miss a lot of fun because they have no convenient and handy way to carry this type of sporting arm and as a result never learn to use it properly. Today there are a number of companies and individuals who make pistol and revolver holsters to meet the needs and specialized requirements of anyone who has occasion to tote the one-hand gun.

First, I'd better warn you that in some localities the law frowns on the act of carrying a pistol or revolver, especially so if that arm is carried concealed. So, before you start lugging old Betsie around with you, be sure and check local and State laws. Of course most of us know that a great many of the gun laws are ill-advised and help no one but the crook—but that's another story, and a long one at that. Anyway check the law and secure a pistol permit if necessary.

Now about holsters. Rigs for carrying every kind of handgun are available either as stock items or made to order. Those in the latter category cost no more than regular ones of similar type. For instance, the George Lawrence Company of Portland 4, Oregon, make a line of about 35 different holsters, most of which are available in six grades, depending on decoration and lacing—and besides, they will make any kind of holster ordered.

Back during the days of the cap and ball revolvers (muzzle loaders), holsters were most always made with a flap which covered the gun grip, thus completely incasing the arm. Those guns were quite vulnerable to dampness in the chambers and nipples and a little rain or snow could put them out of business. I still have one of the Service holsters (as well as the revolver) that my grandfather used during the Civil War. It is quite worn and has been repaired several times, but it is usable and gives good gun protection. Today this flap type of holster is fine for the shooter who wants maximum protection for his short-gun. However, they are on the slow side when it comes to getting the pistol or revolver into action.

Before we get away from the earlier days of the flap holster, I might mention that I have often been asked why those old timers, especially those in the cavalry, carried their revolvers with the butt forward, or in case of two guns, one on each hip with the butts forward. The answer is very logical. When carried in such a fashion the gun or guns were easy to grasp and bring into play by either hand—in case one hand and arm was busy with bridle or sword, or put out of commission.

THE most often seen of modern handgun holsters are of the open top type, low cut at the trigger and with the hammer spur above leather—for quick draw. A safety strap is usually installed across the rear of the trigger guard, secured by a glove snap, to keep the gun from bouncing out when running or when on horseback. The best of these holsters are designed to tip the gun handle slightly forward for easier and faster draw.

The low slung holster, looped on a gun or cartridge belt, is perhaps the fastest of all handgun rigs. The holster should be tied down, or otherwise secured, so that it will not hang up and move with the gun.

Next in the speed department, with regular holsters, is the pants belt type. This holster is carried above and slightly forward of the hip and pitched forward at about 30-degrees. Some shooters can handle a gun faster from the cross-draw pants belt holster, which, with a right handed shooter, is carried in front toward the left side and

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pitched to the right at an angle of about 30-degrees. It depends on the individual as to which actually is the fastest. I personally lean towards the cross draw.

SPEAKING of the cross draw, some of the old timers carried a single-action Colt inside the left front waistband. The loading gate was left open to keep the revolver from sliding through. Al Jennings, the famous Oklahoma outlaw who was pardoned by Teddy Roosevelt and later became a preacher, once told me that he often carried a single-action in that manner, but it was so tough on a gun in hot weather that he devised an inside cross-draw holster to protect the gun from perspiration. This rig was hooked to the belt by a steel clip. In the past I have seen at least two Texas rangers carry their sidearms in such a holster, which, incidentally, are still being manufactured by several holster makers and are popular for short barrel detective type revolvers.

Around the farm here, where I do most of my gun testing and experimenting, I have missed a lot of chances at fox and other small varmint class game because of not having a gun handy or not being able to get it out of my pocket and into action fast enough. Also, I have made plenty of clean misses due to poor aim and too much hurry. Lately I have been carrying a Smith & Wesson Chiefs Special (18 ounce revolver in .38 Special caliber) in a little cross draw holster. It's the handiest outfit that I have ever used, and regardless of the short sighting radius with the two-inch barrel, it can be fired with target accuracy.

I have never been particularly fond of the so-called Mexican or Western loop style of holster because, in most cases, they will not stay put and the added leather makes for unnecessary weight. In the same category, but for a slightly different reason, is the Buscadero belt with a holster looped at each side into the five or six inch wide belt. The first of these hot and mostly uncomfortable rigs that I remember of seeing was years ago at a Frontier's Day celebration in Enid, Oklahoma—it created quite a sensation. The Buscadero belt looks good on a movie cowboy hero and they really are handy for exhibition shooting because the holster can be angled to suit the individual in the best possible position for a quick draw.

The ordinary shoulder holster is uncomfortable in hot weather and due to the fact that the gun cannot be instantly grasped in a shooting grip—the hold on the handle has to be slightly shifted as it comes out of the holster—it is not particularly handy for a fast draw. However, the spring type of shoulder holster is convenient for carrying a fairly heavy revolver or automatic pistol under the coat without it showing. I have such a holster made by Herman H. Heiser Saddlery Company, Denver 4, Colorado, that was designed and made for the .45 Service Automatic. It also works very well with the Colt Match Target Woodsman .22 caliber automatic with 4½-inch barrel or with any of the heavy 4½-inch barrel Hi-Standard .22 caliber pistols —say for example, the Field King!

THE Berns-Martin upside-down shoulder holster is a horse of a different color. It is made for the 2-inch barrel guns of the so-called detective type, and it really permits a very fast draw. Another great Berns-Martin quick draw holster is made for belt use. It is of spring clip construction and opens down the front. In use, the shooter moves the gun butt forward to clear the holster and swings the muzzle up for the shot. This is undoubtedly one of the very fastest of the belt holsters!

Some fast draw shooters like a fairly loose fitting holster—I'm not speaking of the spring type. Others prefer a tight or molded fit to the gun. The best, to my notion, is a sort of compromise—a molded fit of fairly heavy leather that has afterwards been softened by a liberal coat of neatsfoot oil. As a matter of fact, a snug fitting holster, when treated with neatsfoot oil will usually take the shape of the gun.

Regardless of the type of holster used, it takes quite a bit of practice to become skilled enough to approach taking full advantage of its potentialities. That's another story that we will mess up at a later date.

A few fine holster makers that I know about, other than those mentioned, are,

(*Continued on page* 128)

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Would you like to earn up to $3 an hour for your spare time? YOU CAN DO IT! It makes no difference whether you are 18 or 80—whether you ever sold anything before or not—whether you have one hour or fifty hours a week to spare. You don't have to be a "salesman" or "saleswoman" because this isn't "selling"—it's more like giving something away. We'll establish you in your own business at our expense! You pay nothing—risk nothing!

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We deliver and collect. You get cash in advance on every order you write and can easily earn the huge cash bonus that increases your earnings by 40%. You can never know how easy it is for you to get a steady extra income until you have the free, complete money-making Kendex outfit. Your ONLY cost is a stamp to mail the coupon. Send it today! You pay nothing now or later. Show the outfit to 5 women. That's all. When you see how eager women will be to give you orders, you'll thank your lucky stars that you answered this advertisement.

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H. Armstrong of Tenn. earned $202 in 9 days. C. Watkins of Oregon sent in 92 orders in one day. Mrs. J. B. Thurmond of Utah has already earned over $800. These exceptional earnings show you the possibilities. Over a million dollars has already been earned by others just like yourself.

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THE PLAINS

By
HENRY
HERBERT
KNIBBS

HERE the painted warrior sleeps,
And the moon a memory keeps,
Through the night,
Of the pony-herd and raid,
And the forays fierce he made,
And the fight.

Nor again the freighter's train,
Drifts its dust across the plain,
In the dawn;
He has clattered down the ways,
Of his wild and cussful days,
He is gone.

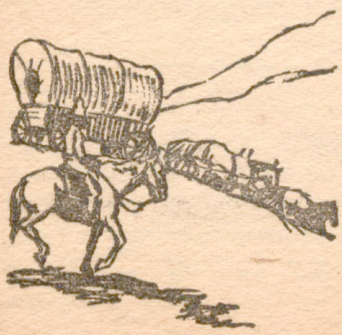
Yet I know a new frontier,
Where the warriors red appear.
As of old;
Where the battle, hunt and dance
Breathe again their old romance,
Bravely told.

Where the prairie grass is green,
And the cowboy, lithe and lean,
Lopes along,
To a girl he's going to meet,
As his pony's nimble feet,
Drum a song.

And along this grassy shore,
Here the cowboy rides no more,
To and fro;
His herd and he have passed,
They have vanished in the vast,
Long ago.

Where the freighter pops his whip,
As the straining cattle slip,
Tug, and wince;
Where he draws his meager pay,
Where he spends it all in play,
Like a prince.

Days of spur and rope and gun,
Days of deviltry and fun,
War, and jest,
Days of peace and days of strife,
And the bold and lusty life,
Of the West.



But mere words, of what avail,
When your feet are on the trail
In the sage;
When this little song you've read,
Mount your horse and go ahead,
Turn a page.

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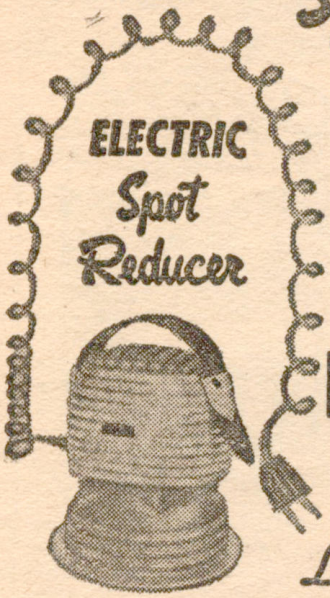

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Take pounds off—keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and turkish baths—MASSAGE!

LIKE a magic wand, the "Spot Reducer" obeys your every wish. Most any part of your body where it is loose and flabby, wherever you have extra weight and inches, the "Spot Reducer" can aid you in acquiring a youthful, slender and graceful figure. The beauty of this scientifically designed Reducer is that the method is so simple and easy, the results quick, sure and harmless. No exercise or strict diets. No steambaths, drugs or laxatives.

With the SPOT REDUCER you can now enjoy the benefits of RELAXING, SOOTHING massage in the privacy of your own home! Simple to use—just plug in, grasp handle and apply over most any part of the body—stomach, hips, chest, neck, thighs, arms, buttocks, etc. The relaxing, soothing massage breaks down FATTY TISSUES, tones the muscles and flesh, and the increased awakened blood circulation carries away waste fat—helps you regain and keep a firmer and more GRACEFUL FIGURE!

Your Own Private Masseur at Home

When you use the Spot Reducer, it's almost like having your own private masseur at home. It's fun reducing this way! It not only helps you reduce and keep slim—but also aids in the relief of those types of aches and pains—and tired nerves that can be helped by massage! The Spot Reducer is handsomely made of light weight aluminum and rubber and truly a beautiful invention you will be thankful you own. AC 110 volts. Underwriters laboratory approved.

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TRY THE SPOT REDUCER 10 DAYS FREE IN YOUR OWN HOME!

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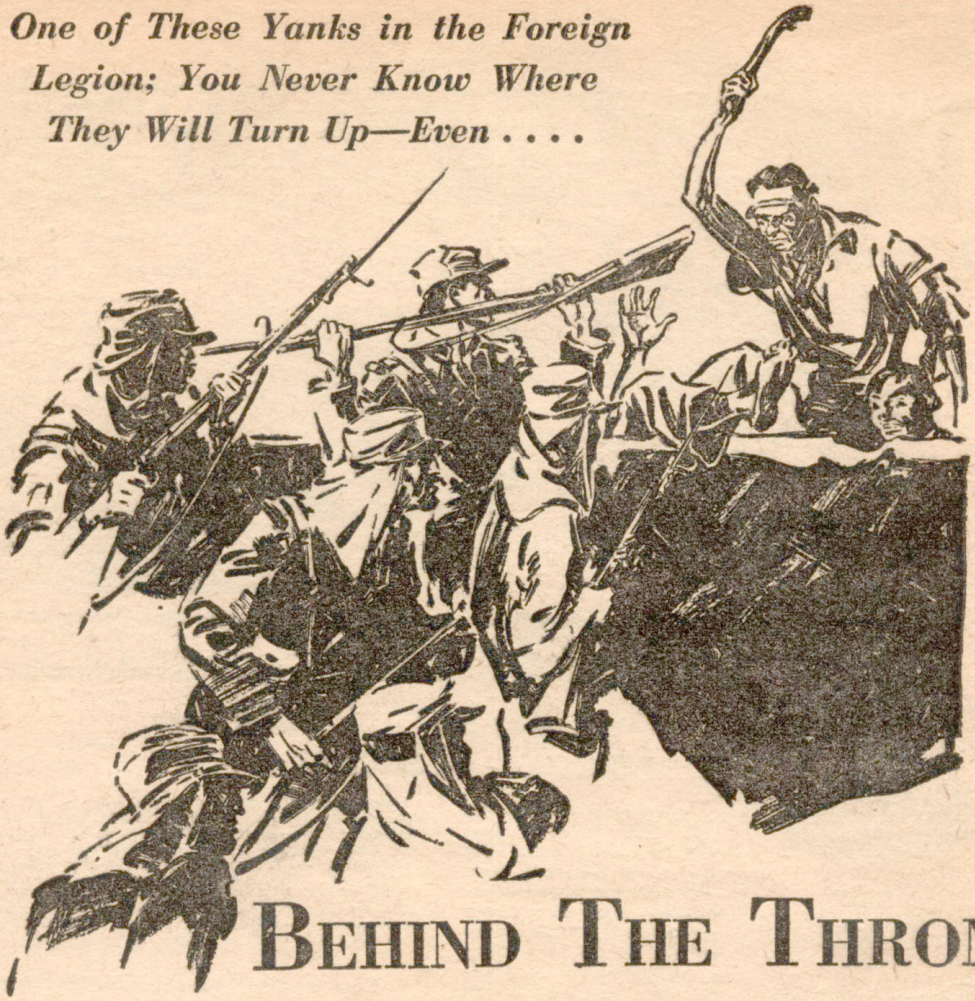
LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

One of These Yanks in the Foreign Legion; You Never Know Where They Will Turn Up—Even . . . .



BEHIND THE THRONE

By J. D. NEWSOM

A DISPASSIONATE observer, noting the size and the temper of the crowd gathered in the rain outside the smoke-blackened walls of the compound, would have called it a riot. Without exaggeration he might have gone so far as to say that it had all the earmarks of a very ugly riot which, at any second, might become a pitched battle with all the odds in favor of the mob.

Several thousand strong it surged against the walls, jostling and milling in the black mud like a great herd of cattle about to stampede. And this compact mass of humanity roared and howled, lashing itself into a blind fury of hate. With fists and sticks it beat upon the gate, which strained at its hinges and cracked beneath the impact.

On the opposite side of the wall, facing the mob, stood a company of the French Foreign Legion, one hundred and fifty mud-bespattered bearded troopers whose stolid behavior contrasted sharply with the wild frenzy of their assailants. Stones, filth and empty bottles hurtled over the wall. Right and left men were being hit. Several of them, knocked unconscious, had to be carried into a one story building on the far side of the compound where the stretcher bearers were busy with bandages and iodine.

And the dispassionate observer, coming unexpectedly upon the scene, would have been perplexed by the fortitude of these soldiers who, although they were equipped with Lebel rifles and machineguns, did not fire a shot in self defense. Their patience was not appreciated by the rioters. From minute to minute they became more violent and aggressive. Emboldened by the lack of opposition they clambered onto the crest of

the wall the better to fling insults and bricks at the Legionnaires. It did not take them long to discover that they were committing a grave tactical error.

Their climb to glory which their supporters greeted with mighty shouts of triumph, aroused the Legionnaires to instant action. Steel-shod gun butts wielded by exasperated experts mashed bare toes to a bloody pulp, broke legs and beat a tatoo on brittle ribs. Back went the rioters into the arms of the mob, and under the feet of the mob, to be trampled into the rain-soaked earth, if they were too dazed to stand up. Their downfall merely fanned the rage of the assailants to a white heat, bringing ever nearer the moment when, like an avalanche, they would pour into the courtyard and smother the Legionnaires beneath sheer weight of numbers.

And a neutral observer, if he set any store upon his personal safety, would have gone swiftly away, bearing in his heart the conviction that he had witnessed an outburst of all the most evil passions to which man is heir: hate and fear and the unbridled, primordial lust for blood. Beneath the low hanging clouds, in the slow warm rain a holocaust was in the making. On both sides of the wall frayed nerves were ready to snap. At any second might come the signal which would hurl man against man and drench the earth with blood.

That, at all events, would have been the opinion of an unprejudiced onlooker. And he would have been utterly wrong. Absolutely and entirely wrong. In fact, any number of mentally sound, normally intelligent government officials, all the way from the Colonial Ministry in Paris to the governor general's staff in Hanoi would have called him a bare-faced distorter of the truth.

The hundred and fifty Legionnaires massed behind the wall had not been sent out on a warlike mission. They were there to serve as an escort to the Mission of Friendship and Good Will dispatched by the French government to the court of His Celestial Majesty, Suyen-Tchen-Doi, supreme ruler by the grace of divers gods of the kingdom of Pnom-Tao.

The purpose of the mission was to conclude a treaty of protectorate which would "bring about a closer understanding between the contracting parties and usher in an era of progress and prosperity." According to the articles which had appeared in the French newspapers the treaty was ardently desired by all the very best people of Pnom-Tao. They had been struggling along, governing themselves after a fashion for several centuries, but they had suddenly realized that what they needed was the help of incorruptible Frenchmen to reorganize the country's finances and lead it toward higher and better things.

IT WAS little short of treason to talk of disorder and bloodshed. Hadn't the governor general, in his latest pronunciamento, issued just before the mission crossed the frontier, asserted that he had documentary evidence of the eagerness with which the people of Pnom-Tao were looking forward to the arrival of the envoys? Can a governor general lie? No, he can not. A governor general is the soul of honor.

Therefore, it was self evident that the subjects of His Celestial Majesty Suyen-Tchen-Doi, gathered in the roadway on that steamy, wet morning, were not really getting ready to massacre the French soldiers. The riot was not a riot at all. Technically every-

thing was quiet along the Pnom-Tao front.

But these considerations were wasted on Captain Rombillac as he stood by the gateway dodging the flying stones. Few if any of his remarks can be translated into English. They can not even be hinted at. If curses were bullets his flow of language would have blown the mob into kingdomcome.

Rombillac was mad and indignant. His eyes were bloodshot and his lips, beneath the close cropped black mustache, were drawn as thin and tight as a string. Blue veins stood out in lumps on his forehead. His men called him "Le Taureau," the Bull, and the name fitted. Big, deep chested, thick waisted, everything about him betokened immense reserves of power and energy. Half measures and compromises were foreign to his nature. He didn't even compromise with the weather. Though his uniform was soaked with rain and daubed with mud, he strangled inside a stiff collar four inches high, and his hands were encased in leather gloves which gave them the appearance of young sledge hammers.

"If one more man is hit," he told Lieutenant Grammont, "orders or no orders, I'm going to open fire. Listen to the hyenas! They send us here to drill some sense into these people's heads, and then, by all the thunders of hell, they tie our hands behind our backs and forbid us to protect our own hides without consulting a mealy-mouthed civilian who—"

Raising a loaded cane above his head, he brought it down with a crash on a yellow hand which was clawing at the top of the gate. The hand vanished. A splotch of blood dribbled down the woodwork.

"Who," Rombillac went on, "won't be happy until he gets his throat cut from ear to ear."

GRAMMONT was young and impressionable. He had a great deal of admiration for his chief, but he was shocked to hear him refer to Monsieur Anatole Fauchon as a mealy-mouthed civilian. Monsieur Fauchon was the head of the Mission of Good Will to the court of Pnom-Tao. Specially appointed by the Minister of the Colonies to handle the negotiations, he had the reputation of being one of the most adroit and subtle diplomats in the service. At that very moment he was closeted with the king's representative. He knew quite well what was happening, and if he chose to ignore the disturbance the outlook could not be as black as it seemed to be.

"It looks bad," admitted Grammont, clearing his throat, "but perhaps—"

A deafening clamor drowned him out. Twenty yards away, the natives had torn a ragged V-shaped hunk of masonry out of the wall. As the stones fell inward a seething mass of faces and arms and bare chests filled the gap. Projectiles poured in upon the Legionnaires. An earthenware jar struck one trooper full in the mouth. Another man's cheek was sliced open by a bamboo shaft with a razor-sharp tip. Squeezed out of the mob like pips of a lemon a score of frenzied half naked coolies leaped through the waist-high breach.

A revolver shot cracked sharply above the uproar. A corporal lurched sideways and collapsed. As he fell a native leaped upon him and slashed off his head with one stroke of a short broad-bladed sword.

For a second disaster stared the Legionnaires in the face, then Rombillac swept half a platoon together and led it into action.

"Don't shoot the precious angels," he roared. "Bayonets! Let 'em have it!"

A battering ram struck the invaders. It drove them back against the wall, and there they died squirming on the end of the slender steel blades. The survivors went back through the gap much faster than they had come in. The white men, they were appalled to discover, were not as helpless as they had been led to believe.

"Over their heads!" ordered Rombillac. "And not too high . . . one volley . . . Fire!"

Twenty rifles spat fire. The Legionnaires' marksmanship was poor. The volley cleared

the breach, swept it bare. When the smoke cleared not a man was to be seen on the far side of the wall.

"Shove some stones in that hole," Rombillac went on. "No," he checked himself, "leave it. Lieutenant Grammont!" his foghorn of a voice carried all the way across the compound. "Put a machinegun over here. I'll give these rascals good will and friendship! I'll give 'em hell! If they try any more—"

The words strangled in his throat.

In front of him stood a short, dapper Anamite orderly dressed in a spotlessly white suit, black bow tie and white canvas shoes. Over his glossy head he carried an umbrella.

"Eh?" ejaculated Rombillac, scowling down upon the neat little man, "Where did you come from?"

"Monsieur Anatole Fauchon," said the Anamite in a sing-song voice, "requests Captain Rombillac to present himself at once in the council room."

"He wants to see me?" echoed Rombillac. "Now? While all this is going on?"

"At once," smiled the Anamite. "If you please."

A dark flush suffused Rombillac's countenance and he appeared to be breathing with considerable difficulty, but he remained ominously calm. He snapped a string of orders at Lieutenant Grammont, gave one last look at the machingun which had been put in position in front of the breach, then he cocked his limp sunhelmet over one ear and swaggered across the courtyard, splashing mud up the back of the Anamite's legs.

THERE are two sides to every question. Knotty questions have been known to have even more. When they have enough sides they cease to be questions and become perplexing problems.

Pnom-Tao was a Grade A problem. It had so many facets that it resembled the Einsteinian concept of space; it went around in a giddy circle and came back to bite its own tail, which is an unpleasant thing for any self respecting problem to do.

A man like Rombillac could not be expected to grasp its intricacies. In the eyes of his men he might appear all powerful and awe inspiring, but in last analysis he was only a company commander of the Foreign Legion, and a not particularly distinguished one at that. The inner workings of chancelleries were as a closed book to him. A book, moreover, which he was not at all anxious to open.

Of course he knew enough to know that the official explanation of the invasion of Pnom-Tao was undiluted nonsense dished up by civilians for civilian consumption.

The facts he had gleaned were slightly different.

Pnom-Tao was a small, independent kingdom on the northern frontier of Tonkin. Because it was cut off from the outside world by jungle-choked gorges and hills set on edge like the teeth of a comb, it had escaped attention in the eighteen-eighties when France and China were signing peace pacts and sending out boundary commissions.

Time and changing conditions had made it more accessible. Explorers, geologists and plain business men had visited the land beyond the hills. When they came back, if they came back, they talked excitedly about the enormous wealth stored up in the Pnom-Tao area. It was stiff with vanadium and tungsten, manganese and chrome, not to mention uranium and lead.

But nothing came of all the talk. The country did not want to be developed. Squarely in the path of progress stood the king. He was much too sacred to have any direct dealings with outlanders. His own people worshipped him as a living god. No white man had ever been granted the privilege of meeting him face to face.

Concession hunters, scrambling for an audience, were halted by Councillor Ariano Thuong, the king's chief advisor and official spokesman. There they stuck.

Thuong was a match for the wiliest concession hunter in creation. Himself an outlander, the offspring of a Macao Portuguese roulette croupier and a Cantonese mother, his position of power at Pnom-Tao was due to the sharpness of his wits and his ability, amounting almost to genius, to play off one faction against another. What he did not know about the weakness of the human race was not worth knowing.

His fame had spread far beyond the borders of the kingdom. Even Rombillac, chasing rebels through the Bac-nahm jungle, had heard of him. From Singapore to Shanghai,

wherever prospectors foregather, Thuong's name was a by-word for slipperiness, cunning and deceit. He accepted presents and bribes, and when his victims had been squeezed dry, they discovered that their presence at Pnom-Tao was no longer desirable. Those who refused to leave and tried to fight for what they called their rights, disappeared and were heard of no more.

One firm, however, had been more tenacious than its competitors. Its full name was the Societe d'Exploitation Coloniale. On the Paris Bourse it was called Sodecol—one of the most important concerns of its kind in France. It had a finger in every pie from Moroccan railroad pies to New Caledonian nickel pies. Its resources were almost unlimited; it could afford to wait.

Monsieur Justin Desmarest, the local agent, had the patience of Job, and a most unbusinesslike faith in his fellow men. He bribed Thuong in the usual way. Thuong made promises which he did not attempt to keep. Desmarest persevered. He did not argue, he did not recriminate, he could not do enough for his dear friend Councillor Thuong. More money changed hands. The sums grew so large that, for the sake of appearances, they were called state loans. Desmarest asked for no guarantees except his friend's signature and a promise to refund the loans at ten per cent compound interest. A signature meant nothing to Thuong. The money lending business became so brisk that Desmarest opened an office in the heart of the city, ran the French flag to the top of the mast planted in the yard, and imported a staff of bookkeepers from French Indo-China.

Then came the day of reckoning, the day when Sodecol presented its bill. The king, who had kept aloof from such mundane matters, was compelled to raise new taxes to meet the interest on the loans.

Riots ensued. Neither the king nor Thuong could keep the people from expressing their hatred of the foreign usurers. Or so they said. But Sodecol wanted its money. It became more insistent and the inevitable tragedy occurred. A wild mob broke into the Sodecol compound, wrecked the offices and murdered the staff of clerks and bookkeepers. By great good luck Monsieur Desmarest had been spared. When the outbreak occurred, he happened to be in Hanoi, under the doctor's orders, recovering from an attack of liver trouble.

Eighteen lives had been lost. Most of them were Anamites and half-breeds, but that did not matter. French prestige was at stake. When French prestige is at stake something is bound to happen. Within twenty-four hours Rombillac and his Legionnaires were slogging down the trail leading to Pnom-Tao. With them went Messrs. Fauchon and Desmarest. The latter had recovered miraculously from his liver complaint. Because he knew so much about the country he had been appointed official advisor to the Mission of Good Will and Friendship.

ROMBILLAC'S orders were vague and ambiguous. On the one hand he was instructed to be firm and resolute in his treatment of the natives, on the other he was warned not to use force "as a means of aggression" except as a last resort. Furthermore, he was urged to bear in mind "the essentially unwarlike character of the mission," and told to make his actions conform "in the broadest possible sense with Monsieur Fauchon's appreciation of the political situation."

This strange mess of contradictions and qualifying clauses, if it meant anything, meant that headquarters was intent upon shifting the burden of responsibility onto Rombillac's shoulders. If the mission achieved its purpose he would receive no credit, if it failed he would make a convenient scapegoat.

But Rombillac did not stop to ask any questions. The one fact which he clearly grasped was that he was to escort the mission to Pnom-Tao.

Ten days later he marched into the city at the head of his company and occupied the wrecked buildings of the Sodecol compound. Ever since then the civilian delegates had been closeted with Councillor Thuong, and while they talked and talked, the temper of the townspeople had grown steadily worse. At first they had been content to stand and stare, then to stare and shout, and at last they had got completely out of hand.

Seared in Rombillac's mind as he brushed the Anamite orderly aside and burst into the

conference room was the knowledge that two of his men had been killed that morning and fifteen others wounded. He was all set and primed to tell the conferees a few home truths.

And the conferees were eager to meet him more than half way.

At the head of the table stood Monsieur Anatole Fauchon, the ace of the Colonial Ministry, a bearded and bewhiskered gentleman with a big belly thrust importantly forward. In the lapel of his morning coat he wore an orchid. His eyeglasses were fastened to a broad ribbon of black silk which passed behind one ear and was looped around his neck. Holding his left arm behind his back he pointed with his right straight at Rombillac.

Beside him sat Desmarest, sharp-featured, clean-shaven and sallow, leaning tensely forward, rattling a pencil against his teeth while he watched Rombillac with a look of venomous hatred in his eyes.

On Fauchon's left sat Councillor Thuong, soft and flashy, ageless, a boneless mound of flesh stuffed inside an embroidered gown of yellow silk. No neck, heavy jowls, a moist, loose-lipped mouth, and dull eyes opaque as those of a dead herring. His pudgy fingers were locked across his stomach. His face was a blank—a yellow mask stripped of all feeling and emotion.

"I must ask you for an explanation—" began Fauchon. His manner was imperious, but the effect was spoiled because he had to shout to make himself heard above the uproar. "I am dismayed by your unwarranted behavior, Captain Rombillac. At such a time, when we are striving to reach a friendly understanding, you, by your rash and abusive methods, have jeopardized the success of our negotiations!"

Rombillac took off his sunhelmet and put it down very gently on the table. He peeled off his gloves and placed them beside the sunhelmet. He could not trust himself to speak.

"Deliberately," Fauchon went on, "unjustifiably, you opened fire on the inhabitants of Pnom-Tao. Such incidents are not only deplorable, they are intolerable. I repeat; intolerable! You have done your country and the cause of peace a singular disfavor!"

Rombillac found his tongue.

"You damn fool!" he said. "You poor damn fool!"

"How dare you!" cried Fauchon, staggering as though he had been hit in the face. "You are not addressing one of your Legionnaires, Monsieur the Captain, you are speaking to the senior member of this mission. In the presence of our guest, Councillor Thuong, I must ask you—"

"I'll deal with him in just one minute," promised Rombillac. "You're the man I'm talking to now." Suddenly his calmness deserted him. "Go over to that window and look out," he thundered. "Take a look at that crowd. I've lost seventeen men in one morning, and you expect me to do nothing! Sacred name of God, do you think I'm going to allow my men to be killed off piecemeal to please you and Thuong?"

"If you kept your men under cover—"

"Cover!" bellowed Rombillac, hitting the table with his clenched fist. "Why don't you wake up? One massacre occurred less than a month ago. If you're not careful there'll be another one. While you argue and haggle the whole city's up in arms against us. That mob must be dispersed, otherwise I can not guarantee your safety. Get that idea fixed firmly in your head, Monsieur Fauchon. Hold onto it. It's simple and straightforward, and it happens to be the unvarnished truth."

"I will not argue with you, Monsieur!" sputtered Fauchon.

"Don't worry," shouted Rombillac. "I'm not arguing. You wanted to see me—you sent for me—here I am—and now you'll

listen to me for a while. There's been too much palaver since we reached Pnom-Tao, and nothing to show for it except riots and bloodshed. You were sent here to make this king sign a treaty—our treaty—dictated by us to avenge the lives of eighteen defenseless civilians murdered in this very house. Have you seen the king? No. Has he signed your treaty? He has not. You're playing straight into the hands of your dear friend, Councillor Thuong."

FAUCHON had lost all trace of his pompous official manner. Obscene gargling sounds came from the back of his throat. The muscles of his face twitched and jerked spasmodically, and a lock of gray hair curled down over his eyes. He brushed it away with an impatient gesture, and as often as he drove it back it fell forward again with maddening persistence. Before long he was completely disheveled.

"This is an infamous outrage!" he cackled. "I did not ask you to come here to air your personal views. I want an explanation which will satisfy not only me, but Councillor Thuong. Your orders—"

"My orders don't compel me to turn the other cheek," Rombillac retorted. "Now I want an explanation too; I want to know why the councillor can't control that mob. If he can't control it I'll have to hold him as a hostage until his people cool off."

A faint glimmer of life shot through Thuong's eyes. His loose lips moved, but before he could utter a sound Fauchon, nobly supported by Desmarest, flew to his rescue. Rombillac, they swore, was overstepping his authority, meddling with high matters he knew nothing about. Instead of bayonetting and shooting the unfortunate natives who had broken into the compound, he ought to have placed them under arrest! If anything went wrong he, Rombillac, would be solely to blame. The conference had been on the verge of a successful climax when he had resorted to such brutal methods to repress a harmless demonstration.

"And I can only hope," concluded Fauchon, pawing at his hair, "that the Councillor will not allow this unfortunate incident to interfere with our plans."

After a series of heaves and grunts Thuong spoke in a wheezing voice which seemed to bubble up through layers of soft fat.

"This is what your promises are worth. While you talk peace your soldiers make war. They stab and kill. They—" he slid a sidelong glance at Rombillac — "they threaten to arrest me; the representative of His Highness King Suyen-Tchen-Doi! And this is what you call laying the foundations of a Protectorate arrived at by mutual consent." He gave a low chuckle. "It is all very amusing, I must say. Very amusing. It gives us a foretaste of what we may expect if—"

"Not 'if'," protested Fauchon in his most persuasive manner. "An unfortunate incident has occurred. We acknowledge it in all sincerity. It will not be repeated, that I promise."

A puzzled expression swept across Rombillac's face.

"You're promising too much," he rasped. "I am responsible for the safety of this mission. Every time my men are attacked I'll open fire. I'm not hunting trouble, but the rioting has got to stop or I'll have to take whatever steps the military situation may demand."

"So," murmured Thuong, "you are uneasy, Captain. You do not feel strong enough, with all your men and your machineguns, to stop an unarmed rabble."

Rombillac placed both fists on the edge of the table, and bent over until he seemed about to fall on top of the councillor.

"Inside this compound there are one hundred and fifty soldiers," he explained. "Outside there's a mob ten thousand strong. I'm taking no chances."

"You were not asked to come to Pnom-Tao," Thuong pointed out. "Your presence in this sacred city," the words hissed between his wet, quivering lips, "is an insult to my master. You can not expect his people to swallow such an insult without some form of protest. You are not our friends—you are conquerors, using brute force to subdue us. For the present we oppose brute force with inertia. For the present. Any further use of force will likewise be opposed by any and every means until we reach an agreement which meets with His Majesty's approval and safeguards his sovereign rights. That is all I have to say."

He gathered together the papers lying be-

fore him on the table and, grunting, heaved himself to his feet.

"You're not going!" protested Fauchon. "Surely not! *Mon cher ami,* I agree with everything you say. Our intentions—"

"You have my terms," said Thuong. "They are final. But," he stared at Rombillac with malevolent fury, "but for the insults that have been heaped upon me I demand reparation. Through me His Majesty has been insulted, and in his name also I demand reparation."

"A misunderstanding—" began Fauchon.

"I want," Thuong cut him short, "a full apology in writing, signed by the members of this commission, the removal of this officer, and a sum of one hundred thousand piasters for distribution among the dependents of your victims."

"You want what?" inquired Rombillac, his eyes threatening to pop out of his head. "An apology? Why, you yellow porpoise, I'll stand you up against a wall and put twelve bullets into you by way of apology! Your terms are final, are they? Damn your impudence! If you're not careful I'll march up to your king's palace and dig him out at the bayonet point, like a snail out of its shell."

His threats did not perturb Thuong, who, turning his back upon him, said to Fauchon, "Until this officer has been removed I will have nothing more to do with you."

Gripping the hilt of his sword Rombillac bore down upon the native, but Desmarest intervened, barring his way. Alone of the four men in that room he retained a certain degree of self-control.

"Captain Rombillac," he said sharply, "you have done quite enough damage for one day. Don't interfere with matters you do not understand. Stay where you are!"

Rombillac stopped. He was, literally, suffocating with indignation. French officials fawning upon a rascal who ought to have been shot, taking orders from him! It was like a nightmare.

"The utmost will be done to give you satisfaction," he heard Fauchon saying. "I'll send a dispatch down to headquarters this very afternoon. You are sure it will be safe for my messenger to leave the city?"

"That is for His Majesty to decide," snapped Thuong. "I think I can promise a safe-conduct. But I will have no more dealing with you until this officer has been removed and the indemnity paid. I bid you good day."

He waddled slowly out of the room and shut the door with a bang.

FAUCHON leaned against the wall, pressing his hands to his heart.

"I hope you are pleased with yourself," he told Rombillac. "You have ruined everything—wrecked all our plans. A hundred thousand piasters, that is what you are costing us on top of everything else! And even that may do no good. The Minister will hear of this, Monsieur, I promise you!"

Slowly Rombillac came out of his trance. Shaking his head, he stared from Fauchon to Desmarest, and back again to Fauchon.

"It's beyond me," he confessed. "Tell the minister whatever suits you best. I'll have a few things to tell headquarters myself."

"You'll have to go," shrugged Fauchon. "Yes. It may sound harsh, but that can't be helped. We must conciliate Thuong. He is indispensable."

"Absolutely!" agreed Desmarest. "I've been here a good many years, and I can tell you that if Thuong turns against us we might as well get out."

"So you see," summed up Fauchon. "There's nothing else to be done; you'll have to go, and I'll have to write some kind of an apology."

"Wait!" ordered Rombillac. "Before we go any farther, will you please sit down and tell me exactly what is happening. I thought I had a general idea of the situation, but I'm at sea. Either you are a pair of traitors, or I'm growing soft headed. We're not talking the same language. My men are being slaughtered while you kiss that old murderer's toes. There's something wrong somewhere. Let's get it straightened out."

"The secrecy of the negotiations—" began Fauchon.

"Be damned to that!" barked Rombillac. "I want facts, and I want them quick and fast. If I don't get them I'll have to put the pair of you under arrest and settle this business in my own way. Take it or leave it."

"You can't intimidate me!" cried Desmarest. "I have nothing to say."

Rombillac glowered at him.

"I want you to shut up. Fauchon, you might as well begin at the beginning."

"There is nothing much to tell," sighed Fauchon.

After that, pacing about the room with his hands clasped behind his back, he talked steadily for three-quarters of an hour. Indeed, he talked so much, and he talked so well, and he went off on so many side tracks that Rombillac was hard put to keep up with him.

By degrees, however, a few more facts about the Pnom-Tao problem came to the surface.

Several other great powers, Rombillac learned, were "interested" in the country's untapped supplies of raw materials. These great powers had to be considered. If they suspected France of trying to annex Pnom-Tao by force of arms they might have some nasty things to say. Therefore, war and warlike acts were tabu.

The object of the game was to convince the outside world that the king had begged his great white neighbor to help him put his house in order. Alone he could not suppress the rebel bands which had massacred Sodecol's employees. He needed help, he needed protection.

Furthermore, Sodecol had to be considered, also. It had loaned the treasury a lot of money, but the treasury was empty. Sodecol was willing to strike a bargain: it would waive all its claims in exchange for the exclusive privilege of developing Pnom-Tao's natural resources.

And that was where Councillor Thuong fitted in. He had to be conciliated. In cruder terms he had to be bribed before he would consent to induce his royal master to surrender his sovereign rights.

Thuong's price was five million piasters gold. Fauchon and Desmarest had been trying to make him cut his figure, but he refused to trim it down by so much as a single sou.

"If we had refused," cried Fauchon, stopping in front of Rombillac and flinging out his hands, "do you know what he would have done—flooded the world with appeals for help and compelled us to get out. We've got to make use of him whether we like it or not. Don't you think I know he can control those crowds if he wants to? Of course he can! But he's got us. What could you do with your hundred and fifty men against ten thousand?"

"Fight," said Rombillac.

"And lose everything!" protested Desmarest.

"All I have to lose is my life," Rombillac exploded, "but you and your damned Sodecol you'd be losing a few million francs. That's much more serious. So you grovel at the feet of this greasy, treacherous swine! And you're ready to hand him five million piasters of French tax payers' money to get you your monopoly."

"No personalities!" begged Fauchon. "Let us face this crisis with cool deliberation."

Rombillac walked over to the window and stood there for a long moment, staring at the throng in the roadway. Its temper had changed since Thuong had gone away. The noise was beginning to subside. The compact, surging mass of humanity was breaking up into little groups which drifted away through the rain.

"We can't afford to waste a minute," Fauchon was saying. "I'll have to concoct some sort of an apology for Thuong and write to the governor general for permission—"

Rombillac swung around.

"I'm going to write a few dispatches myself," he rasped. "This is where we part company. I'll do my duty as I see fit. When you order me to arrest this confounded king and stick his nose into your treaty I'll get him for you. And if one line of apology is sent to Thuong I'll take full charge of negotiations on my own responsibility. And that's final. Think it over."

He was out of the room before either of the civilians could think of an adequate rejoinder.

II

THE room, a few weeks earlier, had housed the bookkeeping staff of Sodecol's Pnom-Tao branch, but a swarm of stocky yellow men, gone mad with fear and hate, had made a shambles of that quiet office.

They piled the desks and the ledgers and the files in the courtyard and set them on fire. And into the flames they slung the bodies of the chief bookkeeper and his half caste clerks.

Nothing escaped the rioters' fury of destruction—nothing except a wall calendar issued by the Manila agent of an American concern manufacturing electric refrigerators. The pictorial portion of the calendar showed a radiant girl in full evening dress gazing ecstatically at the porcelain cabinet large enough to accommodate a couple of full grown steers. Below were the words: Only the best is good enough for the world's most discriminating homemaker, the American woman.

In an idle moment the bookkeeper had adorned the world's most discriminating homemaker with a monocle and a mustache.

Why the rioters had not torn the calendar off the wall and hurled it onto the bonfire is a question which can not be answered. The fact remains that it was left untouched. For a time it stood guard over the desolate room, where the rain and the steamy sunshine poured in through smashed window panes, and yellow-bellied spiders spun their webs in shadowy corners.

Then the stillness was broken by Sergeant Fyodor Kostakov, who stuck his head in at the door and said, "Here, you hyenas, this is your billet. The roof doesn't leak. You're in luck," and No. 3 Platoon of the Fifth Company 111th Battalion of the Foreign Legion took possession of the place.

They filled it with mud and tobacco smoke, damp straw and blasphemous curses. And Legionnaire Frank Dawson found the calendar. It came into his possession after an argument with Legionnaire Volente. When the argument ended Volente had a bloody nose and a sprained wrist; Dawson had the calendar.

It was a case of love at first sight. For ten years he had not given America a thought, but that picture of an eminently pure and wholesome girl gaping at him from a bullet-scarred wall in a remote corner of the Tonkin bowled him over. It reminded him of his misspent youth, and endowed the home he had left without a twinge of regret with a glamor it had never possessed.

Off duty, by candlelight in the small hours of the morning, he would prop the calendar against his knapsack and study the picture until he knew every detail by heart, from the number of milk bottles in the refrigerator to the color of the girl's shoe strings. He became so homesick that for a week he did not draw a sober breath.

Any other man suffering from a similar affliction would have been cured in short order by the combined action of his roommates. Dawson, however, was too hefty and pugnacious to be cured in that fashion. He stood six foot two in his bare feet; two hundred and ten pounds of brute strength, speed and stamina. He had a long, solemn countenance with a protruding underlip, slate-gray eyes, and beetling brows which met in a peak above the bridge of his broken nose.

Men of his temperament, as a rule, do not waste much time in idle speculation. When they want something they go out and get it. Dawson wanted to go home and marry a beautiful girl who would stand all day in front of an electric refrigerator with her hands clasped in a gesture of adoration. But he was not at liberty to obey that impulse. For one thing he had no money, for another the military authorities would have looked upon his departure as a personal insult.

His case seemed hopeless until one afternoon, while he helped shore up the gate which the rioters were trying to pull to pieces, inspiration dawned upon him. At the time he kept his thoughts to himself, but as soon as the last beam of timber had been put in place, he made a bee-line for his billet. He did not walk, he ran.

"Where's the fire?" inquired Corporal Vaardeman, squatting on the straw, picking lice out of the seams of his shirt.

"I'll soon show you," Dawson informed him. "If I'm right—and I know I'm right—there's going to be hell to pay around here in a little while."

"That is to be expected," Vaardeman agreed placidly. "Everybody can tell that

these natives will make plenty of trouble, but that is not a reason why you should come in here and fall over my legs."

"It ain't the natives," swore Dawson. "It's me. I am going to make trouble. You bet. Shut up for a minute and let me do some figuring."

"You speak to me like that," threatened the corporal, "and you will do five days' extra duty."

"You'll shut your face," retorted Dawson, "or I'll wring your neck. You're only a corporal, Vaardeman—but do you know what I am today? Guess!"

Vaardeman's first guess was that Dawson had taken leave of his senses. Such cases occurred from time to time. In Morocco he had had to deal with a Czech trooper, who, after a long period of brooding and gloom, had appeared naked on the parade ground and had tried to convince the garrison commandant that he was a soap bubble as light as air. Dawson appeared to be going the same way.

"What are you?" inquired Vaardeman, trying to gain time while the troopers in the room grinned expectantly. "Is it Napoleon maybe?"

"Guess again?"

"A pink lizard?"

"I'm a civilian!" shouted Dawson. "Get that, Corporal? A civilian. Positively! I should worry about your five days' extra duty. Don't bother me. Pick some more vermin out of that shirt of yours while I work this out in black and white."

From his haversack he drew the calendar, his military booklet and a pencil stub two inches long. Then he hunkered down on the straw and buried himself in a mass of dates and figures more intricate than a problem in higher mathematics.

He had joined the Legion for a period of five years, but every prison sentence he had incurred had to be tacked on to the length of time he was bound to serve before he could claim his discharge. And his prison record was long, varied and colorful. His military livret, which contained a detailed account of his army career, was spotted with entries in red ink calling attention to the nature of his offenses, the date, the sentence, and the penal camp to which he had been committed. He had paid enforced visits to most of the prisons in North Africa and Indo-China. Indeed, he was so much at home in prison that he considered the routine life of the Legion soft to the point of mushiness. A bed to sleep on, twenty-five centimes a day spending money, and a normal ration allowance were luxuries which aroused his contempt.

His sentence ranged from ninety-one days to eighteen months, but over and above these periods, were the additional days and weeks of "rabiot" wished upon him by the prison authorities for infractions of the penal code. All these had to be added up and made to fit into a fiendish system of months, some with thirty days, some with thirty-one, not to mention leap years.

DAWSON did not finish his calculations that day, nor the next, nor the day after that. He worked in spasms, covering the backs of envelopes and odd scraps of paper with rows of figures while other men slept the sleep of utter exhaustion. Every so often he had to drop his pencil, grab his rifle and hurry to his battle post. It made continuity of thought rather difficult, but his perseverance was rewarded at last. The right answer popped into his mind on the morning of the fourth day of his travail while the rioters were swarming through the breech in the wall. He bayonetted three with machine-like efficiency, and shot a couple more when Rombillac ordered volley fire, but his mind was on other matters.

As soon as comparative quiet returned and his squad was placed in reserve, he hurried back to his labors.

"I've got it!" he told the world ten minutes later. "Today's the eighteenth of March. Here's the calendar to prove it. I ought to have been discharged on the third. Corporal Vaardeman, you lousy Dutchman, I am fifteen days overdue. I'm being illegally detained. I'm through!"

"Sure," agreed Vaardeman, trying to humor the madman, "but don't forget you go on duty at half past four."

"Nothing doing!" declared Dawson. "I'm a civilian. Fight your own wars. Nobody's going to bounce any more stones off my nut. I'm going home." He flourished the calendar at arm's length. "To the United States of America!"

And he went on to describe the amazing delight which awaited him in South Philadelphia.

"You mean," broke in Vaardeman who was slow and painstaking, "you won't go on duty at half past four?"

Dawson lay on his back, waving his long legs in the air, sprinkling his neighbors with gobs of mud.

"I will not go on duty at half past four," he sang off-key. "No more so-ho-holdering for me! I had a hunch before we left the base camp that my time was up, but that specimen of a cow of a regimental records clerk up and died of dysentery. I said—"

"Do you refuse to obey an order?" persisted Vaardeman.

"Can't you take no for an answer?" Dawson's solemn countenance relaxed into a broad, happy smile. "No!" he added at the top of his lungs. "I will not go on duty. You can protect me from those wild Indians when the shooting starts. I'll hide under the straw. Me, handle a rifle again? Never! I'm a pacifist—a one hundred per cent civilian. The sight of blood—"

"You're under arrest," snapped Vaardeman. "Come along with me and tell your story to Sergeant Kostakov."

"And won't I hand him an earful!" promised Dawson, collecting his dirty bits of paper, his booklet and his calendar. "He can't bulldoze me; the law's on my side."

So they went out into the warm, slow rain and found Sergeant Fyodor Kostakov wandering about in the courtyard waiting for the bugler to call out the new guard.

Vaardeman stated his case as concisely as possible. Dawson lounged about with his hands in his pockets and his sunhelmet pushed back onto the nape of his neck.

The sergeant showed great restraint. He endured Dawson's nonchalant conduct for fully half a minute, then he blew up.

"Stand at attention, you jail-bird! Take those hands out of your pockets! I'll teach you to show proper respect. Is it that you have gone mad?"

"I think he has," hazarded Vaardeman. "For the last few days he—"

"That's not it!" cried Kostakov. "He's drunk. I can smell it on his breath, the foul species of a pig. Lock him up. Take him away—out of my sight. I have never known a man like him. He would find alcohol on a desert island!"

"Whoa!" ordered Dawson, who was having the happiest time he had had in years. "You are not talking to No. 83,751 Soldier Dawson Franklin. You are talking to Monsieur Dawson, a free citizen of the United States. I demand justice. All the facts are right here in my hand. Permit me to bring them to your attention. I joined this army on the—"

"Swine!" ejaculated the sergeant, raising his fist.

Dawson's face grew as hard as flint.

"Hit me," he urged. "Go ahead, but don't forget you'll be hitting a civilian, and when you're through I'll knock your teeth down your throat. You'd better take me to the lieutenant. He's a sensible man; he can count up to ten, so they say."

Kostakov decided that it might be unwise to resort to physical violence. There were other ways of taming such bad characters. Unclenching his fist he ran his fingers through his beard.

"So it's the lieutenant you want to see," he grunted. "Better be careful, my boy. He won't stand for any nonsense, the lieutenant won't. I don't know what your game is, but unless you've got a fool-proof case I'd leave him alone. Let's have a look at those papers of yours."

One look was enough. He could not make head or tail of the endless rows of figures. Nevertheless, they impressed him very much.

"You claim you ought to have been discharged on the third," he commented. "Is that right? Well—hm—I can't tell. It'll have to be gone into."

"You bet," Dawson agreed heartily, "let's leap into it."

"Now? With the guard due to fall in in fifteen minutes? It's absolutely contrary to regulations."

"There ain't nothing in Rules and Regulations about civilians," retorted Dawson. "Not a word. If I killed a man now it would be murder. Just think of that, will you?"

Kostakov clawed at his beard. Nothing would have pleased him better than to lock Dawson in the cellar, and leave him there until he cooled off—but there were those rows of figures to be considered.

"C'est bon," he grumbled at last. "Don't say I didn't give you plenty of rope. You'll be court-martialed for this."

Dawson shrugged his shoulders.

"That wouldn't be anything to write home about, but I've been to my last court-martial." A far away look crept into his eyes. "Sergeant, I am going home! I'm only a Legionnaire today; tomorrow I shall be a captain of industry."

Kostakov's answer was unprintable.

TRAMPING through the mud he led the way to the orderly room. The sound of angry voices greeted them as they crossed the threshold. The noise came from Captain Rombillac's private office. In the outer room two clerks sat and squirmed on the edges of their chairs.

"It's been going on for the last couple of hours," one of them told Kostakov in the awed whisper. "Fit to bring the house down. It's the captain. Lieutenant Grammont is in there with him."

"Any idea what the trouble is?" inquired the sergeant, mopping his forehead which had suddenly become moist and clammy.

"Something went wrong at the conference. God knows what. He's frothing at the mouth—breaking things. Messages keep coming in all the time from Fauchon. He's been writing his own answers. In there," he jerked his thumb in the direction of the private office, "the floor's ankle deep in paper, like a snow storm."

Words and disjointed phrases came from the adjoining room.

"Crapulous politicians . . . A few bullets . . . resignation . . . get in touch with headquarters . . . a free hand . . . make this king understand . . . dirty moneylenders . . ."

Kostakov nudged Dawson's elbow.

"We'll come back," he promised. "The captain's busy. I'll see you get a hearing tomorrow morning."

But Dawson did not budge by so much as an inch. During the course of his army career he had devised many startling ways of bedeviling his chiefs. Never before, however, had such a splendid opportunity come his way. It was too good to miss.

"If your captain is mad that's his look-out," he declared emphatically. "I can't help it. What's more, I don't care how he feels. Justice is justice. I'm a civilian and I want my rights. The Department of State in Washington will have something to say about this if I'm not released."

He didn't give a continental curse about his rights, but he was looking forward with delight to his coming interview with the terrible Rombillac, the most rigid disciplinarian in the First Regiment of the Foreign Legion where disciplinarians are the rule, not the exception.

Kostakov barked, "You're not a civilian until you receive your discharge papers. Legionnaire Dawson, I order you—"

"You have hit the nail on the head," agreed Dawson. "I want my discharge papers. I'm fifteen days overdue, and I'm not taking orders from you or anybody else. And don't call me 'Legionnaire' Dawson. It's misleading."

Before Kostakov could devise a suitable retort the door to the private office was torn open, torn almost off its hinges, and Captain Rombillac, livid with rage, burst into the room.

"What is this?" he thundered. "A debating hall, a market place, a meeting place for loafers? Cattle! Refuse! One can't hear oneself think above the clatter of your voice!"

All at once he caught sight of Dawson. The Legionnaire was not standing at attention in the presence of his commanding officer! Calm, cool, and indifferent, he leaned against the back of a chair and watched developments with the detached manner of a spectator at a show.

The whites of Rombillac's eyes turned a sickly yellow. He strangled inside his tight

collar. Dawson was the bane of his existence; the worst soldier in the outfit, an unmanageable creature who could neither be coaxed nor bullied into submission. On parade he was an eyesore, off parade he drank like a fish, but when the bullets were flying, as he had proved a score of times, he was the corner stone of his platoon, level headed, dependable, utterly fearless. He had so many good points that his innumerable bad qualities made him absolutely impossible.

At any time one glimpse of that solemn countenance was enough to set Rombillac's teeth on edge, and at that moment, harassed as he was by the breakdown of the conference with Councillor Thuong, his exasperation turned to ungovernable fury.

"This man," he sputtered. "Look at him. Never in my life . . . witnessed such conduct . . ."

He grew incoherent.

Kostakov froze in his tracks, his hand glued to the brim of his helmet, hardly breathing. The clerks bowed their heads lower than ever over their desks. Rain rattled dismally on the iron roof.

Squeezing past the captain, Lieutenant Grammont bustled forward.

"Rectify your position!" he commanded. "Do you hear me, Legionnaire? Do not defy me! It will go hard with you if you do. You'll do ten days' defaulters' drill for this."

"I'm sorry," said Dawson, gazing into the lieutenant's eyes. "I really won't be able to do ten days' defaulters' drill. You see, Lieutenant, it's this way: I'm not a Legionnaire any more."

Rombillac sputtered incoherently. He tore open his collar and hurled the starched lining onto the floor.

"Monstrous!" he said at last. "Colossal impudence! Amazing!" He glared at Kostakov. "What is this man doing in here? Did you bring him in?"

Kostakov seemed to shrivel up inside his uniform.

"Yes, mon capitaine," he confessed. "I brought him in to see the lieutenant. He has a complaint to make and, there being no ruling on the subject, I thought—"

"I, too, have a complaint to make!" roared Rombillac. "Why didn't you put this baboon under lock and key instead of pestering me, today of all days? Did you hear what he said; he isn't a Legionnaire! What does he think he is?"

"He says," Kostakov answered miserably, "he says he's a civilian."

From one second to the next Rombillac's manner changed completely. He checked Lieutenant Grammont, who was threatening to place Kostakov under arrest, and then, with ominous politeness, he said in a voice which shook with emotion:

"Will you be so kind, Sergeant Kostakov, as to furnish me with some sort of an explanation of this unprecedented behavior? I refuse to believe that a wave of mutinous dementia has affected the entire company. Don't be afraid; tell me exactly what happened."

He folded his arms across his chest, squared his shoulders, and waited stoically for the worst.

"I am very sorry," began Kostakov, while beads of cold perspiration rolled down his cheeks. "The circumstances are exceptional and I thought—"

"Please don't mention it," begged Rombillac, laying on his sarcasm with a trowel. "It is nothing, I assure you, Sergeant. A few rules have been broken, but that is inconsequential. I am sure you are quite prepared to lose your stripes, otherwise you would not have come to the orderly room outside of office hours. Proceed, my good man, proceed!"

"I was in the courtyard waiting for the guard to fall in," Kostakov tried again, "when Corporal Vaardeman came to me accompanied by Legionnaire Dawson . . ."

"We'll be here all night if this keeps up," Dawson broke in. "Let me tell it; I ought to have been discharged on the third of March. This is the eighteenth. I am fifteen days overdue. That is the whole business in a nutshell. What, I should like to know, are you going to do about it?"

"Do?" repeated Rombillac, marvellously subduing an impulse to commit murder. "My dear fellow, I am going to put you in solitary confinement. Later on, I'll have you court-martialed. How's that? Is it altogether satisfactory?"

"No," admitted Dawson, "it is not. Detain me illegally and you'll have an international crisis on your hands. I had a hunch

this would happen, so I dropped a line to my consul at Saigon before we left the base. If I don't show up, he'll get busy."

IT WAS a splendid, spur-of-the-moment lie, and it took all the wind out of Rombillac's sails. First it was Thuong, now it was one of his own men who threatened to poison his life with endless worries and complications. He was sick and weary of complications.

"Do you realize that you're on active service?" he demanded. "Don't you know that, even if an oversight has occurred, you are not entitled to claim your discharge until the end of the campaign?"

"But we are not on active service," grinned Dawson. "You said so yourself, *mon capitaine*. Police work is not active service, and never was. This is not a campaign. We are not at war. In company orders last Tuesday we were told—"

Rombillac remembered the order all too well. That damned Fauchon had compelled him to publish a notice instructing the soldiers that "everything must be done to encourage the indigenous population to look upon us as friends, not enemies. We are here not to conquer a foe but to render assistance to an ally."

"Thank you for reminding me of the fact," Rombillac choked. "Very important, of course. Very true. Give me your livret; we'll examine your case at once."

Dawson laid his booklet, his scraps of paper, and the calendar on the table. The refrigerator girl, slightly soiled by much thumbing, smiled a promise of happy days to come.

"Where did that thing come from?" inquired Rombillac.

"America," explained Dawson. "It's a calendar."

"And you carry it around with you?"

"Always!"

Rombillac turned sharply away and barked at the two clerks, "Go over this man's record—at once!"

Month by month, sentence by sentence, they pulled his figures apart and put them together again.

"He's right," one of the clerks admitted finally.

"I fear he is," sighed Grammont. "We left the base camp at such short notice, and Corporal Lavergne dying the way he did—the records must have been—"

A bugle call covered the sound of his voice.

"That's the guard-mount," snapped Rombillac. "The world is not going to come to a standstill just to suit this man's convenience. Grammont, you may go. Sergeant Kostakov also. I'll deal with Dawson myself, and I do not want to be disturbed." He pointed toward his private office. "Come in here, Dawson. Shut the door."

In the old days the room had been used to store office supplies. From floor to ceiling the walls were lined with shelves of unpainted wood. There were but two pieces of furniture: a table littered with papers, and a chair which was losing its stuffing through a gash in the underside of the seat.

Rombillac, still ominously calm, turned and faced Dawson. He was breathing with great difficulty as though a heavy weight oppressed his chest.

"Dawson," he said abruptly, "there is something I want to tell you, something I want you to know before you leave here . . . because you are leaving . . . this afternoon . . . with the dispatch bearers. I am sending you down to the base. Technically you are a civilian. I don't want any harm to befall you; your consul might ask unpleasant questions if you were to come to grief. The rioting has stopped for the time being. I think you'll get through safely, but that's a risk you've got to run."

"I'm not in that much of a hurry," volunteered Dawson.

"You leave today." There was a metallic ring in Rombillac's voice.

"That's all settled. And I want you to take with you the comforting knowledge that you are crawling out of a very nasty situation. You reminded me some minutes ago that we were not on active service. Quite right. But we shall be on active service within a day or so whether we like it or not. It's coming. We'll be fighting for our lives."

"In that case—" began Dawson.

"It is going to be a tight corner, the tightest No. 3 Company has ever been in. You have seen Councillor Thuong—well, while he is negotiating with our diplomats, in the background there is a priest-ridden

king working these natives up to a point where they will stop at nothing to wipe us out. I know these things, but I can't move. My hands are tied. I must sit tight and wait."

"I'm not in that much of a hurry," Dawson tried again. He had what he wanted, his success was complete, yet for some unfathomable reason success left a bitter taste in his mouth. "I didn't expect to leave so soon."

"You'll do what you're told," Rombillac retorted. "I don't want you here, not at any price. When the shooting starts I need men I can trust, who will trust me, not sore-heads and barrack-room lawyers. The Legion is no place for you, never was, never could be. You are a brave man—I admire your courage—but courage is not enough. It is the underlying spirit that counts, the ability to take pride in obedience, to find strength in sacrifice without hope of reward. You haven't got it. You don't belong. I'm glad to see the last of you, but before you go, now that you are a civilian, there is just one thing I want to do; I want the privilege of thrashing the stuffing out of you."

DAWSON'S eyes grew round with astonishment. His lower jaw gaped open foolishly.

"You want the what?" he inquired.

"The privilege of thrashing you."

The idea percolated slowly into Dawson's brain. He grinned from ear to ear, like a child who had just been promised a stick of sugar candy.

"You want to fight me!" he exclaimed. "That's a hot one!"

"I am not going to fight you," Rombillac said briskly. "I intend to knock some of the conceit out of you. That is not the same thing. For a long time I have desired to remove that smug look from your countenance. You are a terror, eh? You think you are a superman. You laugh at discipline; you despise your chiefs. While you were a Legionnaire I could not touch you. But today you are a civilian and, by the bon Dieu, I am going to give you a send-off you will never forget. Remove your coat!"

Dawson unhooked his belt and loosened the buttons of his tunic. Suddenly a thought occurred to him.

"Say, wait a minute," he ordered. "I'm no punching bag. What's going to happen if I flatten you out?"

The captain stepped over to the door, locked it, and placed the key on the table.

"Whatever happens you leave this afternoon with the dispatch bearers," he snapped. "This is a private matter between the two of us—man to man."

Dawson tossed his tunic into a corner and hiked up his trousers.

"All set," he announced. "And don't say afterward you didn't ask for it."

Rombillac stood like an oak in the middle of the floor. He held himself very straight, almost bending over backward. His clenched fists were raised on a level with his chin, offering his stomach as a luscious and inviting target for Dawson's punches.

He was so easy to hit that Dawson felt a sudden twinge of remorse. It didn't seem right to beat up such a helpless and well meaning amateur. Officers, brave though they might be, did not know the first thing about rough and tumble fighting. They lacked experience.

"What's it all about?" Dawson inquired, flabbergasted by Rombillac's strange posture. "Is this a sparring contest or a scrap?"

"You heard what I said," barked Rombillac. "We fight free style to the finish, yes! I await you."

That settled it so far as Dawson was concerned. Two strides carried him within range of that broad expanse of stomach. His right fist shot out, straight at the heart, a mighty blow fit to pole-ax an ox. Unfortunately it missed its mark by several inches. At the last second Rombillac moved. He curvetted aside with all the grace of a young mammoth gamboling in a field of Ploicene daisies. The rotten floor boards groaned beneath his weight.

And an extraordinary thing happened. He slewed himself half way around, raised his right leg, and sent his foot crashing into Dawson's ribs. That blow, too, would have pole-axed an ox. It lifted Dawson clear off the ground and sat him down against the shelf-lined wall with his head half way inside a compartment labeled "Loose Leaves, 8 Columns, 3 Perforations, Model B."

"Yes," said Rombillac, as though answering an unspoken question. "It is the free

style. You think you are a great fighter, is it not? I have heard rumors to that effect. *Eh bien,* I will give you a demonstration of the savate. Get up!"

There came a knocking, a pounding, on the door. The clerks could be heard shouting "Monsieur the Captain, we are here! The door is locked! Do you require assistance? Shall we summon the picket?"

"Go back to your work!" roared Rombillac. "I do not wish to be disturbed. When I need help I'll let you know."

The pounding ceased.

Dawson pulled himself to his feet. His lungs felt as though they had been gone over by a steam roller. His mouth was full of blood. The twinge of regret he had felt for Rombillac no longer irked him. His eyes were full of fury as he said:

"So that's how you fight. You won't get away with that again!"

EVERYTHING was in his favor. He was long and rangy and fast; Rombillac was heavy, beefy and ponderous. Since he had been in the Legion no one man had ever brought him low. In prison the guards had been compelled to use gun butts and clubs to get the best of him. In his heart he was convinced that he could polish off half a dozen Rombillacs at one sitting.

Warily he closed in, aimed a tentative punch at his antagonist's ribs, and followed it up at lightning speed with a left which shot between those motionless fists and found its mark on Rombillac's cheek.

Bang! At the same instant an intolerable pain exploded on his shinbone. His leg went limp. He lurched sideways, and a set of broad, knobby knuckles, moving with a slow but inexorable precision, clouted him over the right eye. It was broad daylight, but he saw many beautiful and curious stars.

Gritting his teeth, hobbing on his aching leg he packed every ounce of steam he could summon into a short arm jolt which landed with a crash on Rombillac's ear.

Then Dawson waded in, keeping close to his opponent, sticking to him like a leech, pounding him with everything he had. Rombillac seemed incapable of parrying anything. He gave ground. Step by step he was driven back. A purple lump as big as a hen's egg appeared on his cheekbone, his nose bled like a fire hose, his lower lip was torn and swollen.

Crack! Again on the same shin bone, on the same bruised spot, Dawson experienced a spasm of excruciating pain. It stopped him for a brief instant. During the respite, with amazing agility, Rombillac, bowing almost to the ground, shot his leg out and up. The heel of his boot struck Dawson's jaw.

He landed against the wall with a resounding thud which shook the whole room and brought bits of plaster raining down from the ceiling. He didn't see a few stars that time; whole constellations whirled past his eyes, and in a dream he heard Rombillac's far-off voice saying:

"That, my friend, is a chasse-croise as taught by Professor de Ponthieu. Have you had enough?"

Dawson had not had enough. Taking hold of the empty shelves he tried to drag himself off the floor. The shelves had not been designed to support so great a weight. They collapsed. He collapsed with them, flat on his face.

"It is enough," said Rombillac.

"I'm not through yet," gasped Dawson, bracing himself on hands and knees. "I haven't begun to fight!"

It was a rash assertion. Summoning all his will power he stood erect and lurched toward his opponent. They clinched and a haphazard struggle ensued. They lurched clumsily around the small room like two bears struggling in a clothes closet. A few more shelves were torn off the walls, the table and chair were reduced to splintered fragments.

Dawson dug his fists into Rombillac's ribs, but his blows were weak and purposeless. Finally the captain pushed him away, held him at arm's length and, without haste, slogged him on the point of the jaw.

He tottered the full length of the office, gaining momentum as he went, struck the door, went through it, and landed in the orderly room on top of the two horrified and astounded clerks.

When his brain cleared he found himself lying on the flat of his back. One of the clerks, a middle-aged man with an unkempt gray beard and a garlicky breath, was swabbing iodine into a cut on his forehead. His jaw felt as though it had been torn from

its sockets and put in again with red-hot rivets. At each breath he drew the air rattled in his blood clogged throat. The pungent smell of the iodine made him very sick.

As the buzzing in his ears died down he heard the drone of Rombillac's voice:

". . . request that this Legionnaire's case receive immediate consideration. Under campaign conditions regimental records can not be kept up to date without the cooperation of battalion headquarters. Time-expired men, according to Article 37 of the Code Militaire, should reach the depot at least a week before the date of their discharge."

Dawson sat up.

Leaning against the doorjamb, the captain was dictating a letter to the second clerk, who bowed so low over his desk that his nose almost touched the point of his racing pen. Rombillac had put on his tunic, his belt and his sword. Not a hair on his head was out of place. His face, however, was festooned with strips of pink court-plaster and streaks of iodine so that he looked like an Indian brave in his warpaint. Moreover, his left eye was shut tight, one of his ears was twice its normal size, and his mouth was somewhat puffy and lopsided.

He finished dictating his letter, consulted his watch, and glanced at Dawson. His one sound eye was cold and indifferent.

"It is twenty-five minutes past three," he announced. "The courier leaves at four-thirty. You have three quarters of an hour to pack your kit and get ready. Report back here at four-fifteen. Corporal Alverez will give you all the documents you require and a safe-conduct. You will accompany the courier as far as Than-Hai. There you will apply for transportation to headquarters. You will be returned to the depot where you will receive your final discharge papers and draw your back pay, if any. That covers the whole ground, I believe."

HE DISMISSED the matter with a jerk of the head.

"Corporal Alverez," he went on, "take another memorandum: to Monsieur Anatole Fauchon, Senior Delegate of the Mission to Pnom-Tao.

" 'Monsieur the Senior Delegate, with reference to your last communication No. II of today's date, kindly note that my decision is final. I will not apologize to that greasy mountebank. I am convinced that Thuong's policy is to discredit us and to—' "

Dawson cleared his throat.

"I want to say something," he began, speaking with great difficulty.

"Say it elsewhere," Rombillac flung over his shoulder. "This is an office. I am busy. Report at four-fifteen. Get your papers. Then get out. That's all. Where was I? 'I am convinced that Thuong's policy—' "

All too clearly he meant what he said. His decisions always were final.

The clerk helped Dawson to his feet and handed him his tunic and his sunhelmet. Gloom descended upon the American like a heavy fog.

"I wouldn't treat a dog this way," he grumbled. "A hell of an outfit this is! They kick you out without giving you a chance to make up your mind. Say," he fumbled about his pockets, "where's all my papers and things?"

Halting his dictation in midsentence Rombillac snatched the calendar off the desk and flung it at the corporal.

"Give him his lousy calendar!" he roared. "It does not belong to him but that is of no importance. Give him his pretty picture. Look at it on the way: a cow-eyed female in a kitchen. Pots and pans and an alarm clock. We don't want domestic minded men in the Legion. Apron string! Bah! Didn't you hear me say that I was busy? Shove that specimen of a mooning imbecile out of here quick!"

Dawson limped out of the room, dragging his feet across the floor in a half-hearted attempt to assert his independence. Outside, in the rain, he tore the calendar in two, dropped the pieces in the mud and, for good measure, kicked them.

III

DAWSON was in no better humor when punctually on the stroke of half past four he limped through the gateway and headed down the trail which was to lead him out of the Legion.

Eight years and eleven months of his life lay behind him. Discipline, court-martials, kit inspections lay behind him also. He ought to have been pleased, but he was not. His jaw was as sore as hell, and so was his shinbone.

In some mysterious fashion the story of his downfall was public knowledge long before he reached his billet and started to pack his knapsack. His reputation had dwindled to zero. While he was folding his dirty clothes Legionnaires had crowded into the room to view his battered countenance and to congratulate him on his discharge.

"A couple of black eyes is a cheap price to pay for your liberty," jeered Corporal Vaardeman as Dawson swung his pack onto his shoulders. "We may be having our throats cut before you reach the base, but that's nothing for you to worry about. We'll try to struggle along without you."

A gust of derisive laughter and heartrending farewells followed him across the courtyard when he went back to the orderly room. Several troopers, overcome by their emotion, covered their eyes with handkerchiefs and howled lamentably.

"Dawson's leaving us!" they sobbed. "Oh, what shall we do without our brave hero?"

There was a great deal more of the same sort of thing. A great deal too much of it to suit Dawson.

The regimental clerk handed him a letter sealed with red wax addressed to the battalion commander and a package wrapped in an old newspaper.

"That's yours, too," he explained, unsmiling and businesslike. "Something you dropped."

Dawson tore the package open. Out fell the fragments of his calendar, covered with mud. The girl's face had been sponged off. Though badly scratched it was still recognizable.

"She is so beautiful!" sighed the clerk. "Ah lala! How one envies you, my old one. You are going home! To the so wonderful land of America. You will find a wife such as that one—a rich wife. Of that there can be no doubt for you are young and handsome. You are made for the tranquil existence by the hearth fire. The rough life of the army is not for you."

"You baboon!" cried Dawson, beginning to see red, "one more word out of you—"

Just then the door to the private office opened and Rombillac appeared. His one eye glittered balefully.

"Get out," he ordered. "If you do not go immediately I shall send you down in handcuffs like a common criminal. *Allez!*"

Dawson allezed. Rombillac, he had learned, did not boast in vain. Before he went, however, to even the score ever so slightly, he threw the crushed and unrecognizable tatters of the calendar in the clerk's face.

But there was worse in store for him yet. His traveling companions awaited him in the yard. There were five of them, all Anamites, dressed in khaki tunics, rice straw hats crowned with red pompoms, and skimpy trousers which stopped short half way over their calves. Four belonged to Monsieur Fauchon's staff, the fifth was Rombillac's courier. They carried carbines, but they were so small, so neat and so delicate that, in their company, Dawson felt like a nursemaid taking a flock of children for an airing in the park.

The analogy did not escape the onlookers gathered near the gate to see him off. The last remark to reach his ears as he hurried away was an urgent request called out in a falsetto voice:

"Maman! Maman! Don't let the little dearies get their feet wet!"

The rain had slowed down to a thin drizzle. The air, steamy and hot, filled the lungs like the air in a Turkish bath. Beads of moisture formed on the brim of Dawson's sunhelmet. Sweat poured down his cheeks.

With a curse he hitched his pack higher on his shoulders and dived into the crowd outside the compound. It parted to let him through, and the Anamites, spitting betel juice through their red teeth, trotted along close beside him.

In his wake the mob reformed, dogging his footsteps. It became a procession through

narrow streets cluttered with babies, scratching hens and piles of stinking refuse. Outside the shops, long banners hung limp and sodden from bamboo poles. Men, women and children poured out of the houses to watch the soldiers go by. They flowed along behind Dawson in a jostling mass, intent and silent, gazing at his broad back with the fixed, unwinking empty stare of the Orient.

Their curiosity did not bother him. In Indo-China, wherever he went, he had been stared at in the same way. It seemed to be the chief outdoor sport of the country.

He was midway across town when the temple bells began to ring. First one bell, then another chimed in, then more and yet more, near and far away, until the whole gray sky was filled with the clangor; great bells of bronze that crashed and bellowed, stroke upon heavy stroke; little bells crystal-clear, crying out their message as fast as their clappers could swing.

And above the tumult, as he hurried forward, Dawson heard a confused noise of shouting—dull and heavy and unending.

The Anamites showed sign of uneasiness. They fidgeted with the triggers of their rifles, and cast anxious glances over their shoulders as they scuttled along sideways like crabs. One of them plucked at Dawson's sleeve. In pidgin-French he explained that he did not like to be wandering about in a strange town while such a bedlam was going on, and that, all things considered, it might be wise to go back to the compound and wait for the commotion to subside.

Dawson scowled at him.

"*C'est rien,*" he declared. "It ain't nothing. Can't they ring a few bells without you throwing a fit? You've got your marching orders; keep moving!"

In his own heart he was none too sure that everything was all right, but he refused to retrace his steps except as a last resort. He could foresee all too well the kind of reception No. 3 Company would give him if some mischance compelled him to postpone his departure. He was out and he meant to stay out.

Meanwhile the throng was growing bigger and bigger. It was no longer following him out of idle curiosity. It had a definite purpose—a goal—like a tide it moved along, filling the street from wall to wall, upsetting market stalls, ripping away awnings, scrambling over heaps of foodstuffs, over rice bags which burst and spilled their contents in the mud, over the carcasses of goats and bales of cotton goods. Ahead of this human avalanche, in a headlong panic, fled black, squealing pigs dragging broken ropes at their heels, and a flurry of chickens frantically beating clipped wings and squawking their heads off.

And the clamor of the bells became more hurried, more insistent, until their innumerable voices blended into one mighty, overwhelming burst of sound.

Here and there a native broke into a run, waving his arms and shouting. Then they were all running. A pig, mad with fear, barged against Dawson's legs. Before he could steady himself he was swept along on the crest of the waves.

At first he thought he was about to be lynched, but he realized almost at once that the natives were not bothering about him. They had forgotten his very existence; they did not even see him. Had he attempted to stand still he would have been bowled over and trampled underfoot, flattened out like dough beneath a rolling pin. So long as he allowed himself to be carried along and maintained an upright position he was moderately safe. But he had to fight every inch of the way. With hands and elbows, arms and shoulders the struggling horde tried to climb over him and around him. His leather shoulder straps gave way. His knapsack sank without a trace, his haversack followed suit. A speckled hen, rising up from under his feet, scratched his face and sent his sunhelmet spinning into space.

He clung desperately to his rifle and cartridge pouches, and the Anamites, jibbering incoherently, clung to him like shipwrecked mariners hanging onto a storm lashed mast. All at once around a bend in the crooked street, the crowd spilled out into a broad highway where it mingled with an even larger multitude.

The pressure relaxed. Dawson stood still and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. The highway, he saw, was lined at regular intervals with weather-worn, moss-grown statues of Khmer dragons, elephants as round as barrels, and curly haired lions that looked

like overgrown Pekingese dogs. Behind the statues there was a row of trees, and beyond these, rising like gray hills out of the luminous mist, loomed the tombs of bygone kings of Pnom-Tao; shapeless mounds of masonry, crumbling with age and neglect, covered with a dense growth of jungle.

Nearer at hand, so close that at first Dawson could not take it all in because of its enormous bulk, towered a pagoda, rising terrace upon terrace, culminating in a gilded spire. A monumental staircase, wide enough to accommodate a brigade of infantry, climbed straight up to the topmost terrace.

From the side towers, full volley, pealed the bells.

Dawson scratched his ear.

"I never saw this dump before," he confessed. "We must have come out of our way."

The Anamites were of the same opinion. They said so vehemently. They ought to have cut across the town in a southwesterly direction, whereas the mob had carried them due east.

They were in a desperate hurry to get out of that jam. Their uniforms made them altogether too conspicuous. The townspeople, tense with hysterical exictement, plainly resented their presence. A stout man in a brown tunic stood in front of the soldiers shouting meaningless insults at them and shaking his fists. Passing suddenly from words to deeds he made a dive for Dawson's rifle. There was a brief struggle and the fat man fell down, clutching his left elbow which had come into violent contact with the rifle butt. The bystanders swayed out of reach, but their flow of abuse redoubled.

"This neck of the woods is no place for us," concluded Dawson. "We got a long way to go." He slipped a handful of cartridges into the magazine of his Lebel. "Step out!" he told the Anamites. "Two abreast. Don't lose your nerve or—"

Abruptly the bells stopped their ringing, and as the vibrant tumult died away a hush fell over the city. It lasted fully half a minute, then out of the misty distance at the far end of the highway came a murmur and a tremor ran through the motionless throng.

Dawson heard the clash of cymbals. Above the sea of heads he saw something moving, swaying, coming closer—an enormous thing as big as a house which rocked from side to side as it advanced; the seven-roofed palanquin of His Serene Highness King Suyen-Tchen-Doi, carried on the shoulders of five score priests clad in white robes, with a daub of yellow paint between their eyebrows.

Surrounding the palanquin marched a swarm of officials and dignitaries. Solemn faced old gentlemen in vestments resplendent with gold set off fire crackers which fizzled and sputtered and banged. Philosophers with chin whiskers and peacocks' feathers on their round skull caps tottered along, carrying a limp and rather dilapidated dragon from whose wide open jaws issued flames made of red paper. Court musicians dressed in blue and yellow silks blew ear-splitting blasts on brassbound horns eight feet long. Priests in lemon colored robes carried brass bowls filled with smoking incense. Naked men wearing frightful masks, which waggled drunkenly on their shoulders, whirled broad-bladed swords above their heads. An elephant, streaked with whitewash, bore a brass cannon strapped on its back. Then came men carrying pikes, and men in medieval armor with bows and arrows, and a row of bedraggled soldiers in moth-eaten scarlet coats bought at second hand in Hong Kong. They looked rather forlorn. The seats of their trousers, tailored for Europeans of more ample girth, hung down miserably around their knees. They were commanded by an ascetic little fellow with eyeglasses, equipped with rust-pitted spurs and an outsize in cavalry swords.

And above this tawdry, motley crew swayed the crimson and gold palanquin, hideous and spectacular, held together with bits of rope, studded with precious stones and decorated with life-size images of gods and goddesses whose chief characteristic appeared to be a complete lack of modesty.

For once in his life Dawson was dumbstruck. Rooted to the ground he watched the procession straggle by and go creeping up the temple staircase. A bell tolled. Doors rolled open on the topmost terrace. The palanquin and its escort disappeared into the shadowy depths where blue lights winked like stars. Again the bell tolled, the doors closed, and the loyal subjects of King

Suyen-Tchen-Doi, who had fallen on their knees while the cortege went by, raised their heads out of the mud.

"Some circus!" commented Dawson. He prodded the Anamites, "We'll be on our way. Never mind the rest of the performance."

He got no farther. The squad of bedraggled soldiers was hurrying toward him through the crowd. Their commander-in-chief wore a peaked cap which rested squarely on his ears. He was very fierce and very mad. He was so mad that his teeth chattered as he pranced about, screeching at Dawson and the Anamites.

His screams electrified the onlookers, who closed in with a rush, yelling and shouting also, reaching out over the backs of the red-coated warriors as they tried to scratch Dawson's eyes out. In a paroxysm of rage the commander-in-chief arose on tiptoe and tried to smack Dawson's face.

A large paw closed on the scruff of his neck and shook him until his glasses flew one way and his cap another.

"Now wait a minute," ordered Dawson. "What's it all about? Speak any French? If so, spit it out!"

"Oui!" foamed his traducer. "I speak French. Sacrilege! You have committed sacrilege. Fiend! Dog! You gazed upon His Imperial Highness. Sacrilege!"

"What the hell!" snorted Dawson. "Can't a Legionnaire look at a king? And anyway I can't see through curtains."

"You have defiled the Thrice Born Son of Heaven!" yapped the little man. "Through the slits in the curtains—your evil eye—accursed. Calamity of calamities!"

He had a lot more to say along the same lines. The red-coats were being pressed in step by step by the angry natives.

"Evil eye be damned!" retorted Dawson, whose temper was none too good. "Give me elbow room. Stand back! What do you expect me to do; pop down on my knees and bang my head against the ground?"

"On your knees, that is it! It is the only way. To look upon the king means death. No foreigner may look at him. You have defiled us all. I arrest you."

One of the Anamites let out a yelp of pain. Clawing nails had ripped the skin off his face from cheekbone to chin. A full-throated roar greeted the sight of blood.

Suffocating with indignation the little officer tried to draw his sword. It stuck. He tugged frantically, shouting orders at his men and insults at his prisoners.

"Quit that," Dawson said sharply, "or you'll cut your fingers. All I want to do is get away from here."

The officer laughed shrilly, displaying two rows of green, crumbling, and tightly clenched teeth. Abandoning his attempt to draw his sword he plucked a large revolver from his holster on his left hip. Closing his eyes he pointed it in Dawson's direction.

But he was a little too slow. Dawson caught him by the wrist, yanked the gun out of his hand and lambasted him over the head with the heavy butt. He folded up like an accordion.

The red coated soldiers let out a yell. One of them, firing from the hip, put a bullet through an Anamite's throat, and the fight was on. Five against five thousand.

"All together," ordered Dawson. "At their bellies—fire!"

They had a nice, compact target to shoot at. The Anamites blazed away as fast as they could squeeze the triggers of their carbines. In the revolver Dawson had captured there were six cartridges. He scored six bull's-eyes.

The front ranks of the mob recoiled violently. The rear ranks thrust them forward again onto the gun muzzles. At point blank range a shot gun loaded with nails blew out an Anamite's bowels, plastering them over the pedestal of Dewa-San, the snake god.

Four against five thousand. They didn't have a ghost of a chance. For a minute they held their own, pumping lead into the swirling mass which closed in around them

through the blue haze of gun smoke. They dripped blood like killers in a slaughter house and their rifle barrels grew red hot.

Climbing over the base of the snake god's statue a coolie with a knife between his teeth dropped down on Dawson's back. Roars of triumph shot skyward. The human wall lurched forward. A hundred hands reached out, ready to rip the living flesh off the white man's bones. But the shouts of triumph turned to yells of dismay when they saw Dawson reach back, grab the coolie by the throat, lift him high in the air and fling him like a stone from a catapult into the thick of the throng.

And the throng, cheated of its prey, suddenly caved in. It broke as a dyke breaks, slowly at first, then with ever increasing momentum as the wave of panic spread from those who had been in the thick of the fight to the bystanders, fifty yards away, craning their necks as they tried to find out what was happening.

All in a second the roadway was swept bare; bare, except for the broken, slime-covered creatures who had fallen and been trodden into the mud.

A shout burst from Dawson's lips. He clouted the nearest Anamite over the shoulders.

"They've come. That's my regiment; the Legion!"

And when he said "my regiment" a chill ran down his spine.

Rombillac and the Legionnaires, however, were nowhere in sight.

Dawson shrugged his shoulders.

"*Faut pas s'en faire!* We should worry. We don't need help."

Smack. A bullet chipped bits of stone off the snake god. More shots followed. The mud spurted at Dawson's feet. The natives were beginning to regain a little confidence. He could see them dodging about among the trees and peering at him around the pedestals of nearby statues.

"If we stay here," he told the Anamites, "we'll get it in the neck. Fix bayonets!"

They were crouching behind the mound of corpses and appeared to be unwilling to leave that precarious shelter. Dawson prodded them in the small of back. The firing redoubled in intensity as soon as they stood up, and as they wavered uncertainly one of them crumpled up, shot through the forehead. His skull burst open. The two survivors, after one glimpse of the hole in his face, went berserk. A madness born of despair was upon them. They waited for no more orders. Instead, they rushed out into the middle of the roadway, bayonetting wounded men, shooting at trees and stones and empty space.

DAWSON could do nothing for them. It was all over in a moment. One met his fate on the far side of the street where a group of natives closed in upon him and hacked him to bloody shreds. The other went around in circles until a bullet smashed his ankle. Kneeling in the mud he gripped his bayonet with both hands and drove it into his heart. He died shrieking with laughter.

It rang in Dawson's ears as he made a dash for the trees and the bank of shrubbery bordering the avenue. Beyond the shrubs there was a low stone wall. Hands clawed at him as he ran. A lick of flame scorched his cheek. Clubbing his rifle he brought it down on skulls and shoulders and outstretched arms. He gained a yard, then another. The rifle stock splintered. He smashed his way through, swinging the steel barrel above his head until it was coated with blood and hair and brains.

He reached the bushes, turned, slung his twisted weapon into the faces of his aggressors and went over the wall like a deer. He landed in a weed grown garden in the shadow of the temple. Lotus pads floated on the still waters of a pool stained bright orange by the light of the setting sun streaming through a rift in the cloud bank. An arched bridge spanned the pool. He was midway across when his pursuers came tumbling over the wall. Bullets tore splinters off the bamboo handrail. A razor-sharp sliver embedded itself in the back of his knee. He had to stop and tear it out. A slug grazed his shoulder. The pack was close behind him. He raced down the path, swerving around banks of rhododendrons which showered him with rain drops as he went by. Another wall loomed up in front of him; twenty feet high, smooth as glass. The path led to a low door, painted red, studded with brass nails. He was trapped.

Then the door opened, and a priest with

a smooth, hairless face appeared on the threshold. In his hand he carried a bunch of iron keys, red with rust. Rage, amazement and hate swept across his face when he set eyes on the blood-spattered Legionnaire, bare chested, his shirt hanging in shreds around his waist.

But he did not have an opportunity to do much conjecturing just then. Dawson fell upon him with a glad whoop. A punch in the stomach doubled him up, another flattened him out. As he fell Dawson leaped past him, slammed the door and shot the bolt.

Safe. Not a soul in sight. His heart rattled and thumped against his ribs, and his knees were so shaky that he had to lean against the wall.

His pursuers were hammering on the door. It rang beneath their blows, it quivered, but it held fast. By degrees the commotion subsided. The sound of shouting receded.

Dawson pried himself away from the wall and peered about through the gathering dusk. He was in a long, narrow passageway paved with flags worn smooth with age. Grass grew in the crevices. On the far side of the yard there was a shed stacked full of boxes and crates and bulky packages wrapped in grass matting. Above the shed soared the wall of the temple, its gray surface streaked with dark moisture stains.

The silence was so intense that Dawson could hear the blood creeping in his ears. Reaction set in. He had no plans and very little hope. At any second he might be pounced upon and killed, but he was too exhausted to care. He wanted to lie down and sleep.

"Move," insisted a voice at the back of his brain. "Move or you'll be caught like a rat in a trap."

The shed was only a few steps away. If he crawled in behind the boxes he might find a hiding place where he could stretch out and snatch a few minutes' rest. His eyelids were as heavy as lead.

He squeezed in between two rows of wooden crates. In the twilight a projecting nail gashed his elbow. The lid of one of the crates had been forced open. He stared at it, scratching his ear.

"Maybe food," he decided. "Let's have a

look. I could do with a bite to eat . . . Gawd, and a drink! Just plain water. . . . Here's hoping I don't find sharks' fins or birds' nests.

The box contained neither fins nor nests. There was no food in it at all. Beneath a layer of tinfoil Dawson's hand closed on a hard, metallic object which was smooth and oily to the touch. He pulled it out. It was a .32 automatic, bearing the trade mark of a Belgian arms manufacturer famous for his charitable donations. The crate was full of automatics.

"Ain't this something!" commented Dawson, forgetting how tired and weary he was. "I ain't dead yet, by golly, not if I can find me a few cartridges."

HE PUT two guns in his trousers pockets and slipped a third in his belt. Then, in the gathering shadows, he groped his way about hunting for something that looked like an ammunitions box. He found nothing. Night closed in swiftly, so dark that he could not see his hand before his face. Whichever way he turned he bumped into sharp angles and tore himself on nails.

Precious minutes slipped away. He was about to give up in disgust when his foot struck an earthenware jar. The jar rolled over, cracked open, and a pungent odor was wafted to his nostrils. He knew that smell even in the dark; shum-shum, rice wine, the gift of poor peasants on the altars of their gods—gifts which the thrifty temple priests had salvaged and set aside for their own consumption.

"Just a snifter," Dawson told himself. "It'll do me good."

Shum-shum is a potent brew. It tastes like rubbing liniment and has the concentrated power of dynamite.

Dawson had one snifter, then he had another and, before long, he was most marvelously exhilarated. Single handed he would have fought a regiment with or without provocation. Anxiety vanished from his mind. Indeed, he felt a trifle disappointed because his pursuers had not turned up.

Armed with three empty automatics he went out to look for trouble. He had a vague notion to go back into the weed-grown garden to see whether any of the natives were lying in wait for him. But he could not find the little low door in the wall. It eluded him persistently and, in some unaccountable fashion, he found himself wandering about in a pitch dark corridor slanting steeply upward.

He didn't mind. Nothing could surprise him. Presently he reached a level space where a wick burning in a bowl of oil shed a pin point of light. Several staircases converged upon this landing, and alleyways straggled away into thick darkness. A dank, stale smell pervaded the air. The walls sweated moisture, and the silence was the silence of the tomb.

A large, cold drop of water, falling from the ceiling, landed squarely on the top of his head. It felt as though a hand had reached out from the grave and tapped him with a clammy finger. Without pausing to remember that he did not believe in ghosts he went up the nearest flight of steps like a streak of greased lightning.

And as he climbed an eery, wailing sound like a winter wind moaning through bare tree tops reached his ears. It made the hair bristle on the nape of his neck. The noise grew louder as he toiled up the slippery steps; it was being made by hundreds of voices chanting in unison.

IT OCCURRED to Dawson that the choristers might not want to see him just then. He paused to consider this question, but he did not pause very long. Below him he spied a smoking torch. The torch bearer was coming up the steps. Through the smoke Dawson thought he recognized the bald, hairless features of the priest he had knocked down in the garden. Behind the priest the shadows were alive with men.

That settled it. Dawson went on, hurrying on tiptoe to keep out of the glare of the torch. At the top of the steps he bumped into a teakwood screen inlaid with mother of pearl designs. He moved it aside an inch or so and risked an eye around the corner.

He was on the threshold of the main sanctuary of the temple; an enormous, cavernlike space whose outlines were lost in black shadow. What light there was came from brass cauldrons filled with a liquid which burned with a long blue flame. Clouds of intense smoke hung in layers in the stagnant air. Where the smoke came in contact

with the flames it shot upward in writhing spirals which faded away into the all engulfing darkness.

On the right, half seen, half guessed at, Dawson's blinking eyes discerned the colossal statue of a god, sitting cross legged on a bed of lotus leaves. Great masses of golden metal glowed faintly in the flickering blue light. The toes were as big as barrels. The underpart of the smooth, rounded stomach bulged like a sail. The rest of the figure was lost in smoke and black shadow.

At the feet of this god, dwarfed to the size of pigmies, priests were massed on the altar steps row upon row. The sound of their discordant voices, flung back by invisible walls, echoed and rang and throbbed. But Dawson was not particularly impressed by their plaintive singing. He was far too preoccupied with his own immediate fate to bother about anything else. The torchbearer, breathing asthmatically, was almost on top of him.

He sidled along the wall and crept behind a pillar. In front of him, so close that he could touch the shafts, lay the palanquin of His Majesty King Süyen-Tchen-Doi. A guard, armed with a pike, sat on the lowest rung of a ladder leading up to the curtained recess. He had taken off his leather headdress and was scratching mosquito bites on the back of his neck.

More voices were joining in the chanting. Cymbals clashed, and a deep-toned gong marked the rapidly rising tempo.

Dawson peered thoughtfully at the guard, and a magnificent idea popped into his head.

He said to himself, "Who said I couldn't look at this doggoned king? I'll show 'em!"

The next moment the guard was on his way to his appointed heaven. A blow at the base of his skull broke his neck. Dawson pushed the body beneath the palanquin, clambered up the ladder, and plunged headforemost through the curtains.

There was no outcry. No one stirred. From the ceiling hung a lantern. Like all the other lights in the temple its rays were so weak that, by contrast, an ordinary candle would have seemed dazzlingly bright. Gripping an empty gun in either hand Dawson sat up, glaring at his surroundings—and his eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets.

On the far side of the curtained recess, on a massive throne, sat a shriveled, wizened old man, smiling, a stiff lipped smile. A seven-tiered crown of gold and precious stones was perched slightly askew on his head. He wore a cloth-of-gold tunic, black silk trousers and scarlet slippers studded with diamonds. His forearms rested on a sword laid across the arms of the throne. His hands hung limp and motionless, sinewy as the talons of a bird of prey.

"I got you covered!" Dawson said in a hoarse whisper. "Stick 'em up!"

His Celestial Majesty sat like a rock. He did not so much as bat an eyelash.

"You can smile!" snorted Dawson, crawling toward him over the cushions. "You're so damn holy a plain ordinary guy can't so much as look at your damn hearse without being lynched." The more he talked the angrier he became. "Five men been killed this afternoon because of you. I only got away by the skin of my teeth . . . And here I am, and what the hell are you going to do about it?"

The king evidently did not intend to do anything about it. He continued to sit and stare over Dawson's shoulder at the curtained wall. And all the while, on the other side of the draperies, the priests chanted and gongs boomed.

An uneasy feeling stole over Dawson that the king was not even listening to him.

"I'm talking to you," he went on. "I mean business, see? You think you can get away with murder, don't you? Well, there's going to be a showdown right now. Do you know what you're going to do if you want to live? Let me tell you—"

His voice trailed off into silence. Kneeling among the cushions he stared dubiously at a fly which had alighted on His Celestial Majesty's nose and was crawling without haste across his right eyeball.

Dawson shook his head and looked again. The fly was still there.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "Don't you feel it?"

Then it dawned upon him that the king was dead. Very dead. He had been preserved with great skill, but in that damp climate the most expert embalming work was not dependable. His Majesty gave off a sweetish smell which was not particularly pleasant.

"I certainly wish I'd left that rice wine alone," muttered Dawson. "Me—trying to

hold up a mummy with an empty gun. I'm in a worse jam than ever, and I had everything doped out pretty!"

He was still cursing his luck when the chanting stopped. Squinting through a slit in the curtain he saw three very old men totter down the altar steps and move to the slow beating of a gong toward the palanquin. The middle priest carried a rooster under his arm. The bird struggled violently, losing feathers at every step. Ten feet from the palanquin the priests stopped. The gong stopped. The bird squawked. The old men bowed, bending over so low that Dawson thought they were trying to stand on their heads.

After the third bow the priests straightened up. Two of them stretched the bird out, holding it by the neck and the legs; the third ripped its stomach open with a bamboo knife. Reaching into the wound, he tore out the entrails and flung them on the ground. He dropped to his knees and gazed intently at the smoking bowels.

Silence. Incense smoke curled upward. The blue flames crackled.

The priest who had performed the surgical operation raised his red hands above his head and began to make a long winded speech. As he talked he rocked his body from side to side, and his words came faster and faster.

"I wish I was back in barracks," sighed Dawson. "I wish—"

Behind him he heard a grunting sound. The curtains at the far end of the palanquin rustled. Somebody pushed the draperies aside and floundered over the cushions; a moon-faced man wearing a skullcap surmounted by a peacock feather. He went straight to the corpse, shoved the arms aside, and picked up the sword.

He was about to drop the weapon through the slit in the draperies at the diviners' feet, when a stray beam of light from the lantern fell on his fat cheek.

"It's Thuong!" grunted Dawson. "Boy howdy!"

Councillor Thuong leaped as though a cobra had raised itself at his feet. He tripped and fell, and as he went down Dawson landed on his chest. The muzzle of an automatic slid into the councillor's open mouth. The foresight scraped his tonsils.

"You double-crossing, cockeyed baboon, if you make one break I'll drill your hide so full of holes you'll look like a piece of mosquito netting. The game's up. You and me and old Father Time we're going to hold a conference."

IV

IT WAS dusk. Two candles burned on the table in the middle of the room. The light fell on Monsieur Fauchon's drawn, haggard countenance.

"It is quite hopeless," he exclaimed. "We might as well face the truth, Desmarest. We have failed. This is the end."

He had to raise his voice to make himself heard, for, after a few hours of quiet, the rioters had come back more numerous, more violent than ever. The gate sagged beneath their blows. Missiles rattled against the buildings, crashing through the few remaining panes of glass.

Every available Legionnaire was on duty, waiting for orders to open fire. Through the slats in the shutters Desmarest could make out Rombillac's bulky figure striding from point to point, inspecting his line of defenses. He walked with a truculent swagger which set Desmarest's teeth on edge.

"That imebcile!" he muttered. "That swinish dolt! He has made an enemy of Thuong, and that means we'll never get at the king. Not this time."

"If he hadn't used such insulting language!" lamented Fauchon, "He called Thuong a porpoise and a murderer—"

"And he threatened to dig the king out of his palace like a snail out of its shell. It's inconceivable . . . when we were trying to avoid friction . . . when we had everything so well in hand! Think what we are going to lose, my poor friend. When the news leaks out the Sodecol quotations on the Paris Bourse are going to hit rock bottom."

"The ministry can't weather the storm either. I'll be recalled—that's inevitable. Think of it. The disgrace!" He thumped the arm of his chair. "But I swear to you, Desmarest, if we get out of here alive, which I am beginning to doubt, I'll see to it that that man is cashiered."

"If Sodecol has anything to do with it," Desmarest said through his teeth, "he won't

be cashiered; he'll be court-martialed for high treason."

The rending crash of rifle fire sent them leaping to the window. It was too dark for them to see through the slats. A machinegun rattled into action, grinding out its bullets six hundred to the minute. In his excitement Fauchon pushed open the shutters. With the candlelight at their backs they were clearly visible to the mob down below in the street. Missiles thumped against the house. A bottle whizzed through the window and burst into a thousand fragments as it struck the wall. A bullet struck the ceiling; another followed.

"This is frightful!" groaned Fauchon, lying flat to the floor. "A little patience, a little tact would have saved everything."

"But they ought to have sent more troops," Desmarest asserted. I warned the governor general. I was most emphatic. They ought to have sent a senior officer—a colonel or somebody, who would have taken a broad view of the situation."

"And we have had to put up with a mannerless lout—an ignorant jackass."

Heavy footfalls rang in the corridor. The ignorant jackass strode into the room, went to the window and closed the shutters. A slug tore away one of the slats as he fastened the catch.

He came straight to the point:

"I can't hold them much longer. They're coming at us twenty different ways. One slab of the wall is down already. It's too dark to see what we're shooting at. Keep under cover, in here, and don't go near that confounded window. I may have to put a machinegun in here with you, in that case."

"You are wounded!" exclaimed Fauchon, peering at the captain's bruised face covered with strips of court-plaster. "Your eye—"

"Never mind my eye. That's nothing," grunted Rombillac. "I had to thrash one of my men. Cantankerous customer. I'll give these people the same kind of a dose as soon as it's light enough to see."

Fauchon's sympathy turned to bitter contempt. An officer fighting with one of his men, like stevedores, at such a time!

"You ought not to have opened fire!" he said acidly. "There was still a chance. Thuong—"

"Yes, Thuong!" Rombillac broke in. "I know. Do you want to know why I opened fire? Do you remember the dispatch bearers who left here this afternoon with a safe-conduct from Thuong? Well, they're down there in the courtyard—killed, ripped to pieces. I don't advise you to look them over. They're enough to turn your stomach upside down. That's Thuong for you, the dirty devil."

"All this could have been avoided!" shouted Desmarest. "We were doing our best—"

"I don't want you to open your mouth in my presence," barked Rombillac. "You're as bad as he is. You ran away and sacrificed your employees to bring us in. You forced us to play your dirty game, so that you can get your monopolies and your concessions. By God, you're not fit to be touched with tongs!"

"Monsieur," sputtered Desmarest, "such language is intolerable! I will not—"

"It's the truth, you blackguard, and you know it. If I get out of here alive I'll nail you to the cross."

"Sodecol may have something to say about that," retorted Desmarest. "Sodecol happens to have a certain amount of influence."

"Not enough to keep me quiet."

Desmarest, his lips twisted and white, took a step in Rombillac's direction.

"You will go on trial—" he began.

Something struck the shutters. A slat flew to pieces. Very slowly Desmarest raised his hands to his chest. A puzzled look crept into his eyes.

"Hit," he said in a small, colorless voice.

A pinkish foam bubbled out of the corner of his mouth. Blood oozed through his fingers pressed to his chest. He rocked back on his heels, gave one gurgling cry, and pitched forward onto his face.

"There are worse ways of dying," commented Rombillac. "He's in luck."

Fauchon pulled himself together.

"This is neither the time nor the place for a dispute," he declared. "Now that the worst has happened, I claim the privilege of shouldering a rifle. I am a sergeant of the reserve, Monsieur le Capitaine. I place myself at your disposal. If I can do anything—"

His speech was interrupted by the sudden advent of Sergeant Kostakov who was laboring under the stress of some great emotion.

"Mon Capitaine," he burst out, "if you

don't mind . . . looking out the window . . . the attack has stopped all at once. I gave the order to cease fire. Something seems to be coming this way."

The uproar had subsided to an uneasy murmur. Rombillac blew out the candles and opened the shutters. The street was alight with the red glare of torches. As the light grew brighter the last sound died away.

Around the bend in the road, rising high above the wall of the compound lurched the palanquin of His Majesty King Suyen-Tchen-Doi.

"The king!" stuttered Fauchon. "Coming here. The k-king!"

The palanquin swayed to a standstill outside the gateway. The blurred sound of voices reached Rombillac and Fauchon as they leaned out the window.

"And I don't give a curse who you are!" shouted someone. "I don't know anything about kings coming in here. You wait there until I call the captain."

"He wants to come in," sobbed Fauchon. "For God's sake let him in! But let him come in!" He wrung his hands as he raced along neck and neck with Rombillac. "We ought to have a guard of honor to receive him. I ought to change my clothes! I knew Thuong would change his mind. Didn't I tell you we could depend upon Thuong?"

Rombillac let this question go unanswered. He was too busy shouting orders.

Minutes later the palanquin squeezed through the gateway. The bearers lowered it to the ground. Having done so they prostrated themselves in the mud. The guard of honor presented arms, while out of sight on the rooftop two machinegun crews covered the assembled dignitaries, ready to hose them down with lead if anything were to go wrong.

But there was not a single hitch.

Councillor Thuong's voice issued from the depths of the palanquin.

"With peace in his heart, His Serene Highness comes to you to give his formal assent to the treaty of protectorate.

"He bids Captain Rombillac, Monsieur Fauchon and Monsieur Desmarest to enter into his presence."

An attendant had placed a ladder in front of the curtains.

"I think I ought to go in first," whispered Fauchon. "I am the head of the mission."

There was a brief colloquy behind the draperies and Thuong called out:

"His Celestial Majesty wishes to do Captain Rombillac the honor of receiving him first. He has implicit confidence in Captain Rombillac's sense of fair play and his willingness to let bygones be bygones."

ROMBILLAC was rather non plussed by this declaration, nevertheless he stepped smartly inside the palanquin, raised his hand to vizor of his kepi . . . and his mouth fell wide open.

The king sat on his throne, smiling his way into eternity. At his feet squatted Councillor Thuong. A thread of blood ran from a cut on his lip over his several chins. The cap with the peacock feather was crammed down over his eyes. The feather was broken. He looked woebegone and apprehensive.

Behind him, holding a gun against his neck, crouched Legionnaire Dawson with the sacred seven-tiered crown of Pnom-Tao balanced at a dizzy angle on his closecropped head.

For a long moment no one spoke. Finally Dawson said:

"I have returned, mon Capitaine. The Anamites got themselves killed. If it's all the same to you I'd like to sign on again. I changed my mind about going to America."

Rombillac tried to be calm.

"Don't you think," he said, "we could discuss that matter a little later? I'd like to know for instance what the devil you are doing in this vehicle, how you got into it, and why the hell you are wearing that crown."

"Who," gasped Fauchon, "who is this-er-person?"

"Oh, just one of my men," snapped Rombillac. "The one I was telling you about—I had the fight with. If you'll keep quiet we may find out what he has to say."

Fauchon gave up trying to understand anything.

"Certainly," he agreed. "Delighted!"

"Now!" ordered Rombillac. "Begin!"

"The gun's empty," grinned Dawson. "That's one thing. You see, mon Capitaine, I had a few drinks and then I sort of wandered into the temple. By the way, there's enough artillery in that temple to outfit a

couple of battalions. And when I saw the king was dead I said to myself, 'That son of a gun ain't on the level—' "

"No," Rombillac said firmly. "Not that way. Start at the beginning. You left here at four-thirty. Now go on."

Dawson was rather hazy about many things, but gradually they pieced his story together.

"And," he concluded, "I said to him 'Specimen of a cow, you aren't dealing with a civilian now, you're dealing with a Legionnaire. We'll tote Old Father Christmas over to the compound and let him sign the treaty.' And he came like a lamb with an empty gun on the back of his neck."

Two pairs of eyes focused on Councillor Thuong.

"You deceived us," Fauchon said indignantly. "Captain Rombillac was justified. You ought to be shot."

"That would be an unwise procedure," murmured Thuong. "The king is dead. That is true. He has been dead four weeks. It is a secret known only to the priests. Even the royal household does not know. I have the power. If the secret is kept I can make war or peace. I can sign the treaty in his name."

"You accept our terms?" demanded Fauchon, unable to conceal his exultation.

"I am at your mercy."

"You are," agreed Rombillac. "You're not going to get five million piasters. You'll get exactly nothing. Why, because you've had plenty already. Am I right, Monsieur Fauchon?"

"Never more so, Monsieur the Captain! Never more so!"

"And no clause is going to be written into the treaty guaranteeing any monopolies to private concerns. Am I right again?"

"I am sure the government will endorse your praiseworthy stand."

"And debts?"

Fauchon waved his hands about and smiled.

"I don't think we have to bother about debts. Legal debts will be taken care of in the normal course of events."

"That suit you?" inquired Rombillac, looking down at Thuong.

"You are very hard," quavered the councillor.

"I haven't finished yet," grunted Rombillac. "You're going to sign the treaty, fix up the succession if any, and then, my lad, you're coming with me to Hanoi. Until we leave a guard of honor will attend you—just to be on the safe side. The governor general will be delighted to make your acquaintance. He'll find a nice quiet place for you to live in, and maybe give you a pension."

A flash of anger shot through Thuong's opaque eyes.

"I will not accept—"

"There's twelve rifles waiting for you if you refuse!"

Thuong bowed his head. It was all over, bar the signing.

A little while later when the noise and the confusion subsided the Legionnaires straggled back to their billets to snatch a few hours' rest.

Corporal Vaardeman was kicking off his boots when Dawson ambled into the room.

"Par example!" exclaimed the corporal. "Where did you come from? You were supposed to have been killed this afternoon. We were going to take up a collection to buy you a marble slab."

"Where have I been?" chuckled Dawson. "Oh, I've been hobnobbing with kings, helping to sign a few treaties—that's all. You see me, Corporal; well, if anybody should ask you, you can tell 'em I'm the power behind the throne. I'm the Gray Eminence of Pnom-Tao, whoever he may be. That bird Fauchon said so."

"Has Rombillac seen you?" a trooper called out from his blankets.

"Has he!" laughed Dawson. "I'll say he has. He made me sign another treaty all on my own to serve another five years in this outfit. That's how much he thinks of me. He knew he was making a mistake when he let me go. Lend me a greatcoat somebody until I can pinch one from No. 4 Platoon. And now move over, you salopards, let the Gray Eminence lie down and sleep. I've had a tough day what with one thing and another."

BLACK CAT

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Where All Black Cats Are Welcome—Mascot or Jinx

FLASHLIGHT put her head over the half-door of her stall and nuzzled at me. The filly was fit. Her hide was like satin, the color of a polished chestnut. Her lustrous eyes, as she nibbled at my sleeve, seemed to say, "I'm winning today."

The black cat that had adopted us, and which had palled up with Flashlight, drifted out of nowhere, mysteriously, as it always did; spookily seeming to materialize in the shadows. It arched its back, purring, with tail erect, weaving airy pretzels about my legs.

Zeke claimed it was a mascot. I hoped so. I needed one. But I was not so sure about black cats. It depends upon how you approach them, or they approach you; if they cross your path, or run away from you. And it's all mixed up. No two countries agree upon it. It had an uncle who stepped on a black cat in the dark, when he was sneaking out from a forbidden rendezvous with his sweetie. The cat turned into a clawing centipede. Uncle was forbidden the house, and he lost the girl. He thought he was very unlucky for a while, and then he changed his mind. So—there you are.

Our cat arrived sight-unseen. She was in the stall one morning, quite at home. Mascot or jinx, she had moved in.

"I'm tellin' you, Mistuh Selwyn, that filly *can't* lose," Zeke asserted. "'Cause why? The hawss's ready to run. The distance and the track am right. You the owner, you *want* her to win. Me, I'm *ridin'* her to win. That cat she *know* she gwine win. Nevuh switch her tail like that, unless. We know she gwine behave at the barrier today."

"I hope so," I told him. Flashlight had been a poor starter, nervous, excited, inclined to be vicious. That was one reason why she had been overlooked in the betting this afternoon. The odds-board gave us twenty-five to one. But we had found out the trouble.

Once we removed the wolf teeth, vestig-

ial remnants of primordial steeds, from each side of her grinders; she behaved like a lamb. Instead of a teething, petulant babe.

The filly had not been in a race since. And Zeke was right. The distance, six-furlongs in the Sandown Handicap for two-year-olds, was right. The condition of the track was right. But I was worried. I *had* to win this race. I owed over three hundred dollars for feed to "Judge" Lyman, and he had been nasty about it.

FLASHLIGHT was the last of my string, frayed by the fingers of Fate. By breeding, she should be the best of them. She was sound as a mountain trout, without fault or flaw; and she had the speed.

"Look what she clocked this mawnin'," said Zeke. "One-ten! What it take Man o' War to win when he was two-yeah old? One-eleven-three-fif'; Futurity Stakes, Belmont Park. Yessuh."

"When he did that in nineteen-nineteen," I said, "he was packing a hundred and twenty-seven pounds. You rode Flashlight this morning at about a hundred and twelve. She carries one-twenty-five in the race."

"Anyone 'ud think you-all didn' *want* this hawss to win. Look at Ekkypoise. In nineteen-thirty he toted hundred an' twenty-six pounds in the Eastern Shore Handicap. What he do then, huh; when *he* was two-yeah old? Bes' he could do, to win, was one-twelve-an'-two-fiffs. We's gwine make record today, Mistuh Selwyn."

"Stuffy" Dalon came nosing into the stable. Dolan was once a jockey, and a good one. But he was tricky, and got ruled off. He put on fat. Now he was a tipster, a tout who could pick a winner pretty often, but usually named three or four nags in one race to the suckers. A pretty shady customer, Dolan, but he had a name of playing fair with his pals.

"I hear the filly looks good," he said.

"Who told you—and what?"

"My stop-watch told me, if it was tickin' right this morning. I might have stopped her down wrong, seein' I was a bit jittery. I don't often go pickin' mornin'-glories that early."

Zeke and I had had the filly out before sun-up. We had made the trial in the morning twilight. There had been one or two fence-riders, but they had been on the far side from the finish. We had taken care of that. But if Dolan had been one of them, the word might have passed. The odds were holding up. Yet I didn't like it. I had a hunch things were going too smoothly. Luck was due to shake me by the hand, but it might be waiting to give me another kick in the breeches.

"You clocking *me,* Dolan?"

"Aw, not to give you away, Mr. Selwyn. Not for outsiders. But I'm toutin' Flashlight to win. What I tout don't affect the odds none. I'm lucky today. I pick four guys an' a couple dames, who'll bet on the filly. I stand to get a nice cut. Gord knows I need it."

He was genuinely injured. "I got my *own* dough up," he said. "My eatin' money. On the nose."

That was the way I had bet all I could rake and scrape, borrow and pawn. Eight hundred and forty dollars in all. Not much, to spread across the board; enough to set me on my feet properly, at twenty-five to one, after paying off. And, if the filly proved that good—?

A BUGLE sounded. Zeke, jockey and swipe in one, blanketed and hooded the filly. Dolan went into the stall to help him. I didn't figure him as up to any chicanery. I had helped him out once; when he was in bad shape, and his wife ill. He might be a bit of a crook, but he was straight with me. I didn't notice whether he came out, or what happened to him, as I watched Zeke leading Flashlight to the paddock.

She stepped like a young doe, on long, springy pasterns. Her ears were pricked, her head up, her eyes luminous as living jewels, like great magical opals, brown melting into blue.

She was bred for this. She went daintily, but she was keen for it all. Racing was in her blood and spirit. The packed stands, the bugles, the quivering, contagious excitement of man and beast, the glory of her own speed.

I turned back into the stable. Perhaps my luck had turned, maybe the black cat—

There it was, gliding by me. It made a sudden scoot across the path of a man

just coming in. And I hoped her crossing meant bad luck for him.

My hunch of trouble had materialized. I knew the man, a deputy-sheriff, one of the lean, crafty crackers who get their badges through murky politics, who act as tax collectors, serve summonses, carry out evictions, enjoying the authority and the dirty work.

He gave me a false, brown-toothed grin. I knew his errand, not the first of its kind at the track. Nemesis arriving at the crucial moment. It was that damned feed-bill.

"I got some papehs to serve on you-all, Mr. Selwyn," he said with mock deprecation. He was gloating inwardly, especially since I was not of his state, but from Kentucky. "Reckon I'll have to attach yo' filly to satisfy Jedge Lyman's claim."

Lyman's title of "judge" attained from his appreciation of liquor. But he was also a good judge of horseflesh. He wanted my filly. She rated more than his bill, whatever her past performances.

"You can't do that—until after the race," I said. "If she wins, I can clear the attachment a hundred times over."

"If she wins." He grinned his sly grin. "Looks like the experts don't think she's so hot, by the odds. The jedge, he 'lows he most owns her, anyway, 'count of the feed he's put into her. Of course, if you kin pay—"

A bugle blew again. The saddling-call. Flashlight was due at the start in a few minutes.

I went hot and cold. It was like taps blown over the grave of my last chance. This was my last show.

"Why not wait until after the race?" I asked, sick at having to plead with him; with his half-baked, biscuity face, his pale blue eyes and foxy smile.

"She wouldn't know she was ever in it."

I knew he was lying. The pupils of his eyes were quivering. Lyman had been tipped-off. I thought of Dolan, looked for him. Flashlight was entered in my name. If she was attached she could not run in his. Not now. But he would clean-up with her. He had nothing to lose.

The deputy's face was greasy with a malicious triumph as I stood in the door, facing him. His back was to the stall. He started to fumble in his breast pocket for his papers.

And then his eyes were set and goofy. A silly smile melted his indeterminate features, as if they were a waxen mask in the sun. His knees buckled, and he went down to them, down to the floor.

It was no act of mine. No intention. But it was too providential to be overlooked. He had passed out with some sort of stroke. He had not served his papers. The filly was free to run.

I took a good look at him, at his eyes, felt his pulse. It was sturdy enough. I hauled him into the stall, laid him on the clear straw. Something seemed to stir in a dark corner. Likely enough the cat. I went out, locking the door after me. He would not come around for a while, but he was all right. I have seen plenty of men in his case.

The bugle shrilled again. They were saddled, being called-out for the race. In two or three minutes it would all be over but the shouting. And if he was up and shouting, nobody would notice it.

The black cat bolted out between my legs, went prancing off like a sprite, yellow eyes gleaming.

SIX furlongs is three-quarters of a mile. It takes from seventy to seventy-five seconds for a top-horse to cover. The average pulse beats seventy to the minute. It accelerates, marks time to the tattoo of hoofs, the springing leaps.

They were off! Flashlight was well away. There had been no need to give Zeke any last instructions. He knew the filly, and she knew him; I could see him through my binoculars, clinging like a monkey on her withers. She had been given Number Five in the barrier stalls. Now she was running third, easy and true.

Blackcock had the rail, making pace for his stable-mate, Gamester, the odds-on favorite. It was a race.

They were carrying her wide at the turn —Blackcock and Gamester. But Blackcock was tiring, and Flashlight coming strong. The field tailed them, though the bay gelding, Jabberwock, was hitting his stride, moving up. Fast, on the inside. He passed the failing Blackcock. His nose was up to Gamester's girth.

Zeke made his bid. There was an opening between them and he tried for it. Gamester had the rail. Gamester would win, if Zeke had to keep wide on the last of the curve.

They were in the straight, the beginning of the stretch. Flashlight's muzzle was between the flanks of the others. She was gaining at every jump.

I let out a groan. They had her pocketed. They would not let her through. Two white boys, one Irish, and one Italian; combined against the Negro.

No chance now. They were too closely woven. If Flashlight had been behind, and clear, I thought she could have made it, even if Jabberwock's rider bored out. Those two were clever lads. They did not mean to be disqualified for fouling. Flashlight had nosed-in. They did not have to give way.

There was a sorrowful gladness in seeing how she ran, how she challenged, going free, but shut-off from the sprint I could feel burning within her.

Twenty yards to go—and the crowd shouting, at the driving finish!

Some wag called it the Ripley finish—"Believe it or not!" On sheer performance, on reserve, Flashlight had the race won. Gamester was dropping back, but not enough, not at that stage of the game. It was a question of seconds.

And then—and then—something streaked across the track, hellbent. A black bur of speed. A cat. *Our cat.*

There may have been a dog around under the grandstand. It might have been sheer caprice. It might have been a reincarnation of Bubastis, the cat-goddess of Egypt, impersonating Fate.

Jabberwock swerved—Flashlight went by Gamester, headed Jabberwock, crossed the wire, winner by a head. Time—one-eleven and a fifth.

I don't know where Bubastis—if it were Bubastis—went. I never saw that cat again. But all black cats are welcome to my stable.

IT WAS not a popular victory. It was not an outstanding race—even though a track record was broken. There was no floral horseshoe. Zeke, his black face slashed with pearl, took the filly away, to

cool her off. I went to the pari-mutuel window to realize. I saw Dolan hanging round, waiting to see if those, to whom he had tipped the filly, were cashing in.

He gave me a joyous wink, and I knew he had got at least part of his cut.

It was only then, with my pockets lined with bills, that I remembered the deputy. I could satisfy Lyman's claim within the limit.

I was walking on air when I got back to the stable and opened the door. The deputy was still in the straw, but he was coming to. I helped him to his feet.

"You slugged me, dern ye, you slugged me from behind! But you got to take the papers."

"Hand them over," I said. "So I slugged you from behind, when I was standing in front of you. There are just two in my outfit, as she stands. Zeke and myself. Zeke was in the paddock. Did you have a fit, or were you drinking?"

He thrust the papers at me, and I accepted them.

"The filly won," I said. "The race is over. I got twenty-five to one." I showed him my winnings.

"Lyman'll give me hell fer this. Reckon I'll lose my job. I tell you, somethin' hit me."

He felt his head gingerly, back of one ear.

"I got a lump, big as a pigeon's egg," he said. "Must have been someone back in the stall."

"I didn't plant him there," I said honestly. "You tell Judge Lyman you couldn't find me. And put a plaster on that lump."

I peeled off a century note and gave it to him. His shallow eyes bulged. He slipped away, as if he were afraid I'd take it away from him.

Dolan arrived, with Zeke, and the filly.

"How did you make out?" I asked.

"Three outa the bunch played," he said. "Only one on the nose. The rest smeared it. But I did pretty good."

He started to help Zeke unblanket. The filly was puffing for a drink, looking for her mash.

I stripped another century off that nice roll of mine, slipped it to Dolan. Zeke would get his later.

"What's this for?" asked Dolan.

"You can call it an advance, if you want to come to work for me. I'm buying horses. I can use you, Stuffy."

He was a hard lad; but he was soft, in spots. He began to cry, quietly but earnestly.

"Gee, Mr. Selwyn, you mean it? I don't see now why I rate this century note."

"What made you slug the deputy? It was either you, or the cat."

"Why wouldn't I slug that louse? The filly was right, an' him an' Lyman knew it. They had it rigged agin' you. I was back in the stall, see; and I had a sap with me, see; so when he tries to pull his play, I let him have it, back of the ear."

He took a blackjack from his pocket, a weapon of soft leather with a bulbous head filled with buckshot.

"I know you won't stand for this sort of stuff," he said. "Take it, Mr. Selwyn."

"Throw it in the river, Dolan."

Zeke came out grinning from the stall.

"Ah won me nine bucks last night at craps," he said, "an' put it on the nose. Baby, I got me a ticket at twenty-five to one."

"Go and cash it," I told him. "Lose it tonight, if you want to. You've got plenty more coming."

"No suh. I ain' shootin' no mo' craps. I'se gwine entertain mah honey."

"How about you, Dolan?"

He was still sniffling. "I'm going to show this to the wife and tell her I've got a job—with you."

When they were gone I counted over the roll, figured up my debts, and what I might have to pay for the start of my new string.

I could see the blue grass waving in Kentucky.

Dolan had his wife, Zeke his money.

And there was someone in Old Kentucky —for me.

RULE OF THUMB

By
KARL DETZER

Trooper Larry Martin of the Michigan State Police Knows All About Keeping His Eyes Open and Remembering What He Sees

TROOPER LARRY MARTIN crossed the state line between Indiana and Michigan at seven o'clock that June morning. He had spent the night in South Bend, where he delivered a repentant embezzler to the sheriff of St. Joseph County. It had been an unexciting task. Now, en route home, there was no need to hurry.

He swung from State Highway 40 into U. S. 12 at Paw Paw. Squinting into the bright sunshine, he whistled dolefully while he thought of the three hundred odd miles that still lay between him and his station at Traverse City.

Instead of the trim blue and gray uniform of the Michigan state police, Martin traveled today in an inexpressive dusty brown suit, slightly baggy at the knees, and a brown slouch hat somewhat the worse for five years of off-duty wear. His small dark car, like himself, was in plain clothes. Clipped over each door, to hide the police insignia and white stenciled number, an inconspicious patch of waterproof cloth hung neatly.

So to most observers along the way, Martin might have been a traveling salesman out on his rounds. Only initiates would have observed the patch on the door, the military set of the driver's broad shoulders, and the slight bulge which the shoulder holster made under his left arm.

He drove steadily at forty miles an hour, thoughtfully observed the license plates on all cars that passed him, and ignored the jabbing thumbs and the pleading eyes of hitch hikers who were strung along the highway every half mile or so, down in this part of the state. Martin had a particular aversion for hitch hikers. They wanted something for nothing, which was the trouble with too many people these days. He passed them up, as a matter of principle. Besides, they made trouble sometimes.

Thus he passed through Kalamazoo, where he turned north again on U. S. 131. The short-wave radio receiver under the dash was signaling at the minute, and the operator in the station at East Lansing announced: "WRDS, Michigan State Police, testing. Time, 10:45 A.M."

Trooper Martin yawned and looked at the gasoline gauge. Why didn't the sergeant send some of those young troopers on these long trips? Why pick on the oldest man in

the post? He yawned again. No denying he was getting old. Time that somebody got round to thinking of making him a corporal. Of course they weren't making any corporals these days! or sergeants, either. Breaking them, instead. Economy.

HITCH HIKERS were strung more thickly along the road here, busy with their thumbs. Martin paid no attention to any of them until he had passed Plainwell, twelve miles north of Kalamazoo. Then, without reasoning why he did it, almost to his own surprise, he pressed slowly on his brake and pulled over to the side of the road.

Another young man had hailed him, begging a ride. But something in this one's manner of walking and his method of signaling interested the trooper. The hiker didn't limp. But he stepped uneasily, as if his feet hurt; as if he weren't used to walking, maybe. He was slightly under medium height, exceedingly thin, and he carried a light tan raincoat over his left arm.

Martin leaned across and opened the right hand car door, and the man ran, still with the peculiar gait, and climbed in.

"Mornin'," Martin said. "Noticed the new wrinkle. Where you goin'?"

"What new wrinkle's that?" the young man asked. His voice was harsh, yet not loud, as if his vocal cords had sand in them. "Going to Grand Rapids. Looking for a job."

"Yeh." Martin nodded. "Lots of people do that. You ask what new wrinkle? Well, when there's hitchers hangin' 'round every cross road in bunches like bananas, and all of 'em thumbin', what do *you* do? You go original. Don't use your thumb. Just point your finger."

The fellow grinned. Martin, observing him professionally saw that he had three gold teeth in front, and a small triangular scar on his upper lip and that the upper lid of his right eye drooped slightly.

"Never thought of that," the young man said. "Fact is, though—if I was to thumb my way, I'd do a long stretch of sitting on the roadside."

He held up his right hand and the trooper, glancing at it, realized that it was necessity rather than originality which had drawn his attention to the man. For there was no thumb. It had been amputated—and not so long ago, either—and the scar testified to poor or hurried surgery, and there were several small black spots imbedded on the edge of it.

"I see," Martin nodded. He made a clucking, sympathetic sound with his tongue. "Too bad. How'd you lose it?"

The hitcher did not at once reply; instead he had bent forward and was observing with some curiosity the volume control knob of the short-wave radio, clamped to the steering post. It was unlike an ordinary car radio, in that there was no dial, for a police receiver is set to intercept only its own frequency. Martin had turned off the radio before he stopped the car, so that now not even the gentle continuous crackle of the generator sounded in it.

The hitch hiker asked, "What kind of chatter box is that?"

Trooper Martin drove twenty yards before replying. Then he merely evaded. "Old fashioned. It's broke," and persisted, "How'd you lose your thumb?"

"Got it jammed up in a fanbelt," the young man reported. He continued to look distrustfully at the radio.

"That's too bad," Martin sympathized. He glanced again at the man beside him, classifying him professionally. A rowdy sort of kid, probably, but nothing really remarkable about him. Anyone might get a thumb off, one way or another, or have three gold teeth, or a small scar on his upper lip, or a droop to one eye. No, nothing remarkable except his bright tan shoes, and they were unusual only because they covered a hitch hiker's feet. Most fellows Martin had noticed hiking up these pavements wore big, heavy old shoes, that wouldn't hurt, in case everybody was too hard-hearted to pick them up.

This man's shoes were new and nicely shined, without a scratch or stone bruise on them; new, and small, too, with hard narrow pointed toes. Martin could see the way the fellow's foot pressed out at the sides; if he ever went hitch hiking himself, he decided, he'd certainly put on a pair of shoes that was big enough.

His passenger remained silent, unlike most hitchers; they liked to talk, all

the ones Martin had ever known; tried to pay for their rides by telling humorous anecdotes. He didn't like anecdotes while he was on the road; they kept him from watching car numbers closely enough as they approached and passed him. Fortunately, this fellow merely sat smoking cigarettes.

Martin entered Grand Rapids. He had crossed three sets of railroad tracks and driven a mile through the south side industrial section, when the passenger suddenly said:

"Hey look it—I'm getting out here!"

Martin pressed on the brake a little too hastily, and the man was thrown forward, off his balance, so that he lifted his right hand quickly and caught the windshield, to keep from being pitched against it.

"Sorry," the trooper apologized, "didn't mean to do that."

" 'S all right," the hitch hiker said.

"Hope you get that job," Martin told him.

"Hope so," the fellow replied. "That's a police radio, ain't it?"

"Where y' ever get that idea?" Martin countered.

The fellow laughed, and climbed down without remembering to say thank you.

Martin grunted. That was the way with these thumbers. Lift 'em thirty-five miles, and they walk off without even offering a cigarette. And this one wasn't so dumb, either. He watched the fellow limp up the street and around the corner.

Martin lighted his corncob pipe, reflecting that it was his own fault. He should have stuck to his rule of never picking up anybody.

He followed the rule, thereafter; simply drove northward alone into the waning afternoon, and as the sun prepared to settle behind the hills, he turned off the concrete into the cinder drive at Seventh District headquarters in Traverse City. He stretched noisily and thoroughly as he climbed out, made a note of his total mileage, and walked into the district commander's office.

That rangy lieutenant turned from the typewriter on which he was pecking out his daily report, tipped his cap farther back on his head, took a pair of good-duck dice out of his pocket and rolled them together in his hand.

"Get your buddy to South Bend all right?" he asked.

"Yeh," Martin replied. "Here's the receipt for him, sir. That sheriff was tickled to make his acquaintance again. Put him right in behind the revolvin' door."

"Anything on the road to report?"

"Nothin', sir."

"Much traffic?"

"Nothin' but leg. If every thumb that jerked my way was a dollar, I'd retire for life."

"Well, I'd hate to lose you, Martin, so I'm glad they aren't dollars." The lieutenant grinned and tossed a piece of scratch paper across the desk. "You might look into this tonight."

"Who? Me? Tonight?"

The commander missed the anguish in Martin's voice. He went on carelessly. "This lady reports how some gunmen invaded her chicken coop last night and hooked two settin' hens. Down to Empire, in Leelanan County. Run over there after supper." He ignored the expression on the trooper's face. "When you're done with that, you better take a trip around the horn, through Provemont and Sutton's Bay. Look for headlight violators. Get in by midnight," he added, "and you'll have plenty sleep."

ALONZO P. HARDESTY had placed his bag of golf sticks and his new steel rod and box of flies in the back seat of his car in Chicago shortly before nine o'clock that same July morning. He swung through Grant Park, followed the Dunes highway across Indiana around the end of Lake Michigan, and U. S. 12 as far as Kalamazoo. Then he turned north into U. S. 131 approximately an hour and fifteen minutes after Trooper Martin had swung around that same corner.

At noon from the lobby of the Hotel Pantlind at Grand Rapids, he telephoned to his wife at Clear Lake, in Mecosta County, directing her to meet him in Big Rapids at half past three and go with him to the country club.

Three miles north of Howard City, he slowed to pick up a hitch hiker who was limping slightly and pointing northward with his finger instead of his thumb.

"How far you going?" Hardesty asked, by way of opening the conversation.

"Big Rapids," the man told him. "Looking for a job."

"That's where I'm going," Hardesty said. "Jobs still pretty scarce?"

The young man talked affably. It was not until they had passed Stanwood that something about the fellow stirred Hardesty's suspicion. The tan raincoat, which the hitcher had allowed to sag over his knees, somehow had slid up so that it covered his lap. From beneath it suddenly poked the muzzle of a revolver.

"Now, mister," he warned Hardesty, "no funny business. I don't want to iron you off, see? All I want is your money and your car."

Hardesty cried: "Why you—"

"Ste—ady," the other warned. "Drive on. Careful!"

"I'll get out here," Hardesty offered, his words scraping up dryly through his throat. "Give you my purse. You take the car."

The other shook his head.

"Not here, no. Too much traffic. Too many people. You go on, till I tell you to stop. I know a place where you'll not get to a telephone right quick. Just keep going. And not a funny move."

TROOPER MARTIN completed his investigation of the disappearance of two setting hens in the village of Empire and drove north through the darkness up the long hill on the lake shore road. A chill fog was blowing in from the beach and Martin closed the window on his left. He wore his uniform tonight, dark tunic with broad gray shoulder patches, gray breeches and black belt, and puttees. The radio had completed its 9:30 summary of all calls since the previous midnight and was busy with routine signals and dispatches.

The Ohio state sheriff's radio had just reported, and WRDS had rebroadcast the fact, that seventy-two pairs of pants had been stolen tonight from a store in Perrysburg. Then the signal buzzed again.

"Attention Rockford and Traverse City posts and cars," the operator said crisply. "A missing person report. Alonzo P. Hardesty —H for Holland, A for Adrian, R for Richmond—"

Martin listened to the spelling with neither great interest nor enthusiasm. Too often the night air was cluttered with missing person reports, which, when traced down, merely meant that some wife had got worried because her husband was late getting home from lodge.

"This man left Grand Rapids shortly after noon," the operator in East Lansing said. "He is believed to have had a considerable sum of money on him. His wife was to meet him in Big Rapids. She was there, and thinks she saw him drive right through town. There was at least one other party in the car with him. She thinks Hardesty was driving, and this other party was sitting beside him. There may have been a man in the back seat."

Martin, driving along slowly, allowed three deep wrinkles to gather in his forehead. He'd been over exactly that route at approximately that time. No, a little earlier. Just before noon. How could a man disappear between Grand Rapids and Big Rapids in broad daylight? The frown deepened as he listened.

"There seems to be no doubt that the wife is right," the operator in East Lansing said. "A filling station keeper in Reed City reports seeing car of this description, with two men in it, headed north about half past three or a little after. They appeared to be arguing. All cars keep a close lookout."

The voice paused. But Martin was still thinking about the case when the operator directed: "Rockford post send a car north to pick up trail of this missing man. Repeating description of missing person and missing car—1934 model DeLuxe sedan, six wire wheels—"

Martin had pulled off at the side of the road and was writing the descriptions on his log. He'd found his memory sagging of late; it was better to put everything down in black and white, and then a man could have something to check back on. He started again at last, turned east at Duck Lake school corner, and jogged over the black surface of the county road toward Provemont.

As he topped the rise west of the village and came down into town, past the gasoline storage tanks which loomed on his left, he was aware suddenly of some excitement ahead in the street. A dance was in progress;

he could see the lights in the community hall, and the cars parked in a disorderly clutter near the church. But out in the highway men and women were milling in small groups, heads close together.

THE trooper halted at the intersection and looked and listened. Now that his business did not take him across state lines, he had removed the waterproof shield from the car door, and the number 55 and the police insignia stood out clearly, painted white on black.

At sight of it the crowd moved. A plump smallish man with a round grave face and reversed collar stepped forward quickly.

"Hello, Father, what's up?" Martin asked.

The priest's expression was deeply troubled. The crowd which had been chattering in French-Canadian *patois,* in Polish, and in sharp short English sentences, became suddenly quiet. Before the priest spoke a car thundered over the planks of the wooden bridge, across the narrows of the lake a hundred yards away.

"That's the sheriff now, I guess," the clergyman said. "We've got a dead man on our hands, Trooper."

"Dead man?" Martin repeated. "Hit and run?"

"No, no." The priest waited till the sheriff drove up hurriedly, unbent his six feet two and his two hundred pounds, and climbed down backwards from his car. "Come here, Minnie," the priest said, then. "Tell these officers about it."

A girl with dark eyes set wide apart and a droop to her mouth which prevented her from being pretty, stepped forward uneasily. She had been crying and tear stains covered her face.

"We were having a dance," the priest said. "Polish wedding dance. Minnie, here, and three other girls got tired. Wedding dances last a long time—"

"Yeh, I know," Martin said. He nodded to the sheriff; he knew this big fellow—a good egg, liked to work with him.

"Minnie was cleaning a cottage today, four miles south of here on Lake Leelanau," the priest explained. "The owners are coming up tomorrow. They sent her the key so she could get the place ready. She still had the key tonight, so she and these other girls —those are the three standing over there—got into a car and drove down to that cottage. Tell them what you found, Minnie."

The girl gulped.

"Gosh, we was fools!" She addressed Trooper Martin.

He waited, not committing himself.

"Just wanted to rest," she said. "We went down and I unlocked the door. Right away I smelled something. Cigarettes, I guess. Tobacco, anyways. I ought to have knowed then somebody'd been in."

"You went right in?" the sheriff asked.

"Sure we did. We was tired, wasn't we? I knew where the lamps was. Electric lights, they ain't hooked up yet for the season. I lighted a lamp, but there wasn't any chimley for it."

"What time, was that?" the sheriff asked.

"Gosh," Minnie said, "about half an hour ago."

"Then what?" Martin demanded.

"Why, we was looking for a bed, I tell you. Wanted to lay down. We just goes in the downstairs room and there he lays."

"Who?"

"This dead fellah."

"Yeh," Martin said, "dead. Know him?"

The girl shook her head. "No, but he looks high-toned enough. Like a resorter or something."

"We'll go see," Martin said.

WITH Minnie beside him, to show the way, he started southward in his car along the west shore of Lake Leelanau. He questioned the girl again as he drove. She seemed singularly untouched by her discovery. He wondered what young people were coming to.

"Here's the place," Minnie said, after about six minutes. They approached a cottage, that stood alone, without neighbors. "Turn in at that gate."

Martin obeyed. At the door the girl said, "Go straight ahead and you'll see him, all right. Me, I'm staying outside."

Martin pressed the button of his flashlamp and looked around. He saw nothing unusual. Then he said, "Door's open."

"Think we stopped to close any door?" The girl drew back, and Martin, with the sheriff and the priest, entered the cottage.

No odor of cigarettes remained now on

the air, since the door had been open for half an hour. The three men sought the downstairs bedroom.

The man on the bed was well dressed, of middle age, with slightly graying hair. His hands were tied behind him with a piece of heavy line, and the back had been blown out of his head. The rear righthand trousers pocket hung, inside out, but except for that there was no sign of struggle. The bedding was not disarranged.

Martin touched the body and drew back his hand quickly.

"Why, he's almost warm!" he exclaimed. "Hasn't been dead very long. Here, Sheriff, let's see if we can find any identification on him."

Two minutes later he straightened up.

"Hardesty's his name," he said huskily. "Maybe I know something about this case." He opened his notebook. Yes, that was it. Hardesty. Alonzo P.

A NEAT sedan, bearing Illinois license plates, rolled southward swiftly on U. S. highway 131, past the gaily lighted filling stations in the village of Manton. The young man who drove was whistling to himself between puffs at a cigarette. As the lights of another town appeared he ceased whistling. An illuminated sign announced "Cadillac."

"Might as well get me some java here," he told himself. In front of a restaurant he parked his car, turning it in at an angle against the curb. The restaurant was deserted except for a single waiter with dark skin and stiff straight black hair, who was sitting in front of a radio fussing with the dials. The traveling young man saw with interest that the station finder pointed far over to the left into the short-wave band.

To the waiter he said, "Cup of coffee, without cream," and sat down on a high stool at the counter close to the radio.

At the same time the instrument spoke.

"Rockford post send car north to pick up trail of this man. Repeating description of missing person and missing car—1934 model DeLuxe sedan, with six wire wheels." The waiter brought the steaming cup and pushed the sugar bowl closer. But the young man wasn't paying any attention to coffee at the moment. He was listening to the description of the missing car and its license number. That was the same number which just now was parked there at the curb. He'd have to get out fast. He picked up the coffee in his left hand, drank hurriedly, threw down a coin, and went back to the street.

Half a dozen other cars stood nearby. He walked past them, slowly, glancing into the front seat of each. The keys were removed from their ignition locks. The young man scowled.

There was still another machine down the block, but as he started toward it, he saw a policeman crossing the street, keeping an eye on him. He turned abruptly and went back to the car he had originally been driving. The policeman was coming on slowly. Inside the restaurant the radio was repeating the description. Its words cried out through the open door:

"Driving a car with Illinois license—"

The young man stepped on the starter, backed away from the curb, and drove southward at an inconspicuous speed while the policeman stood on the curb and looked incuriously after him.

TROOPERS VAN AND LANG, in response to Martin's first telephone call, arrived at the somewhat isolated cottage on Lake Leelanau shortly before midnight.

Trooper Van climbed out first, carrying a long black fingerprint camera and a fat brief case filled with camel's hair brushes of various sizes, squat jars of dusting powders in light and dark tints, magnifying glasses, films and identification cards.

Martin, however, had not been idle. While his partners were covering the thirty miles from their post, he had managed to pick up certain information. To begin with, the cord which bound the dead man's hands turned out to be a piece of fish stringer, with its brass ends still attached. And the position of the body indicated that there had been no struggle, for not even the rug beside the bed was disarranged and the bedclothing was smooth.

The murder had been committed here, right at this spot; of that there was no doubt. No man could have lived ten seconds after that single shot, and besides there was no blood upon the floor, which there would have been had the body been carried into

the house. Except for eighty-five cents, which the murderer either had missed or been indifferent to, no money remained in the dead man's pockets.

But another group of facts impressed itself chiefly upon the trooper. Tracks of a car had broken through the moist crust caused by the evening dew on the sandy approaches to the cottage. This car had come into the gate and had stopped directly in front of the steps. Footprints of two men, so indistinct as to be of no value in themselves, led from the left side of the car to the cottage door, and the prints of one man from the door to the car. The lock on the door had not been broken, nor, as a careful search disclosed, had any of the window fastenings been tampered with, which indicated that one of the men, at least, had had a key, or that the lock had been skillfully picked.

"Looks like they might of lived here in this house," the sheriff said.

"Looks it," Martin muttered. "Funny."

Yet the sheriff had never heard of Hardesty, nor did the name mean anything to the group at the gate. Martin sought out the girl, Minnie.

"Listen, miss," he began, leading her to his car, out of hearing of the other, "tell me all over again, just how this happened."

But the girl's recital brought out no new facts. Martin prodded her: "How long you worked here?"

"Four, five year. Summers, while these people are resorting."

"Who are the people?"

"Gosh, just two old maids. From Detroit."

"They have lots of company?"

She shook her head. "Never."

"No relatives to visit?"

"Don't think they've got relations."

Martin took time to relight his pipe. "Who's worked for them? Right from the start."

The girl thought for a moment.

"Old man Boulanger built the cottage. Lives over there in town. Noah Pinski was the only one to help."

"Who's Noah?"

"Gosh, he's just a fat guy. Lives over across the lake toward Fountain Point."

Martin checked old man Boulanger and the fat Noah in a mental index.

"Who else?" he demanded.

"Charley Smith. He painted the place. Comes from down around Arcadia. Gets back here sometimes."

"What for?" Martin asked.

SHE told him pointedly, "You're plenty dumb. To work, of course. They send for him. Want him to varnish, maybe, things like that. He's a good looking fellah."

"Sez you," Martin grunted. "What you mean?"

"Oh—" she hesitated, and giggled. "Well, he's kinda thin—not so tall—just good looking, that's all." She paused, thinking. "He's got some swell store teeth."

"Gold, you mean?"

"I'll say. It wasn't him did this, though."

"Who else works here, then?" Martin demanded again.

"Just Mrs. Ryan. She's the cleaning lady. Lives over acrost the hill."

"Big woman?"

"Oh, sure. Weighs about two hundred."

Martin added Mrs. Ryan and Charley Smith to his mental list. "Anybody else?"

"Gosh, unless you count the Bedford boy. He weeds the garden."

"How old a fellow?"

"Thirteen. Wasn't him did it, either."

"You tellin' me?" Martin reproved her.

"This girl, Minnie," he told the other troopers as they arrived a few minutes later, "says she went over everything in this bedroom with a damp cloth about five o'clock tonight. It ought to be easy to find prints, unless this party wore gloves."

Trooper Van already was dusting aluminum powder on the dark footboard of the bed. He asked, over his shoulder, "That girl at the bottom of this?"

Martin shook his head. "You're always thinkin' of women in it."

"Oh, yeah?" Van bent closer to his work. He stood up suddenly. He had found something. "Here they are," he exclaimed.

Trooper Martin focussed his flashlight upon a group of silver patches.

"All four fingers of the right hand," Van said.

"Four?"

"And here's the left. Four fingers and thumb."

He handed Martin a small magnifying glass.

"Notice that right index finger?" he pointed out. "See that small scar—shaped like a Y? Clear, isn't it?"

Martin took a deep breath but did not speak. He was studying the other prints, the four right hand fingers and the slightly blurred impressions of the left hand. They put an idea into his head. While he was still thus engaged a man came over to the door.

"Listen," he called, "your radio's still open and somebody's yellin' for you in it. Says one of you come to telephone and report."

"I'll take it," Martin said. He stood up and straightened his back. "Ain't science grand?" he asked Van.

"You kidding me?" Trooper Van demanded.

"Not a bit," Martin answered. "Give *me* that extra bottle of dust, will you? I know how to brush up prints, too."

He drove away quickly; half a mile up the road he halted and spent five minutes in the front seat of his car, following out his theory alone.

IN THE main street of Cadillac, the machine with Illinois license plates moved slowly southward after leaving the restaurant. Beyond the business section it turned west, and suddenly put on speed. It passed Benson Corner, swung north through the hamlet of Boone, and west again through Harrietta, where it crossed the railway tracks.

At Brethern its driver quietly broke the lock on a gasoline pump in front of a garage and filled his tank, then continued in the direction of U. S. highway 31. He arrived in Manistee without mishap, and after circling the north shore of Manistee Lake, parked his car in a dark side street and limped forward on foot.

This precaution proved valuable to him, for as he turned a corner where the new highway bridge loomed ahead, he observed that a car without lights was parked in the middle of the bridge, with a man in uniform standing beside it.

The discovery changed his plans but did not dismay him. When a man knows a territory, it's impossible for even smart police to block every hole. And these police, the young man reflected, weren't smart. Like most cops, they were blind to everything except the obvious. True, they were hunting this car. But did they know that Hardesty was dead?

And even if they discovered that much, which was unlikely, they'd have no way of telling who killed him. They were hunting the car, of course; watching for it to go south. Well, if it went north, they'd be disappointed, wouldn't they?"

There were plenty of places to hole in up north, especially if you have relations to visit. And plenty of woods to hide a car.

That's what a smart fellow would do, he figured; just what the dumb cops wouldn't expect. He returned to the machine and swung back northward into U. S. 31. Five miles from town he turned left into Michigan highway 22. Let the dumb cops waste time watching bridges!

FROM Provemont, Martin called his office as the radio directed. He shook his head impatiently at his district commander's new orders.

"*Me* go on bridge guard?" he exclaimed. "Listen, sir."

He argued for some five minutes; then ran back to his car and turned westward. He was right—couldn't be anything else. It wasn't just a hunch. What was the matter with headquarters? Lieutenant had sounded pretty mad at the other end.

He stepped on the gas. They'd eat him up tomorrow if this idea came out wrong now. But how could it go wrong? He could read prints as well as the next one.

Thirty minutes later he roared through Empire, where two stolen hens earlier in the night had required his attention. The radio had been silent for a few minutes. He was starting up the long hill when it suddenly vibrated. The voice of the dispatcher cried:

"Attention, everyone! Deputy at Bear Lake just shot it out with Illinois car going north! Step on it, you men in that vicinity."

North! Just as he'd figured—just as he'd told the lieutenant on the telephone.

Martin drove faster. He bumped across

to U. S. 31 between Big and Little Platte Lakes, roared up Benzonia Hill, and near the settlement of Joyfield, just south of the Benzie-Manistee County line, jammed on his brakes.

A car without lights was parked in the road ahead of him.

Martin loosened his revolver, turned on his spotlight, and driving with his left hand, approached it carefully. No one was in it. He drove past, came up behind it, and recognized the number on the Illinois license plates. It was Hardesty's car. But why had the fellow left it?

The trooper turned, and drove past it again. It was empty, all right. And that was a bullet hole in the rear window, too high to have hurt anyone. And another hole in the gasoline tank. That's what had stopped it. It had lost its gas.

Where was the driver? Where the Bear Lake deputy?

Martin examined the seat of the abandoned car carefully for bloodstains. There was none. Satisfied of it, he pulled out his road map of the district and studied it thoughtfully. He took his time. If he were right in his assumptions, he had all the time in the world. If he weren't—

Of course the Bear Lake deputy might have caught the fellow. If so, the radio soon would tell it.

Dawn was beginning to show through the tree tops when he got into his own car and started northward at a leisurely pace. There still was no reason to hurry. As the map had promised, an inconspicuous byway left the main road. Martin got down and looked for footprints.

He found some. But whose? Doubt assailed him for a moment. He might just be wasting his time.

He followed the byway. It wandered aimlessly for a mile, then forked. A weathered sign pointed to the left to Pierport, right to Arcadia. He turned right. As he expected, the footprints turned that way, too.

A quarter of a mile farther he overhauled a man limping heavily. The fellow glanced over his shoulder at the sound of the approaching car, halted, and pointed a finger in the direction of Arcadia.

"Ride?" he shouted.

Martin opened the door as he came abreast of him. "Jump in, buddy," he said. "So you're Charley Smith with the store teeth."

The man stared at him. Martin's revolver was poking through the door.

"Put 'em both up this time, Charley," the trooper ordered. "Atta boy!"

HE QUICKLY searched the man.

"Didn't expect the pleasure so soon after yesterday's ride," he said. "So that's your gun!" He weighed it on his left hand, his own revolver still aimed steadily in his right. "Ain't much of a gun. But the ballistics experts can use it. It'll prove you killed Hardesty. Wrists, Charley. That's it. I like 'em to fit snug. Get in, we're goin' to town."

The car started.

"You left four fingerprints and no thumb on that bed, Charley," Martin revealed, "and some more just like 'em on my windshield. Maybe you forgot how I throwed you off the seat yesterday, comin' into Grand Rapids? And them black spots I see where your thumb used to be, is powder burns. It wasn't a fanbelt took that thumb off. It was a gun. You'd been around in your time, too. Enough to know what a stretch meant, anyway. Said you'd do a stretch of waiting if you had to use a thumb."

From Bear Lake, while the deputy sheriff guarded the speechless prisoner, Martin called his post.

"I knew it was somebody who'd been around that cottage sometime, that much was certain," he explained, "and nobody else the girl talked about fitted the looks of my hitch hiker. They were all too old or too young, except this one."

Over the phone the lieutenant asked a question, and Martin answered, "Why, Lieutenant, I knew he'd turn north, 'cause he had folks near Arcadia. Thought he might head there. And once he left his car, I knew I had plenty of time to catch him. He couldn't walk fast or far, not with the tight shoes he had."

He hung up. It had been an easy case. Just a lot of little things. Little things, and the rule—keep your eyes open and remember what you see. In this case, a hitch hiker without a thumb.

On India's Northwest Frontier——

GREEN EYES

By GARNET RADCLIFFE

THERE are three things in this world which, in the colloquial phrase, take some knowing. Probably you can think of a lot more, but what I refer to are women, the income tax regulations and Afridis. And of the three I maintain that the third-mentioned are the most baffling. For Johnny Afridi is the riddle of the East in a very concrete form. He is an incalculable person, capable of any devilment and about as safe to handle as an untested explosive.

That, of course, explains why the Frontier regiments recruiting Afridi Pathans are so popular with Indian Army subalterns. Youth craves the joy of the unexpected, the thrill of a gamble against the unguessable. But no subaltern commanding Afridis would admit this attraction. If you asked him he'd tell you his hawk-faced cut-throats were as docile as Gurkhas. "Old Johnny Afridi? He only wants a bit of handling. If you know how to take him he's all right." And so forth.

Press the subject and the subaltern will tell you *his* pet theory about Afridis. That he will have one is as certain as it is that night follows day. All subalterns hold theories, a rule to which Slade, Adjutant of the Forty First Piffers, was no exception. And his colonel, who had once been subaltern himself although his present girth and dignity rendered that fact difficult to believe, had not shed his habit of theorizing with the letting-out of his Sam Browne and the donning of field-boots. Indeed, he was, if anything, a keener theorizer than Slade himself, and so convinced of the correctness of his theories as to be prepared to back them any day for fifty rupees—especially when it was a theory that concerned Afridis.

But Slade was equally hot on the subject of Afridis. Hence clashes of opinion in the headquarters office of the Forty First were

Stolen Ponies and Alarming Rumors Are the Chief Exports of the Country of the Afridis; Fighting Is Its Principal Industry

not infrequent. Sometimes Slade proved right, sometimes the colonel did, but much more frequently Johnny Afridi proved them both wrong. Not that that in any way damped their belief in their pet theories. They talked about exceptions that proved the rule and were more convinced than ever about their own rightness.

THIS story concerns itself with two differing theories. How should you judge the character and capabilities of an enlisted Afridi? The colonel said the only possible way was to examine his sheet roll, that being the name given to the document that sets forth his previous record of service. If the sheet roll was all right, the Afridi was all right. Thus the colonel speaking, as he often reminded Slade, from twenty-five years' experience.

But Slade disagreed. His theory—based as he often told the colonel on five years of intensive study of the subject—was that the only way you could tell an Afridi's real character was by the color of his eyes. If they were brown or gray, the Afridi was a good chap. If they were black he needed watching. But if they were green—emerald green and shaped like a cat's—their owner was a treacherous, crafty devil and no more to be admitted to a self-respecting regiment than a certified carrier of bubonic plague.

Then came the inevitable bone of contention. He was a machine-gun *havildar*, an Afridi Pathan called Pattu Din. He had served with the Kurram Militia, the Zhob Levies, the Ninth Baluchis and the Third Divisional Machine Gun Company. Now Pattu Din wanted to transfer to the Forty First where there was a vacancy for a machine-gun *havildar*. His present commanding officer, Major Fulton of Divisional Machine Guns, was strongly in favor of the transfer being made. Over a friendly couple of pegs he warned the colonel of the Forty First that if he missed Havildar Pattu Din he'd be missing a good thing.

"What's his sheet roll like?" said the colonel. "That's the only way of judging an Afridi, by his sheet roll. If his sheet roll's all right I'll take him."

"His sheet roll is excellent," said Major Fulton. "There's not a single crime entry. In fact, Colonel, if it were any other regiment than yours I'd oppose the transfer. I hate the idea of losing Havildar Pattu Din. But since you need a good machine gun havildar so badly—well, I'll waive my own interests and let you have him."

Now Slade had been an insignificant third at that talk. He'd been hovering in the background like a groom whose employer is bargaining for a horse. And it struck him that Major Fulton was just a shade too altruistic. And just a shade too eager. If Pattu Din was really such a paragon, why was the major pressing for his transfer with such suspicious eagerness?

"He's selling the old man a pup," thought Slade. "He knows Pattu Din is a swine and he wants to be rid of him."

BUT he'd no opportunity of warning the colonel then. It was arranged Pattu Din plus sheet roll, should be sent over to the Forty First lines to be vetted by the colonel. And when he was marched into the office by the Jemidar Adjutant the following morning, his first glance told Slade that his doubts of Major Fulton's altruism had been only too well founded. He nudged the colonel's arm.

"Don't have him, sir. He's got green eyes. That proves he's as treacherous as an old collie."

The colonel was annoyed. He had been staring at Pattu Din's sheet roll lying in front of him on the desk. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes he wouldn't have believed it possible for an Afridi with seven years' service to have attained such a sheet roll. The page for crime entries was pure and undefiled as a field of new-fallen snow. Certificates of merit abounded. The only blemish the most critical eye could have detected was that Havildar Pattu Din seemed to have changed his unit with rather curious frequency.

"Rot," said the colonel. "What the devil does the color of his eyes matter? Look at that record of service. You can't say he isn't a good chap in face of that evidence."

But Slade felt it his adjutant's duty to stick to his opinion even in face of irritable seniority.

"I know, sir, but I always say you can't judge an Afridi by his sheet roll. My theory is that a green-eyed Afridi is always a wrong 'un. I've studied the subject for years. If

you take this fellow you'll be sorry. He'll turn out a traitor."

"Bunkum," snapped the colonel. "The record of service is the only way to tell an Afridi. All right, Pattu Din, I will send word to Major Fulton Sahib I am willing to accept the transfer. March him out, Jemidar Sahib."

Havildar Pattu Din's exit would have done credit to a Grenadier sergeant major. As the tramp of his ammunition boots faded away along the veranda, the colonel turned on Slade.

"That's a smart fellow," he said. "Look here, Slade, I'll bet you fifty chips my judgment of Pattu Din is right and yours is wrong."

Slade grinned. Fifty chips would be very useful. He was safe to win the bet, for his theory about green-eyed Afridis had never proved wrong yet.

"I don't like taking your money, sir. Still, if you insist. But you must give my theory a little time to prove itself. Shall we say a year?"

The colonel nodded.

"In a year from today I'll be recommending Havildar Pattu Din for his Jemidarship," he prophesied.

TEN months of the year passed. As far as Havildar Pattu Din was concerned they had been ten months of hard work and faultless behavior.

He had become the colonel's pet. As month followed month and the green-eyed havildar's halo remained undimmed, so did the colonel's jubilation increase. For he wanted to prove to Slade that his theory about sheet rolls was right, and that Slade's theory about green eyes was wrong. On occasions—as for instance when Pattu Din's machine gun platoon won the divisional trophy for all-round efficiency—he teased the adjutant about his failure as a prophet.

"What about those green eyes now, Slade?" he said when the report of the machine gun competition had come in.

And Slade, still unconvinced, could only say, "Wait and see."

And then the Forty First were ordered to go to Balla. Balla, in case anybody doesn't know, is a triangular jumble of brown hills some two hundred square miles in extent on the eastern side of the Furious Gomal. It is mainly populated by scorpions and Afridi Pathans. Stolen ponies and alarming rumors are its exports; fighting is the principal industry. In short, it is one of those typical Northwest hornets' nests which never have been civilized and never will be.

Nobody expected the Forty First to civilize Balla. Indeed, the Brass Hats at Pindi would have been quite sorry if they had civilized that most useful training-ground for young soldiers. But there was no real danger of that happening. Among their own bare, grim, brown hills the Balla Afridis were as nearly invincible as makes no matter.

When he heard of the order to go to Balla, Slade sought out the colonel.

"There's one thing, sir," he said, "and that is that in my opinion Havildar Pattu Din ought to be left at the depot. As you know he's a Balla Afridi himself. It would be a big risk to take him with us. An Afridi's a funny beggar at the best of times, but when he's got green eyes—"

"Green eyes my elbow!" snorted the colonel. "Slade, you're a monomaniac. Haven't you yet realized that Pattu Din is the best N. C. O. in the regiment?"

"Oh, he's efficient all right," Slade said grudgingly. "And I'll hand it to him that he's a wizard with a machine gun. But I trust him less than when I first saw him. He's too clever. I don't like him."

"Ugh! Look at his sheet roll," growled the colonel.

"Look at his eyes," retorted Slade. "If you take him to Balla I'll win that bet and I'd much rather lose it than see the regiment disgraced."

Of course the colonel wouldn't give way. He'd rather have left the Subadar Major behind at the depot than Havildar Pattu Din. So when they went to Balla, Pattu Din went too with his platoon, his mules and his six Vickers guns of the latest patterns, all in the very pink of condition.

AND again it seemed as if Slade's theory were wrong. The scrapping began directly they had crossed the Balla border and, so far from behaving in a treacherous manner, the green-eyed havildar did good work. On the evening of the day

on which he cleared a hillside of snipers by indirect high-angle fire, raining bullets over a shoulder of the hill while an observer from the platoon signaled the range of the invisible enemy to the gunners, the colonel in high good humor fired the now familiar taunt across the E. P. tent that served as mess.

"How's that for green eyes, Slade? Better write your check for fifty rupees now and have done with it."

"Not a bit of it, sir," Slade said. "We're not out of Balla yet, you know."

Days, weeks passed. The Forty First lumbered round Balla as destructive as a bear in an apiary. Burned villages and ruined crops marked their trail. The Afridis recompensed themselves with stolen Lee-Enfields. Everybody—except the few unfortunate casualties—was happy.

A sordid question of rupees, annas and pice put an end to the picnic. Someone in Simla got an attack of economy and decided that Balla had been subdued. That Balla itself was quite unaware of its subjection to the Raj didn't matter. The Forty First were told to go back to Fort Khol. Much to the disappointment of the Balla Afridis, who yearned to test their stolen rifles and feared that inter-tribal warfare would seem very tame after the glorious sport provided by the Forty First, the well-disciplined regiment about-turned and headed for the Chirka Pass, that being the nearest exit from Balla into comparative civilization.

Havildar Pattu Din looked at the Chirka Hills with nostalgic green eyes. He was nearing home. Although nobody else in the regiment was aware of the fact, he had been born and bred in a village that was perched like a hawk's eyrie above the ravine-like pass. Sad to relate, he had left his village in black disgrace. Some trifle about the wife of one of his numerous brothers. He had knifed the outraged husband and then had left the village to take service with the British Raj, speeded on his way by the bullets of his furious kinsmen.

STRIDING at the head of his platoon over the rough track through the foothills with the familiar outlines of the Chirka Hills before his eyes, a great desire to visit the old folks at home came to Havildar Pattu Din. He had not seen his father, who was Headman of the village, for nearly eight years. To go through Chirka Pass without paying him a visit would have been an unfilial act of which Pattu Din would have scorned to be guilty.

It had been decided that before negotiating the steep pass the Forty First would make a three day halt to rest the transport animals. That suited the green-eyed havildar. On the first night of the halt, almost naked and moving as soundlessly as a cat, he crept out of the camp unseen by any sentry.

The prodigal son was going home. Not empty-handed, however. For the purpose of making the peace with that fierce old gentleman, his father, he took with him three Lee-Enfields and as much ammunition as he could carry. He had stolen the rifles from

the sides of their sleeping owners with a skill only to be found in an Afridi.

While passing the sentries he had a knife between his teeth. If any sentry had seen the deserter he'd have been a dead man, but no sentry did. It was a very dark night and Pattu Din's skill in crawling was only equaled by his skill in using a machine gun.

Safely clear of the camp Pattu Din looked back to grin.

"That's the third time we have been raided by a rifle-thief since entering Balla," he reflected. "The colonel sahib will be very much annoyed."

A little more than an hour later he was entering his own village. He had ascended by a path up the hills that would have made a goat feel giddy. But giddiness didn't trouble Havildar Pattu Din. Nor did the fact that he was burdened by three rifles and a large quantity of ammunition discommode him in the least.

More lucky than many returning exiles, he found his village quite unspoiled by the march of so-called progress. It was just as primitive as when he had seen it last, a collection of caves and mud huts that looked like the lairs of a colony of wild animals.

THE habits of Afridis are nocturnal. When Pattu Din stole into the village his father and the other elders were squatting round a council-fire. And as it was a very self-contained little community where intermarriage was the rule rather than the exception, almost every man present was related to Pattu Din.

The havildar was about as welcome as the poor relation who arrives when the lawyer is opening the will. His father was the first to see and recognize the prodigal. His hand flew to his knife-hilt; he craned through the smoke like some furious old eagle.

"Wherefore art thou come, foot-licker of the English?" he screamed. "Thou dog that betrayed thy salt! Seize him! Sirdar Ali, Nadir Gaksh—"

The knives wheeped from the scabbards and flashed round Pattu Din's head. But he forced his way through the throng and laid the rifles at his father's feet.

"Gifts to prove I am loyal to my salt and no friend of the Unbelievers," he cried. "I have come at peril of my life to bring warning to my kinsmen. Back, fools, and listen to my words. In two days the regiment now camped at foot of the pass is coming to burn this village, destroy the crops and kill every man, woman and child who is found. Allah strike me dead if I speak a lie. It is against the black treachery of the colonel sahib I have come to warn you. Is it a lie? Then Allah destroy me where I stand."

Apparently Allah declined the invitation. The other Afridis were impressed. And they were still more impressed by the sight of the rifles and ammunition—wealth such as had never been seen in that village before.

Pattu Din's father tugged his beard.

"It's a strange tale thou hast brought," he said doubtfully. "Only a few days ago leaflets were dropped from an aeroplane stating hostilities were ended and we had nothing more to fear from the Raj."

Pattu Din's laugh was contempt made audible.

"So you would trust to the faith of the English? Do you not know they are all liars and traitors, given to double-dealing and impossible for honest men to understand? Those leaflets were part of the treachery. The colonel sahib himself gave orders they should be dropped. He hopes to fall on the village unawares. The regiment is to march up the pass as if they had no hostile intent, but when they have reached the open ground at the top—"

With a wealth of detail he described the plot. The tribesmen listened and were convinced. It was just such a treacherous plan as they could have rejoiced in carrying out themselves.

But it's one thing to plot treachery yourself and another to hear that it is being plotted against you. Their faces darkened and they gripped their knives as they listened.

These treacherous dogs of Unbelievers! Allah be thanked they had been warned in time!

PATTU DIN's father wrung his hands in wrath and dismay.

"We can do nothing save go to the hills and hide. How can we fight an entire regiment? The village will be burned and the crops destroyed."

Pattu Din knelt and laid his head on his

father's feet in token of submission and fealty.

"May I give thee counsel?"

"Say on."

"Then listen. The treachery and stealth of the English must be met with the same weapons. The regiment must be ambushed as it comes up the pass. They expect no attack; they will be thrown into confusion by the first volley. And then I and the Afridis in my platoon who are all loyal men like myself will come to your assistance. We march in the front of the regiment and it will be a simple matter to take the rap-rap guns that are in our charge and turn them on the others. In that narrow place where there is no escape they will be slaughtered like sheep. There are six rap-rap guns each firing faster than a regiment. The regiment will be utterly destroyed and the rifles and gear will become our property. Is it a good plan, my kinsmen?"

A deep chorus of *"Wah's"* signified assent. Pattu Din sprang to his feet.

"Then all that remains is to decide where the ambush can best be laid. I must know the exact spot so that I can be ready to use the rap-rap guns. But we must make haste. I have to return to the camp before my absence is detected; otherwise the colonel sahib might suspect I had come to give thee warning of the treachery he has planned. Come, let us plan the ambush."

Just before dawn the green-eyed havildar got back into the camp. As before he crept unnoticed past the sentries. Next morning he was the first N. C. O. to detect that the camp had been visited by a rifle-thief during the night, and was commended by the colonel for his vigilance.

TWO days later the Forty First struck camp and moved up the Chirka Pass. In view of the fact that hostilities were over it was not judged necessary to picket the heights. An advance guard was sent out and that was all.

But on the Northwest Frontier you never know. As the event proved there *was* an ambush prepared about halt-way up where the pass was narrowest. It was a clever ambush. Indeed, if it had not been for the prompt behavior and magnificent shooting of one man the situation might have been quite nasty.

The hero of the occasion was Havildar Pattu Din, who, fortunately, was with the vanguard. He was easily the first to detect the trap. Before anyone else had realized there was a hostile tribesman within twenty miles, he had mounted a machine gun and was spraying the sides of the pass with bullets as a gardener sprays a vine.

"Amazing" is the only word adequate to describe that shooting. Not only was Pattu Din out for his Jemidar-ship, but he was also out for a long-delayed revenge on his male relatives. His first burst went into the cave where he knew his old father and uncles were lying doggo. The second was for the cleft in the rocks he had recommended to his brothers and cousins. He didn't miss much. An expert machine gunner who knew beforehand exactly where his targets are can dial death as he likes.

Ambition and a thirst for revenge were the incentives that steadied his aim. With long bursts and short bursts he smoked the ambush party from their hiding-places. He enfiladed them as they ran. And before the tail of the first belt had clicked through the feed-block he knew he had won both promotion and revenge.

Colonels have souls above crowing, but that evening the one who commanded the Forty First, now camped on the civilized side of the Chirka Pass, felt it his duty to point out a few truths to his adjutant.

"So you see, Slade! As usual I was right and you were wrong. There's nothing treacherous about Pattu Din although he has green eyes. His behavior today proved your theory all bunkum. And, Slade, I seem to remember something about a little bet—"

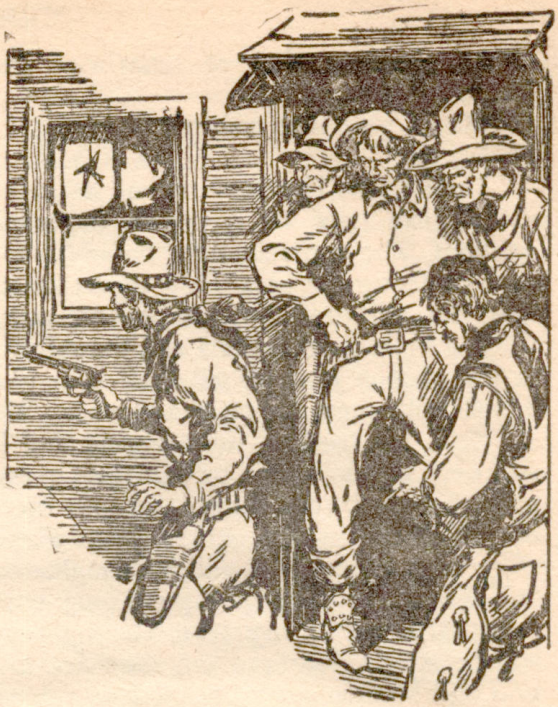
"Will you take notes or a check, sir?" the adjutant said humbly. "Pattu Din must be the exception who proves my rule about green eyes is correct."

A Bullet Out of Nowhere Closed Cases on Kelly's Partner— and Kelly Earned His Name Once More by a Deal in Sudden Death

SUDDEN KELLY

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES



I

KELLY RIDES SOUTH

THE cool of the evening, more grateful after a blazing hot day, was amiably received in Salinas. Waiting for a poker crowd to drift in, Slim Johnson sat on the steps of the Dos Cabezas, sniffed the beer odor from inside, and fingered a guitar. He lifted up his voice in none too melodic song.

"Once upon a time, when the sun was hot
And the sand was full of fleas,
I tried to climb up a Joshua tree,
And I done barked both my knees."

Two horses cantered up, the riders halted by the rack, hitched, and came in. Both were swarthy, grinning, cheerful vaqueros from the Juan Vigil rancho.

"Evening," they said in passing.

"Evening, boys," said Johnson. He thrummed again, struck a monotonous chord, and took up the burden of his song.

"Oh, I hitched up the team and I took my girl
For a ride down the valley trail;
But all we could see when we got there
Was a rattler sheddin' his tail."

From somewhere up the street came a flash, the sharp report of a shot. The guitar splintered, fell, rolled down the three steps; Slim Johnson coughed twice, and then lay on his side.

And this was all that Salinas ever really knew about the killing of Slim Johnson.

Early next morning, Red Kelly rode into town and dismounted in front of the Dos Cabezas. Slim Johnson lay in the back room, and the coroner's jury was holding the inquest, when Red stalked in. He was generally known as Slim Johnson's partner in a little ranch newly established back in the hills, though both men had come up from the south. Kelly was a sandy haired, lanky puncher of about twenty-five, perhaps less; these red haired hombres are hard to place definitely. He was usually drawling, cheery, with a laugh in his steel blue eyes and a humorous twist to his thin lips; but now, as he nodded to the citizens assembled, his eyes were narrowed and bitter, his mouth set.

"Morning, Red," said the coroner. "Glad you've showed up. Know who might ha' done it?"

"Don't you?" asked Kelly, with an evasive shake of his head. The coroner described the killing, so far as it was known.

"Nary a sign who done it," he concluded.

"Sheriff ain't found a thing. The shot was fired three-four places down the street, from in between them stores. Can't ye help us none?"

"None whatever," said Kelly.

The verdict was death at the hands of parties unknown. Slim had no relatives that his partner knew of, and Kelly arranged to have the funeral held at once.

Hank Grubbins, of the Bar Thirty Bar, was in town that morning. Kelly met him. The two partners had worked for Grubbins when they first came to Salinas, and Kelly asked if he still wanted to buy their outfit. Grubbins did.

"She's yours," said Red. "I got the deed here—either one of us can sell, so there'll be no hitch on account of any estate tangle. Fix a price."

"No idea of who done it?" asked Grubbins, when he had written out the check.

"Yep," said Kelly, with a glance to assure himself that they were alone. "Slim had done had trouble with a jasper from down below, over a girl—feller from Kayuck County. Slim sort of expected action."

"Sho!" said Grubbins sympathetically. "What proof you got?"

"None," said Kelly.

"Feller wasn't seen here?"

"Nope."

"What you goin' to do?"

"White a letter to Slim's girl, and it's a hell of a hard job," said Kelly. "Then I aim to go find the feller."

Grubbins shook his head dubiously, promised to keep his mouth shut, and went to get his deed recorded. Then he rejoined Kelly and they, with others, saw Slim Johnson laid to rest.

Half an hour later Red Kelly, astride his flea-bitten gray, said farewell to Salinas and headed south.

KELLY had a good sum of money in his pocket, for the little outfit had prospered, and he had two guns at his belt and a Winchester in the boot; and he knew whom he was after, even if he had never seen the man. Red was exactly what he looked to be—efficient and to the point. When he had a thing to do, he went at it and did it.

To Red, it seemed that a whole chapter in his life had ended—he did not realize that it had just begun. We never realize such a thing until afterward. He had companioned with Slim Johnson for three years, and now that Slim was gone, Kelly found the blue sky bitter hard and the white sunlight a mockery.

Seven miles out of Salinas, he came to Hazel Corners, a combination store and postoffice at a crossroads, where meals could be obtained. He dismounted, entered, and found old man Hazel alone, awaiting the mail. Hazel had not heard of Slim's killing.

"Morning," said Kelly, lounging against the counter and rolling a cigarette. "Feller was in town to see me and I done missed him—a stranger in these parts. Maybe you could help me out, Hazel. He done stopped here last night for supper. Feller with a mustache."

"Yeah?" Hazel scratched his gray head. "Reckon I might, Red. A thin gent with a pack-hoss, mustache, and gray-green eyes that sort of went through you?"

"That's him," said Kelly. "Ask for me, did he?"

"Nope, for supper," and Hazel showed yellow fangs in a grin. "He aimed to hit Salinas 'bout dark."

"Did he come back this way?"

"Not to my knowing. How come he missed you?"

"Search me," said Kelly. "Just did. Them things happen, like rain in New Mexico, and gosh knows why. What sort of hoss was this gent riding? Triangle J?"

"Uh-huh, but there's no such outfit around here."

"Nope, it's down below." Kelly lighted his cigarette and nodded. "Much obliged, old-timer! See you later—maybe."

He departed, mounted his gray, and jogged off to the south.

"Well, I got my evidence right now," he reflected grimly. "Aldrich come up here to get Slim, and he done it. He figured to get into Salinas after dark, leaving his pack hoss outside town. He hung around the street waiting; then he plugged poor Slim and rode away. It was a pretty safe play. Most likely he had never heard of me in his life. Now he's going back home and work his game there without no more interference—or so he thinks. But this here

hombre is nobody's fool. He got brains, he's got money, and he can figure out a thing right. Now, what would I do if I was in his place? I wouldn't just go kill a feller and then ride home to wait and see what happened."

No, decidedly not. Red figured it all out very methodically. A careful man like Aldrich would take no chances whatever. Having several men in his outfit, he would make use of them.

Probably, thought Red, Aldrich would have one of his men following him, ignorant whither Aldrich had gone, but sent to gather news, and instructed to reach Salinas the day after the killing and see what had turned up.

"If my figuring is right," thought Kelly, "then I'd ought to meet up with this hombre today sure. Likewise, it's lucky I never been in Kayuck County! Nobody there would recognize me, as it is—wouldn't be looking for me. I can ride right in, get Aldrich off to himself, tell him about it, and then give him his needings; and then beat it. Simple job, too."

A very simple job. As he rode, Red Kelly cursed womenfolks very heartily. All this trouble had come up on account of women. If Slim Johnson had not stuck by a girl he knew, had not backed her with money and friendship, had not hoped to marry her some day—Slim would still be whanging his guitar and making up songs as he went along.

With which pessimistic reflection, he eyed a spurt of dust down the valley and rode on.

THE spurt of dust developed into a rider ambling lazily along, not the first traveler Red Kelly had met that day either. He had come far, and lolled wearily in the saddle, and was liberally sprinkled with impalpable white alkali dust. He was a large man, with a thin peaked nose, sharp and inquisitive eyes, and coldly thin lips; not a pleasant gentleman in appearance.

"Howdy," he said, in response to Kelly's nod, as the two came together and drew rein. "How far to Salinas?"

"No farther than supper," said Kelly. His blue eyes wandered over rider and horse, narrowed slightly on the latter's brand of a J within a triangle, and came back to meet the gaze of the traveler. "Come quite a ways?"

"Some. Bain's my name—sort of prospecting around on the loose."

"Yeah," said Kelly, and did not mention his name. "Ever met up with a varmint down below, name of Aldrich? Reg'lar skunk."

"Some." Bain was on the alert now, and aggressive to boot. "Right good gent, in my opinion, especially to work for."

"Yeah?" drawled Kelly, with a twist of his lip. "Good thing you ain't workin' for him, feller. Anybody works for that low down coyote ought to be hung."

"Oh!" said Bain, with a sneer, as he stared at Kelly. "Got your fighting clothes on, huh? If I was to say that Aldrich was the best feller on earth, what'd you say?"

"That you're a damned liar," said Kelly calmly. "You're one anyway, because you work for him now and he sent you up here—"

Bain slid a hand under his coat, toward his armpit holster—a sharp, quick move; he fired under his arm, sideways, through holster and coat, for Kelly was on his left. But the report came double, and Bain toppled, was flung from the saddle by the jump of his horse, and lay huddled in the dust.

Kelly quieted his own mount, put up his Colt, and looked down. He did not know that the peak of his Stetson held a ragged tear.

"That's what you get," he said coldly. "And if anybody asks questions, one look at your burnt coat and your gun will show why. Better luck next time, feller!"

And he rode on to the south. It was Slim Johnson's gun that had killed Bain.

II

CALLERS AT THE MT

JENNIE MANTON was frying doughnuts when Ole Jansen, better known as the Swede, drove up and gave her the mail. Ole was the Triangle J cook—a shock headed boy from back east in Minnesota. He was slow to catch on to range slang and so passed for thick witted; but that was

more of a mistake than some folks realized at the time.

"Ay got two letter," said Ole, coming into the kitchen without warning.

Jennie Manton made a dive for the gun on the table, knocked over a crock of fresh doughnuts, then saw who it was and dropped into a chair.

"Why didn't you holler before you came in?" she exclaimed, laughing. "You nearly gave me heart failure, Ole! Two letters? Fine!"

"By golly," said the Swede, handing her the letters, "Ay tink you shoot somebody some day! Now Ay got a yob."

He settled to work with the smashed crock and scattered doughnuts, while Jennie Manton tore at her letters. She was too interested in them to see the furtive glances of admiration which he shot up at her, or else was not concerned about him.

She was pretty, no doubt about it. Not in the fashion of a bisque doll, however; she was brown and ruddy, her rolled up sleeves displayed bare arms that were muscled, and the smile that rippled across her face under its wave of brown hair—ah! The smile died abruptly. A pallor crept over her cheeks; her dark blue eyes dilated on the letter she was reading. Ole caught the sudden change of expression and stood up.

"Hey! What's the matter? You got bad news?"

She drew a quick breath and came to her feet. "Yes. I'll be back in a minute, Ole—wait, please!"

She was gone, darting into the next room, slamming the door behind her.

Ole looked after her and scratched his head. "By yiminy! Ay tink it ban bad news for sure."

He went on with his work. Presently Jennie came back into the room, and if her eyes were red, her voice gave no hint of tears. "Take some doughnuts, Ole," she said. "And thanks so much for getting the mail!"

Ole gathered that he was on his way home, and so departed.

Left alone once more, Jennie Manton did not break down and cry as she had expected to do. She opened her other letter, found it to be an advertisement, and threw it aside. She read over the letter from Kelly, telling her that Slim Johnson was dead, and then, forgetting her doughnuts which were sizzling to a crisp, she walked outside and stood there, gazing over the valley. She made a lonely figure in the doorway, her gingham apron disguising the trim khaki blouse and skirt beneath.

It was four years since Bob Manton had settled here in the Kayuck Valley, building a good house and barn and corral on the six hundred and forty acres he had picked up at a tax sale. His wife died the winter after he came. It was now nearly two years since a horse pinwheeled, injuring his spine, and left him a bedridden invalid, to die months afterward.

A Mexican family had been on the place then; now Jennie Manton was alone. A lone girl on a farm in the East would have been something to wonder at—but this was not the East.

As she gazed out over the valley, a despairing droop came to her usually erect figure. She had fought hard these two years, and now it seemed over. The buildings lay near the mouth of a small canyon, watered by a stream that trickled down from above; the ranch itself lay behind, in a strip through the hills, excellently fenced and fairly watered. The surrounding range was half Triangle J, to the north, and the remainder Plus Y, the old Ybarra brand. A long fourteen miles down the valley lay Hoyt Springs, which rivaled the older Campbell City, twenty miles farther, for county seat honors.

No stock roamed the little MT ranch now—it deserved its name, so far as cattle were concerned. They had dwindled; then Jennie had sold them off in a lump and gone in for mustang strain ponies. Slim Johnson had helped stake her to that change. The old open range was coming back, said Slim, and cow ponies were certainly in keen demand; and it was true. So, hiring two more or less crippled old punchers who lived at the other end of the range and attended to things, Jennie Manton started in.

She was still starting. The punchers were there, and the ponies were coming, but they had a habit of mysteriously vanishing. The winter feed, raised in the canyon which held

the house, had gone up in flames a few weeks previously—fine dry alfalfa and Sudan grass, ready for bringing in to the barn. That was only a sample of the blows that had fallen since Bob Manton had bid in this ranch at the tax sale; and whence they had come was no great secret. Aldrich of the Triangle J had let it go for taxes, unaware that the State law gave him no chance at redemption. He woke up too late.

"I'll have to sell out to Aldrich, after all," thought the girl bitterly. "Now, whoever inherits Slim Johnson's estate will collect that note I gave him; I must sell to pay it. My winter feed's gone. Those horses I've arranged to sell in October will just about pay up the wages due Sime and Denver; unless I sell the breed stock itself, I'll start the winter broke—and nothing in sight. Too bad! Just when another year would pull me through! But if only poor Slim were back—"

She broke off there, biting her lip. She had not been engaged to Slim, but she had liked him a whole lot. And now she blamed herself for thinking of her own troubles, rather than of the man who was dead. Kelly had not stated the cause of death—he had merely said, very bluntly, that Slim Johnson had died suddenly.

Perhaps shot in some squabble, thought the girl, a little bitterly. Slim Johnson had come into money, and she knew perfectly well he had been rather wild in some ways.

Jennie Manton had other friends, most of them women; then there was Judge Prendergast in Hoyt Springs, her confirmed partisan. The old judge was highly respected as a lawyer, but his bank account was *nil*. Plenty of riders came to the MT, like Ole, on casual errands, with their minds bent on courting, but Jennie seldom went to dances and seldom encouraged any advances. She was too busy.

Suddenly remembering her doughnuts, she fled into the kitchen and set about retrieving what could be saved of the batch. As she worked, she fell to wondering what sort of a man Dan Kelly was. Slim had often praised up his partner to the skies, but she had a notion that Slim's ideas might not coincide with her own; Slim was apt to admire anyone who was handy with a gun and who regarded the law lightly. She had an idea that this Kelly was an irresponsible rakehellion who would live a skyrocket career and come to no good end.

SO, TRYING to put away the staggering blow that had fallen, she worked getting her house in order, and was hard at it when a hail brought her to the front door. There she saw two riders, Morgan and Dad Chambers. Morgan was range boss of the Triangle J—a dark, hard, sneering man, and she had no love for him. Dad Chambers was horse-wrangler to the outfit, an old-timer, dried up, dirty and dissolute.

"Good morning," she said, without warmth. "Want to see me?"

"It ain't morning, it's afternoon," and Morgan grinned at her. "Yes'm, if you can give us five minutes or so, we'd like to see you. Right sorry about our errand, ma'am, but it can't be helped. Looks like this here is a popular point today, huh?"

She followed his glance, and saw a rider approaching from the direction of town, apparently a stranger, though he was not close enough to show up any details.

"Well, come on in," said Jennie. "I'll meet you in the kitchen in a minute, as soon as I finish loading dad's gun." She slammed the door.

Dad Chambers broke into a cackle of mirth as he dismounted, and Morgan swore at him with lurid, surly emphasis. Both of them knew that the girl's last words held more truth than poetry. The last time he was here, Morgan had come on courting bent; his courting ended in a bullet that missed him by a hair, and an invitation to stay away in future unless he had to come on business, and not to come alone then.

The two riders made their way to the kitchen, helped themselves to doughnuts, and made themselves comfortable. Both were silent, and seemed to share some rather weighty knowledge. Presently Dad Chambers pulled out his gun and looked into it to see if it was dirty, and it was.

"Put it up, you danged fool!" snarled Morgan under his breath.

Dad obeyed, with a snicker. "Takin' her time, huh?"

She was, undeniably, and the waiting appeared to get on Morgan's nerves.

"Who's that feller coming from town?" he asked. Dad went to the door and peered out, only to shake his head.

"Search me. Stranger. Got a likely lookin' gray bronc—sho' is a fine li'l hoss! He's headin' for here, all right."

Morgan grunted, and rolled a smoke.

Presently the girl appeared, holding the gun in her hand, and laid it on the table before her as she sat down. "Well?" she said briskly. "You're here on business, I suppose?"

"Kind of," said Morgan. "Ain't very welcome to neither of us, ma'am, and I'm right sorry to—"

The dark blue eyes flashed. "Cut out the mourning," she said briefly. "You don't mean it, and it doesn't interest me. What's the gent in the woodpile?"

"Well," said Morgan, with a lift of his lip, "if you want it so danged straight, that there old puncher that's working for you, Sime Hoskins, is dead."

The girl stiffened slightly. "Dead?" she said. "He was all right yesterday."

"Yes'm. Me and—"

A voice lifted outside, demanding to know if anybody was home. Morgan broke off.

Jennie Manton looked at the door and called out. "Sure! Come on in."

Kelly's figure shadowed the doorway. All three stared at him, wondering who this stranger might be, appraising him swiftly. He, in turn, noted the girl in one surprised glance, noted her stormy eyes and tight clenched lips, noted the revolver on the table before her; he sized up the other two present without trouble, having noted the Triangle J brand on their horses before he entered. It was not hard to tell that the situation was rather strained.

"Who are you?" demanded Morgan abruptly.

Kelly grinned, widened his eyes, swept off his hat, and made a mocking bow. "I am me, mister," he said. "Most folks call me Red, because my hair is green. I see I made a mistake, this being your place when I thought it belonged to a lady, from what I had heard. Or are you a lady in disguise? Come to think of it, that might be. You got right pretty teeth, but when I look at your feet—"

Morgan stood up, but Jennie Manton intervened swiftly. "Quit it!" she said, and her hand clapped down on the Colt. "You two shut up, and don't start anything here. Red, come in and sit down, and if you want to see me, wait till I get rid of these two gentlemen. Now, Morgan, go ahead. What about Sime?"

Morgan glared at the newcomer, but sat down. Kelly slid into the one empty chair, crossed his legs, grinned at Dad Chambers, and rolled a cigarette.

III

KELLY NOMINATES HIMSELF

"WELL," said Morgan, "me and Dad were ridin' down the south fence, and we seen something in a heap, and got off. It was old Sime. He had fell off, I reckon; the gun had dropped out of the holster, and shot him. Aldrich and Ben Himes come along, and they figured the same thing. Aldrich, he says to come along and let you know, and he'd attend to burying Sime. He sent Ben to find that other rider of yours, Denver, and get the body up to their shack."

Jennie Manton bent a level gaze upon Morgan.

"You expect me to believe that story?" she asked in a low voice.

Mr. Kelly leaned his chair back against the wall, regarded the scene cheerfully, took out one of his guns and sighted thoughtfully at the floor.

"I dunno why not," said Morgan flatly. "It's true. You can ask Dad, or Aldrich himself."

The girl laughed, but not mirthfully. "So Sime shot himself?" she said.

"No'm. We figured the gun had shot him—it done went off when it fell. He had the trigger filed, and prob'ly when it hit the ground the hammer come back or was jarred enough to hit home."

"Sounds likely," said the girl. "Was his horse there?"

"No," said Morgan, taking confidence from her quiet attitude. "He done run off, I guess."

"Like Kelly did," said Mr. Kelly.

The others turned and concentrated on

him—Jennie Manton frowningly, Morgan with a black and narrow-eyed look.

"What you mean, swearing before a lady?" asked Morgan harshly.

"Who, me?" Kelly looked surprised. "I wasn't swearing. I was talking about a feller I knew, name of Kelly. He met up with a feller in the road, and they stopped to talk, and after a spell the other feller he took a notion to reach for his gun. So did Kelly. And about five minutes later Kelly run off—at a slow walk. The other feller stayed there."

Morgan glared suspiciously, not quite certain what Kelly was talking about. The girl, however, regarded the speaker sharply, appraisingly, critically. Then she held out her hand. "You give me that gun, Red. I'll take charge of any weapons around here."

"With pleasure, ma'am," said Kelly; he rose and handed her the gun. "I got another right handy, so it's all right. You see, feller, I wasn't swearing when I talked about Kelly. I just happened to think of it, because it happened only a couple o' days ago."

Morgan said nothing. Jennie Manton fingered the Colt, looked at the stock carefully, turned it over and regarded certain scratches in the blued steel and the wood. "Oh!" she said, and pallor came into her face.

"So you see, ma'am," began Morgan, "there ain't nothing to carry blame about. Of course, I know you and your outfit don't like the Triangle J, and you've done us wrong in some of the things—"

"Cut it out," said the girl, looking up at him. "Morgan, you say that Sime fell off his horse and shot himself—or that his gun shot him. Were there any signs of his horse?"

"You bet," chipped in Dad Chambers blithely. "The hoss had jumped real sudden—the sign was plain to read. There was traces of a sidewinder there, and I reckon the hoss come on him all of a sudden and shied—you know how a hoss does, thataway."

Jennie Manton drew back the hammer of Slim Johnson's gun, still in her hand.

"Look out with that gun!" exclaimed Morgan.

She smiled. "I'm looking, Mr. Morgan—and right at you," she said quietly. "If I was a man, I'd shoot you right here and now and be done with it; but you know you're safe in trying to run a lie like that on me. You didn't know, did you, that old Sime was badly ruptured a couple of years ago in breaking a horse, and hasn't been able to sit a saddle ever since? The hasn't been on a horse since he came here. The facts are that you and your gentleman friend here found Sime alone, picked a quarrel, and shot him."

Dad Chambers opened his mouth and stared at her. Morgan frowned. "Ma'am, you shouldn't suspicion us this way," he said. "I'm simply telling you the facts as I know them. Whether we figured right or wrong—"

"Doesn't matter," cut in the girl, with a sudden edge to her voice. "Like all that hay of mine going up in smoke—set fire to itself, didn't it? Now, you can carry home this message, Morgan; tell your boss that I think you're all a pack of liars. If it would be more impressive to your minds, make it *damned* liars; I don't mind a cussword in dealing with reptiles like you!

"What's more," she went on, "the road out to your place goes up this canyon. It's a private road. Inside of an hour I'll have a strand of wire across it. You and your outfit can pick out another way to go and come from the highway—make you another road. It'll be longer, but it'll be safer. I've got a Winchester and a shotgun here, and the road's in plain sight from here; and I'll open on any of your outfit who sets foot on my land. Any of you who want to see me, can write a letter and make an appointment—and if you try it otherwise, I'll shoot. That's all."

MORGAN heard this with a flush in his cheeks. "All right, ma'am, if that's your mind," he said. "I'll tell the boss."

"Excuse me, folks," intervened Kelly whimsically. "But this lady said she'd perforate you gents if she was a man. Well, it looks to me like she ain't a man; but there's nothing I like better than to oblige a lady. I go all around the world lookin' for a chance. Now, ma'am, if you'd like me to put a bullet through each of these gents, just speak up."

He regarded the girl blandly, inquiringly. She broke into a short laugh. "Don't be ridiculous! You know I don't."

"Oh! Then that's all right." Kelly tipped back his chair again and smiled cheerfully at the two Triangle J riders. "I hate to shoot anybody in the heat of the day."

"You're one of these fun artists, ain't you?" said Morgan with a growl.

"Now," broke in Jennie Manton, "both of you stop this cat and dog business. Red, you needn't jump in and make trouble; I don't want any help, particularly from strangers. Morgan, you beat it! Go to town or go back home—but don't come down the road again or up it."

"Yes'm," said Morgan. He and Dad Chambers got up and took their hats.

"Just a minute, gents," said Kelly brightly. He spun his Stetson on his finger, and his finger went through a hole at the top of the crown. "I got a message for the Triangle J outfit from a feller name of Bain—ain't you Triangle J boys?"

Both of them gave him sharp attention.

"Yes," said Morgan. "Where'd you meet up with Bain?"

"In jail up north of here," said Kelly. "You see, it's sort of wild up in them parts, around Salinas. Well, me and another feller got into an argument over a hand at poker—and if you boys ever go up there, don't you-all go near the Dos Cabezas! The games are straight, but the crowd there—"

"Get to the point!" snapped Morgan. "What about Bain?"

"I'm comin' to it, ain't I?" complained Red Kelly. "If you don't want to get the message, then run along and I'll deliver it next chance I get."

"Well, spit it," said Morgan.

"As I was saying," and Kelly settled more comfortably in his chair, "me and another feller had an argument, and he got shot. The sheriff bein' in town, he had to arrest me, but the thing proved to be all in my favor and they let me out next morning, and I traveled south. Well, there was a gent in jail there that night, and he says his name is Bain and would I give a message to somebody from this outfit if I come through here. Is there such a feller, or was he stringing me?"

Kelly gazed up innocently, and Morgan smothered an oath. "Yes! What's he in jail for?"

Why," and Kelly lighted his cigarette, "it seems this gent Bain, who might have belonged to your outfit by his looks and yours, was up north on some errand for your boss; he didn't rightly understand it his own self. There's a place just outside Salinas—if you've ever been up that direction, you've maybe heard of Hazel Corners. It ain't only a store at a crossroads, where a body can get a bite to eat."

He puffed at his cigarette, and the two Triangle J men glared at him impatiently. Jennie Manton watched him with a glimmer of suspicion in her eyes, as he proceeded blandly.

"Well, seems that somebody had held up this store, and they thought it was Bain, and had put him in the calaboose. It wasn't him and I told him so, because I had met the jaspers that done it for a joke; he says it was a hell of a joke on him, and would some of you boys come up and answer for him or bail him out."

"Huh!" said Morgan. "Sounds funny!"

"Yeah," admitted Kelly placidly. "I reckon so. But I never claimed Bain fell off his hoss and his gun shot him, did I?"

Morgan compressed his lips, stared at Kelly a moment, then stalked out of the house with Dad Chambers following him.

The girl went to the doorway, stood watching them off up the canyon toward the Triangle J, then turned and faced Kelly, who rose. "Who are you?" she demanded.

He put up his hands and grinned. "Don't shoot!" he said whimsically. "My name's Kelly."

She looked down at the revolver, still in her grasp, then laid it on the table and put out her hand. "I thought you were," she said. "Glad to meet you. Now, just what is back of this story you told about Bain? Do you know him? Was he really up north? And—"

"One at a time," said Kelly. "And got any doughnuts to spare? I'm hungry."

She reached for the crock. "Coffee?"

"No, thanks—this is plenty." He helped himself and resumed his seat, talking between bites. "You see, I figure that Morgan, or maybe Aldrich himself, will get up there in a hurry to see about Bain. That'll be one

man out of the way anyhow—one less here. By the time they get back with word of what happened to Bain, then I'll be squared away. I've set in at this game, and I'm playing my chips close to the ground, that's all."

"Then what happened to Bain?" she demanded. "Did—did Slim—"

"Nope," said Kelly. "Bain had an accident, that's all. He ain't coming back. Now, you said you didn't want any help. Was that for me or for Morgan?"

"Both," she replied, watching him intently. "I just got your letter a while ago—it sort of knocked me out, Red."

"Well, you don't know your own mind," said Kelly. "I done taken a notion you do need help, and need it bad. Let's have a showdown, young lady."

IV

PARTNERS

"SINCE the afternoon is young and your doughnuts are good," said Kelly, "suppose you tell me how it happens that a fairly big rancher like Aldrich is picking on a very charming young lady! And how come he ain't run out of the country for doing it? That's what I don't savvy. I've never talked the matter over in detail with Slim."

"Tell me, first, about Slim's accident," she said.

"Wasn't any accident," declared Kelly, facing the unpleasant job boldly. "The way I figure it out, a jasper comes into Salinas after dark, pulls down his hat and hangs around the street until he gets a sight of Slim. Then he slips off betwixt two stores, puts a bullet into Slim, slides around back of the stores, gets into the street again, takes his hoss and goes away. Naturally, nobody knows who killed Slim or why."

"And the man's name?" asked the girl.

"Aldrich," said Kelly. "I've done fastened it on him to suit my own mind, but not to suit any jury. He done sent Bain up there, or had him on the way rather, to collect news and bring back word. Bain won't bring back word."

Jennie Manton stared down at the floor. It seemed to Red Kelly that she took all this information rather calmly, considering that she had been in love with Slim Johnson; but the first glimpse of this girl had staggered his preconceived ideas.

"I sort of got the notion, without any real reason for it," he went on cautiously, "that you and Slim would have got married some day—"

Her head jerked up. "What?" she exclaimed. "No, Red—that isn't so. We liked each other, of course, but Slim wasn't in love with me or I with him. He had worked for my father once, and when he came through here and found what shape things were in, he had a blowout with Aldrich and then backed me. I hoped he'd be down here this summer."

"We were both coming down," said Kelly. "But you ain't answered my questions yet. How come Aldrich does it, and how come folks let him do it?"

She smiled, bitterly. "Second one first. For the same reason you couldn't get him arrested for the murder of Slim. In the first place, it don't stand to reason, as you just said, that a big rancher like he is would pick on a woman; in the second place, he's too crafty to give any evidence that he's doing it. Most people think I've just had a run of mighty hard luck. Aldrich is not popular at all, but folks would want pretty good proof of his actions."

"Sure." Kelly nodded reflectively. "He's a dark bird, and no mistake. But how come?"

"Several reasons. First, it used to be his place here. He got into some mix-up about it and let the taxes go. Father learned of it and bought it in at the tax sale. That set Aldrich against us. Then, after father died, he and I did not get along well."

"Oh!" Kelly eyed the young lady appreciatively, and grinned. "If it was me, I'd say you'd be the easiest person on earth to get on with. I expect you've got a sharp temper, and you enjoy flirting with the right party, like any healthy person does, and you ain't got no great sense of humor, which goes for most females; but I expect we'd get along. Aldrich, I s'pose—"

"Thought the same thing, exactly—that we'd get along," and the girl laughed. "Same as you, Red, and just as frank about saying so. I took a horsewhip to him and he changed his notions."

"And hated you ever since," Kelly chuckled. "Got the whip handy?"

"If you go to acting like you thought it was true," she said, then sobered. "But don't worry. You'll not have to get on with me."

"Yes, I will," said Kelly. "I didn't intend setting into this game, but now I've bought chips and I'm going to stay. Don't contradict me, now—it only makes me stubborn." He brought several papers from his pocket and selected one, which he handed to her. "Know it?"

"My note to Slim for the money he advanced, and a partnership agreement," she said, and returned it. "I'll meet that note—"

"Oh, shucks!" Kelly rose, went to the stove, lifted the lid, and dropped the paper in. At her startled cry of protest, he grinned. "Listen! Slim is dead. He's got no heirs except me. I'm doing exactly as he would want done with that note—"

"I'll pay you anyhow," she declared firmly.

"You won't. Listen to sense, now, just to prove you *ain't* an ordinary woman! I got some money too, and I'm footloose, and I'm in this game to get Aldrich. I didn't come here for your sake, not by a good deal! I come on account of Slim. But I'm staying on account of you. I meant to look up Aldrich, tell him who I was, and plug him. Now, I'm going about it a while lot different. I aim to put a knife into him and twist it, before I finish things. I want to beat him, and beat him bad. Savvy?"

"Now," and Kelly came back to his chair and the table, "I heard you tell them Triangle J boys a few things, and I can guess the rest. How many riders you got?"

"Two—or I had two. They weren't really riders."

"Uh-huh," and Kelly nodded. "And one got shot by his gun falling and plugging him. Gosh, if I had the nerve of them jaspers and couldn't lie any better than they do, I'd be dead a long while ago! I'm a good liar."

"So I've noticed," said Jennie Manton.

Kelly regarded her a moment, and then they both laughed.

"We'll get on," said Kelly. "Now, I got a proposition. You done lost a rider, you done lost your winter feed, if I ain't wrong, and I understand you're raising stock for cow ponies. Some sense to that. I can sell a whole cavvy between here and Silver City in half a day, at top prices. You and me go partners, fifty-fifty, in this deal. I got some money to put in; we can talk figures tomorrow in town at the bank, to let your banker O. K. the deal—"

"Judge Prendergast," said the girl, her eyes alight. "He's a friend of mine. The bank isn't. Aldrich has some stock in the bank."

"I see. Well, I'll take that rider's place, but I aim to live right here and not stuck off in a herder's shack—I know what them shacks are like, from painful experience. We'll move a Mex family here, or a woman or something, so's nobody will lose any sleep wondering how soon you and me will get married. And we'll start in, or I will."

"Start in what—getting married?"

Kelly grinned. "I take it back about your sense of humor. No—start in herding some bad luck toward the Triangle J. Same sort of bad luck has struck you."

"You don't mean fighting him the same way?"

"Nope, not the same—worse!" Kelly leaned his chair back and rolled a smoke. "Me, I don't set still and look for something to happen. I go out and make her happen. If my wife started in to throw plates at me, I'd lam her before she got started with the platter, and she'd quit."

"Oh!" Jennie's eyes widened a trifle. "Why not bring your wife here, Red?"

"Well," said Kelly reflectively, "for a couple of reasons. I've been thinking about that very thing, and I reckon it'd be better not. In the first place, I don't reckon any wife of mine would appreciate having you and me in partnership, you being so downright pretty—"

"What?" Jennie stiffened. "How dare you—"

"And in the last place," continued Kelly, his eyes twinkling, "I ain't got me no wife as yet."

"Oh!" The girl relaxed, and then broke into a laugh. "You blessed torment! I'll be glad to have you around the place, Red—there won't be any more monotony."

"Well, I aim to make you glad," said Kelly daringly, then rose and took up his hat. "Come on and let's get the fence laid

acrost the road—I'll set the posts and you tack wire, if you got any wire."

"All right."

She came to him abruptly, impetuously, and taking his hand, met his eyes squarely. "Red," she said, quietly, "I don't know just why you're doing all this—unless for Slim's sake. I do want you to know that I appreciate it, and that I thank you."

"Oh, shucks!" he returned, flushing a little. "It ain't for Slim's sake now, it's for yours—that is, I mean—oh, never mind. How'd I get this here hole? There's a plumb good Stetson ruined for wet weather. Look at that, would you!"

She met his look gravely. "Well? I'm not a silly female in spite of what you think, and I'm no fool. Was it Bain?"

"Nope," said Kelly. "It was sunburn that ate through the felt. Come on and tend to that fence before Morgan calls your bluff!"

An hour later, with the road properly cut off at this end, one of the three broncs in the corral was loaded with some wire, much to its sorrow, another was saddled, and the new partners went forth to inspect their domain and cut off the road at the upper end.

"Nothing like improving on schemes while you got time," said Red Kelly, as they headed up the canyon. "In fact, I've done found that if a feller can sort of push time ahead, act on instinct as it were, he'll prob'ly push the other gent off his feet. Instead of going into town tomorrow, let's us go in this afternoon and have supper there, and come back tonight. It's moonlight and good weather, and I sort of got a hunch storm is coming. We can't make the bank, but your friend the judge can deposit the checks there in the morning for you."

"Done," said the girl promptly. "I want to have Sime buried properly, too. We can take the body in with us. He and Denver were mighty faithful old men."

The road used heretofore by the Triangle J went on up the canyon, and a quarter mile beyond branched off to the north and Aldrich's ranch. When they got to the branch, Kelly drew rein.

"S'pose you go on. Denver can rope up his partner for you and come back here with you. I'll be getting up a strand or two of wire, just for instance. There's plenty of brush around and I can makeshift a post or two, to fill the gap in the fence."

She nodded and sent her horse ahead.

Kelly dismounted, hobbled his horse into the brush—for the gray was given to straying—and unloaded the pack animal. He had only to connect a gap in the fence at present closed by two long poles in place of a gate. Given a roll of wire and a small pick to break a posthole in the center, with part of a pole for post, it was no great job.

He was ready to stretch his wire, and had the top strand cut for the purpose, when he caught a hail. A rider was approaching, down the Triangle J side of the fence.

"Hey, you're stoppin' up the road there!" cried the rider protestingly.

"Not a bit of it," returned Kelly, pausing in his job. "I'm stopping up the fence."

The other arrived, drew rein, stared hard. He was a large and unshaven waddy, puffing as he stared at Kelly. "My gosh, you're a new one!" he observed.

"Not so new as you'd think, my gosh," said Kelly blithely.

The other scowled in the heavy fashion of a fat boy. "Don't get gay with me, feller! What you doin' there?"

"Three guesses," said Red. "Looking at you, standing, and fixing fence. Which?"

"You quit this here wire stringing," said the other. "I aim to go to town tonight, and it's a hell of a ways around. Besides, Aldrich ain't going to like it. That's our road."

"Is that so?" said Kelly, gaping at him. "That's queer. I thought it was all MT range here and down the canyon."

"Well, we use it, savvy? And we ain't going to have it closed, you bet."

"All right, I'll bet," said Kelly gravely. "How much you want to bet?"

"Huh?" The other stared, then frowned again. "Say, you trying to be funny?"

"Nope. I never try. I just am. But I can't stand here talking about it all day. I got to string this fence. Come on and be a sport and give me a hand with this wire."

"What!" exclaimed the other. "Say, you got your nerve! I'm tellin' you to quit!"

"That's all right, I ain't deaf," said Kelly cheerfully, picking up his wire. "So long's you just tell me and let her go at that, I'm satisfied."

"I've had enough of your smart talk,"

snapped the Triangle J rider. "You git aboard your hoss and drop that job, or I'll climb down and make you!"

"Climb, then," said Kelly, and hammered home a staple.

The other promptly hauled himself out of the saddle and came charging for his defier. The last thing he anticipated was that Kelly would come for him; but Kelly came, and came with a three foot section of pole that cracked the other rider fair and square over the head.

"Which," observed Mr. Kelly, "ought to hold you for quite a while. Get home there, hoss!"

The Triangle J bronc turned, felt a stone hit his rump, and started for home.

V

RED TAKES CHARGE

"WHY, it's Bull Harper! Is he hurt? What's he doing here?"

Jennie Manton looked from the unconscious man on the ground back to Kelly.

"He's just sort of waiting around to find out what hit him. No, he ain't hurt." Red flung a wink at old Denver, a grizzled and stooped figure astride his bronc.

Denver had made a satisfactory job of preparing his late comrade for travel—the big package across the extra horse did not look in the least like a corpse, and the grisly fact of it was shut out from sight, if not from mind. Now Red met the appraising gaze of Denver with a nod.

"You and me are liable to see some action, old-timer," he said. "Suit you?"

"Uh-huh." Denver scratched his three-day whiskers. "Me and Sime were partners, Red. That covers it."

"You reckon his gun shot him?"

Denver only laughed derisively at this, and quite obviously did not trust himself to speech in presence of the girl. He clapped his hand on the stock of the rifle at his knee. "So you're running this here outfit, Red? All right. Got any orders?"

"Yep. Tend to your business, keep your gun loaded, and look for me to show up sometime before midnight," returned Red Kelly. "Get some sleep before then, too. Take care of these tools. Rope a couple o' good broncs and have them hobbled—may need 'em tonight."

"Aren't you going to sleep tonight?" demanded the girl.

"No," said Kelly thoughtfully. "If I don't get sleep for a night, I can always sleep better the next day, Jennie. Now, Denver, d'you reckon we can load this jasper up alongside the bundle on that bronc and rope him there?"

"You hold that cussed bronc, Jennie," directed Denver, and dismounted.

"What are you going to do with Harper?" asked the girl.

"Take him to town and jail him for assault. Denver, if you see any of the Triangle J outfit, tell 'em he's in jail and they'd better bail him out."

"What?" asked the girl sharply. "But they'd do it right off, tonight!"

"Which suits me—the more in town, the fewer here." With this cryptic response, Red joined Denver and between them they got Harper in place, embracing the wrapped corpse, and lashed him firmly thus, much to the sorrow of the unhappy bronc. Then Red Kelly took the reins, mounted into his own saddle, and handed down his rifle to Denver.

"Keep this for me until I show up, old-timer. So long, and good luck!"

He started off beside the frowning and perplexed girl. Before she had a chance to query him, he uttered a question of his own. "What you aiming to tell the sheriff or coroner about this defunct rider of yours?"

She swept him a sidelong glance. "What would you tell them?"

"Just what Morgan said, of course, and refer them to Morgan. That way, there won't be any coroner and so forth—it's a clear case. Why make trouble?"

"You're a queer one, Red!" She studied his bronzed features. "Why do that?"

"I dunno. Why not, Jennie?"

She smiled a little, and made no response.

They rode on down the canyon, passed the house, and Kelly opened the newly strung wire to let them through. Then on down the valley toward Hoyt Springs, jogging easily, but both uneasily conscious of the dead man behind them. Bull Harper did not awaken.

To Kelly, this ride in the white afternoon sunlight might, except for the led horse and

its burden, have seemed rather absurd—the whole situation very unreal and difficult to realize. That the girl beside him should be hard pressed by hidden enemies, that she should be actually on the verge of ruin, seemed rather fantastic, here in the hot sun. The dead man in his wrappings held the balance true, however.

THEY spoke little, but that which followed them was oppressive to Jennie Manton, while Red Kelly was figuring over certain plans of his own. When they were still three miles out of town and approaching a crossroad, the girl uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Oh!" she said in relief. "There's Mason!"

"Who's Mason?" Kelly, who had been eyeing a rider coming in to the crossroad by the left hand track, jerked his head. "That man?"

"Yes. The sheriff."

"Friend of yours?"

She hesitated. "I think so—it's hard to know. I think Mason would do the right thing, though, if—"

"If Aldrich would let him, eh? I get you. If we have that kind of a sheriff in this county, it suits me down to the ground; I guess we can play ball with him."

Sheriff Mason had discerned their approach, and waited for them at the corners. He was a stoop shouldered man with heavy grizzled rainbow mustache and tired eyes. At the introduction, Kelly got a grip that was very indicative of the man—cordial, none too firm, touched with indecision.

"Mr. Kelly has recently become my partner, and is acting as sort of range boss for the MT," went on the girl. Kelly caught a perplexed glance in the eyes of the sheriff. "You know my rider, Sime Hoskins? He was killed sometime today. We were bringing him into town—I want him given proper burial."

Mason looked at the burdened horse, looked back to the girl, then at Kelly. "Killed, you say? And Harper done it?"

"Oh, no! Morgan and Dad Chambers and Aldrich found poor Sime dead, and sent word to me. They said that it was quite clear Sime must have fallen off his horse, his gun exploding in the fall. Perhaps you had better ask them about it, if there's any question."

"Huh!" said the sheriff, rather taken aback. "First time I ever heard of that sort of an accident—but it's always the queer kind that happens. A man doesn't watch out for 'em, naturally. No, I guess there won't be any question—but what you got Harper for?"

"I'm asking you to lock him up, Sheriff," said Kelly. "I'll swear out the warrant when we reach town."

"Huh? What for?"

"He assaulted me," said Kelly gravely. "Tried to hit me."

"Huh? Drew a gun on you?"

"Oh, no!" Kelly's face was a mask of injured innocence. "I was fixing a fence and he came along and thought he could make me stop. It was on the MT range, you see. He was going to hit me, so I banged him over the head and loaded him on with Sime, and here he is for you."

The sheriff swallowed hard. He could not quite fathom this stranger. "My gosh, feller," he said. "It's something new to lock up anybody on such a charge, ain't it?"

"Of course, if you'd rather not," said Kelly apologetically, "I can take him along to town and explain at the jail about you feeling maybe the charge wasn't enough. You see, I hate to have anybody try to hit me. That's assault, and it ain't a bit polite, Sheriff."

Sheriff Mason eyed the speaker critically, but dismissed his suspicions. "All right, Kelly. Gimme them reins and you folks ride along. I got to wait and meet a man here. See you later—so long!"

It was an obvious but kindly lie, to rid the girl of the following burden, and Red Kelly mentally registered it in the sheriff's favor.

Once out of earshot, Jennie loosed her mirth. "Some day you'll meet a man who knows when you're making fun of him, Red—and you'll be sorry!"

"Until then, rejoice and make merry," said Mr. Kelly cheerfully. "I did sort of hanker to be present when Harper woke up and realized his situation—but it's better as it is."

Restraint now loosened, they jogged on to town and made up for past

silence by eager talk. Hoyt Springs rounded into sight ahead—a pleasant, quiet little town, long since wakened from its afternoon siesta and now looking forward to supper and evening. It was a place of well kept frame buildings and Lombardy poplars, indication that Mormons had passed this way in the early years. Sight of the town, the stores, the dusty street with its cowponies and buggies and wagons, brought reality home to them both.

"It's a hard job," said Jennie Manton soberly. "Just you and I—against a clever, rich, powerful rancher who fights in the dark! Do you think it's worth while, after all? Perhaps we'd better sell out to him. He offers a fair enough price.

"Quitting?" Kelly glanced at her, brows uplifted inquiringly.

She nodded. "Yes, I'd quit if it would save—anything more happening."

"It won't," he responded curtly. "I got chips in the game now."

"But, Red, it's a long fight ahead! And I dread the strain, the suspense of it—I've carried on so long, never knowing what would happen next."

"This one wouldn't be that way," Kelly laughed a little, and she eyed him curiously.

"Why? You think we can beat him—when?"

"Oh, by tomorrow night—maybe before," said Red carelessly.

She stiffened a bit in her saddle. "It's nothing to joke about!"

"I ain't joking." He turned to her suddenly, and the grave, level look of him widened her eyes. "Jennie, we're up against a bad combination. There's only one way to beat this kind of a game—buck it with the deuces running wild! Thats' what I aim to do. Lay your bets natural, according to your cards, and you haven't a show to win, not a show! But tangle up the other gent, get him guessing, whoop'er up all of a sudden with a wild play—and you're liable to be surprised the way luck will back you up!"

"You're not banking on luck, though?"

"Not me," said Kelly positively. "I'm banking on Red Kelly, first, last and foremost! If I was to act the way anybody would be expected to act—where'd I get? Nowhere. If I was to tell everybody that I'm a puncher named Kelly, and aim to make MT pay, I'd plumb throw away half my advantage of coming in here unknown and then going to work like a streak of lightning. No, *ma'am!* I'm out to fight with every weapon I got."

"But aren't you runing risks?"

"Sure. Anybody runs risks every time he goes out of the house. You run along now and see your lawyer. I'll leave you here, and show up at his office in twenty minutes or so. Ain't there a store here called the Blue Front? I've heard Slim mention it."

"A pool room," she said. "All right. Judge Prendergast's office is upstairs over the bank, and I'll be waiting there."

"You won't wait long," said Kelly, and they separated.

Five minutes later he was entering the Blue Front, after a swift but sweeping inspection of the horses lined at the rail outside. That inspection brought a laugh to his lips, and he swung into the ancient poolroom, some doors from the bank, with a gay and confident assurance in his air.

Two tables were hotly engaged in peapool, the dozen contestants making the afternoon riotous. Most of them were riders. Kelly was given a casual survey, but the interest in the game was too great for any idle conversation. Kelly took one of the side chairs, and when the next chair was occupied by a player who had just shot, he leaned over.

"Partner, can you tell me who that feller is at the next table, with the checked shirt?"

The other followed his glance. The man in question was a lean, bowlegged puncher with a shock of tow hair and a face marred by a scar across the cheek. Despite the blemish, he seemed a good-humored fellow.

"Him?" came the response. "Search me. He done horned into the game there—stranger in town, I reckon. Never seen him before."

"Thanks."

Kelly rose and approached the other table. The man in the checked shirt had just put down his ball and was raking in the pot exultantly. A sudden silence fell, and he looked up to see Kelly standing there, gun out and trained on him.

"Well, Pearson, looks like the game's over, don't it?" said Kelly. "Up!"

Pearson put up his hands. Into his face

leaped fright, astounded wonder, consternation. "You!" he gasped.

"Me," said Kelly calmly. "Want to see my warrant, or do you know me? Might tell the boys I ain't staging a holdup."

"All right, all right," stammered Pearson. "I know you, Marshal—my gosh, I thought I had throwed you clear off the trail! What you want me for?"

"I guess you know," said Kelly. "That bank robbery down south."

"All right," said Pearson sullenly, recovering from his surprise.

"Boys, I'm sorry to break up this here game," said Kelly. "But if one of you will slip me the gun I see hanging in this gent's holster, him and me will take a little pasear to the sheriff's office and bid you adios."

The gun was handed over. Kelly promptly put up his own weapon. "Come along quiet?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," grunted Pearson. "Any U. S. marshal like you, Red, can hand me orders. I ain't courting no sudden death. So long, boys—see you-all later."

So, amid the stares of the crowd, Kelly escorted his prisoner outside and they started up the street, leaving heavy gossip behind them.

"I got to swear out a warrant at the sheriff's office, then go meet a lady," said Kelly. "You can pick up your hoss later. Doggone you, I was sure glad to see that hoss of yours! If you hadn't got my wire and met me here, I was up against it."

"Well, I'm here, you danged old rooster," said Pearson, losing his sullen manner and grinning at his companion. "And I had a hell of a ride to make it, too. Done got in last night and got some sleep, and kept my bronc ready like you said. What sort of a game you playing?"

"Wide open. Slim Johnson's dead and I'm out for the gang that got him. Suit you?"

"You're durned shouting!" said Mr. Pearson enthusiastically.

VI

THE MT RIDES TO WAR

SHERIFF MASON had not yet arrived in town when Kelly reached his office, so an astonished deputy attended to Mr. Kelly's business, and the two friends started for Judge Prendergast's. Here they found Jennie Manton in lively conversation with the judge—a white haired, kindly old man. Both looked at Pearson in surprise, and Kelly introduced him.

"Jennie, this is Chuck Pearson, a friend of mine. Judge Prendergast, Chuck. This here hombre is working for the MT outfit. He ain't much good at work, but he ain't hired for work. Him and me are going chasing over the country enjoying himself and myself. He wants to go right out to the ranch now, Jennie."

"I do not!" said Mr. Pearson emphatically.

"Yes, you do," said Kelly. "Jennie and me are going to ride out after supper and we don't want a third party along to spoil the moonlight. You can rustle yourself some supper when you get there, and look out you don't forget to wash the skillet afterward. If you meet anyone on the road, which you're plumb liable to do, stop and converse. Tell them you're a deputy sheriff from Salinas looking for a gent here, but don't say who or why. Now you got your orders and there's nothing more holding you here, so *vamose!*"

"But I don't know anything—"

"You ain't supposed to know anything," said Kelly. "Only, you'd better buy you a box of cartridges before you leave town."

"Oh!" said Pearson. He looked at Jennie and his eyes twinkled. "Glad to 've met you, ma'am. See you later. Look out for this feller—he ain't right in his head part of the time."

And with this Parthian shaft, Chuck Pearson went his way. Kelly dropped into a chair and met the laughing, puzzled gaze of Jennie Manton.

"Red, why didn't you tell me you had a friend on hand?"

"Wasn't sure he'd be here," said Kelly.

"What do you aim to do?"

"Settle matters with you and the judge. Let's get to work."

They did so forthwith. In no time at all, Red Kelly and the judge were the best of friends, and the partnership arrangement for the MT was soon agreed upon in all details and drawn up for signature. What with overdue taxes and bills in town, the

MT was in a worse way than Kelly had suspected; the judge bared its condition mercilessly, was made arbiter of the money question, and outlined terms eminently fair to both sides. Kelly insisted on signing up immediately.

"And stick in a clause making either party heirs of the other party," he said. "I'm liable to fall off my hoss some dark night and Jennie ought to be protected."

"Hm!" said the judge, and his eyes twinkled. "Suppose Jennie up and marries somebody?"

"She will," said Kelly. "But that'll take care of itself—"

"I will not!" said Jenny emphatically.

"That's all right, judge, never mind her," said Kelly. "When she gets right well acquainted with Chuck Pearson, she'll find he's one of these fellers with a heart of gold, just like me. Why, if I was him, I'd —did you notice how staggered he was at sight of his new boss, judge? Yes, sir, if I was Chuck I'd just naturally rush things!"

The girl's eyes flashed stormily. "That's enough! A joke's a joke, but—"

"But I ain't joking, so that makes it all right," declared Kelly, unabashed. "Go ahead with the documents, judge, and stop talking so much."

The judge chuckled and obeyed. When everything was signed, sealed and delivered, Kelly and Jennie Manton took their departure, and in the street, Red halted the girl.

"Now," he said solemnly, "before we go any farther, promise me one thing!"

"What?" she demanded, startled by his gravity.

"To forget your troubles, ask no questions, and just have a good time! Do your shopping, and then we'll have supper at the hotel, and then we'll ride home; and any notion about plans or prospects can wait until later. Suit you?"

"You're on," she declared, laughing. "Come and help me pick some stuff for curtains—and look there in the window! Aren't those cretonnes perfectly heavenly?"

For five minutes Jennie kept him before the general store window, expatiating upon the fine points of the drygoods display, while more than one grinning puncher passed by with audible coughs. Kelly was game, however, took his medicine meekly, and was quite contented to note the interest taken in him by the community. Gossip had spread from the poolroom about the U. S. marshal who was in town.

GOSSIP had spread from other sources, also. It became known that the sheriff had brought in Bull Harper, on a warrant of assault sworn by Kelly, and also a dead man. If the town in general was excitedly discussing these matters, the sheriff himself was a sadly puzzled man at learning that Kelly was a United States marshal. Further, the marshal's prisoner had been seen to leave town alone, and the marshal was remaining in company with Jennie Manton. The whole thing was badly twisted, any way it was regarded.

It was nearly dark when Jennie and Red Kelly started home. Near the crossroads outside town they passed two riders who were in a hurry—too much of a hurry to stop. It was too dark to distinguish faces, but the girl laughed softly as they rode on.

"You got your wish, Red! Aldrich and Morgan heading for town to bail out Harper!"

"Fine!" said Kelly cheerfully. "They'll spend the evening in town listening to gossip and won't get home until real late, if at all. Moon will be up right soon, Jennie, so don't get in a hurry. I'm sort of saddle weary, and I got quite some riding to do later. Did you arrange about that Mexican outfit?"

"Judge Prendergast is going to send out a man and his wife he knew of—but should we afford it, Red? I'm a good cook—"

"All right, we can use 'em," asserted Kelly.

During the ride homeward, he reached an astonishing degree of friendship—considering how, only a few days previously, he had been damning all womankind. Jennie Manton was a new experience to him. In her self reliance, balance of character, and laughing camaraderie, she was the perfect ideal of what a girl should be, from the standpoint of Mr. Kelly.

The moonlight magic ended, however, when the MT hove in sight. As they drew near, a peculiar sound reached them, not unlike the bleat of a sheep. It came mournfully from the upper strand of wire laid

across the road, above the house. Chuck Pearson came out to meet them and commented on it.

"That's a new kind o' hoot owl you got around here," he observed. "Listen!"

It sounded again. "Yen-ny! Yen-ny!"

"Why, it's Ole!" exclaimed the girl. "Hey, Ole! Come along!"

"Don' shoot!" said Ole. "Ay want to see you quick!"

Urgency was in his tone, and Jennie, who had not dismounted, urged her horse on toward the fence.

"My gosh, I thought it was a sheep!" said Pearson. "Who's this Ole?"

"Durned if I know," returned Kelly.

The colloquy at the barrier was too low voiced to be overheard. At length the girl came back, and the dim shadow that was Ole moved up the canyon.

"He's the Triangle J cook and a good friend of mine," exclaimed Jennie breathlessly. "He came through the upper barrier and on here to see me. He says that two of the Triangle J men are going up to Lobo Draw, where my finest breed stock is located, and kill off a few of them. He says they'll be there in an hour or two."

"Fine!" said Kelly. "Let's go into the house and get us a doughnut and some information, then we'll maybe persuade them two jaspers that killing off good hosses is a mighty expensive waste of good material. Head for the kitchen, Chuck. You found the doughnuts, I reckon."

"You bet I did," said Pearson. "And they're elegant, ma'am, elegant! I don't guess you got a whole lot left, neither."

"That's what they're for," declared the girl. Anger leaped in her voice. "Kill my stock, will they? I'm going up there myself and see about it."

"No, you ain't," said Kelly. "Aldrich and Morgan are in town establishing an alibi. Most likely another of the outfit has headed north to see if Bain is really in jail or not. Two more headed over to assassinate some broncs. How many should be left to home. Count Bain and Harper gone, remember."

"Should leave three men in the outfit, and the cook," answered the girl. They dismounted at the kitchen door as she spoke. "They may not be there—"

"You and me are going there, if you feel like hard riding," said Kelly. "What say?"

"You're on," returned the girl promptly, and led the way inside.

"All right. Now map me out on the kitchen table how the Triangle J lays—buildings and all."

The three settled about the table, with coffee that Pearson had made, and doughnuts. Kelly had not intended to take Jennie with him, but this was the only means of keeping her from going to Lobo Draw, and Kelly judged he could look after her.

SHE sketched the layout of the Triangle J—a large outfit sprawled all down a creek, with scattered bases of supplies at outlying strategic points. When he had the situation in his head, Kelly gave Pearson his orders.

"Jennie will tell you how to reach her rider, Denver. You tell him you're from me, and take my rifle he's keeping for me. The two of you go up to Lobo Valley, let them two jaspers kill a hoss or so, and then get 'em—and get 'em good! Kill their hosses first, and then shoot for their legs. We want one alive, anyhow. Then you come over with Denver to guide you and meet us by this roundup corral on the north range of the Triangle J—the one with the winter haystacks Jennie mentioned. We'll be there."

"Red!" The girl broke in sharply. "You don't mean to kill those men?"

Red Kelly gave her a swift, level look. "Speak your piece—yes or no? Let 'em kill off our stock, would you?"

"But shooting isn't necessary! We could scare them away!"

"Hm!" said Kelly. "I expect you're right. Forgotten about Slim Johnson, huh?"

She flushed quickly. "All right," she said after an instant. "You're the boss, Red—I was wrong. What are we going to do at the Triangle J?"

"Oh, sort of wander in and have a sociable evening." Kelly pushed back his chair. "Get ready—we got some riding ahead."

Pearson received his instructions about finding Denver, and set forth straightway. Ten minutes afterward, Kelly and Jennie Manton were on their way up the trail to the Triangle J.

VII

RUTHLESS MEASURES

ALDRICH was proud of his ranchhouse, and with reason. He had built it recently enough, when quite confident that he would bring Jennie Manton to it as his bride; when his confidence proved ill founded, he went ahead and finished it anyhow. It was a long, low, frame structure at some distance from the bunkhouse and other buildings.

When Kelly approached alone, on foot, the house was dark, but a glimmer of light showed from the bunkhouse. His proceeding was simplicity itself. He went to the corner of the porch, on the far side from the other structures, and found it shingled like the house. With his knifeblade, Kelly easily split one of the sundried shingles; then he lighted a match and held it to the splinter, and his work was done.

When he rejoined Jennie and the horses, a hundred yards away, he was puffing at a cigarette. He paused a moment to look at the tiny tongue of yellow flame licking at the porch.

"I reckon I'm the only man alive who ever set fire to a house and then got him a light off the conflagration," he observed whimsically.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" broke out the girl. "We shouldn't have done it, Red—it's wrong."

"We're fighting fire with fire, girl," said Kelly grimly, as he mounted. "Now your winter feed's paid for, so far as it'll ever be. Ride! There's a dog rousing 'em up."

"That's Aldrich's wolfhound," she exclaimed. "I'd forgotten the dog."

The rest was lost as they urged the horses out and away, with the short, staccato voice of a dog rising after them. The yellow flame was licking up strongly now; by the time the outfit discovered the trouble, they would be unable to quench it.

Over a rolling crest and gone—Red Kelly was conscious of a certain sneaking sensation in thus firing a house and running, yet held himself in hand and fought it down, forced himself to go through with the plan of campaign he had outlined. This was war, no less, and there is nothing very nice about war except in stories.

The two horses drummed on into the night. Behind them rose a gradual glare against the skyline; it reddened and widened, and there was no longer any doubt that the Triangle J house had gone the way of Jennie Manton's winter feed.

"Are you intending to do the same thing to the stacks where we meet Denver and Pearson?" asked the girl coldly, when they slowed down the horses to a steady jog.

"I was," said Kelly. "And I still am."

"Well, it's wrong! It's wrong to destroy property and I won't have it!"

Kelly said nothing, and they rode on in silence until she spoke again, more gently. They were just easing over the crest of a long rise.

"Don't you see? It shames me, Red, to do things like this! It seems sneaking and underhand. Even if they did it, there's no reason for us to do it."

"Unless you're going to gain something definite by it, sure."

"What? Then you expect to gain something definite?"

"You bet. I want to win this game we're in, and win her quick. Firing the ranch was one point; firing these stacks is another; the third is up to Chuck and Denver. If they're lucky, over yonder at Lobo Draw, then the big play ought to come clear."

"I don't understand—"

The girl's words ended with a gasp, as her bronc leaped sideways. A thin, sharp, singing whistle passed between them; from somewhere came the crack of a rifle.

"Off the skyline—quick!" exclaimed Kelly, and drove in his spurs. "That was luck more'n good shootin'; moonlight means luck."

They raced down the farther slope, side by side.

"It's the—wolfhound!" gasped out Jennie. "They can trail with him!"

"Keep a-going and head for them stacks," commanded Kelly. "Ride!"

It was a wild plunge across the moonlit range—open rolling country hereabouts, good going for the horses, yet ever with the chance of a gopher hole and disaster in the uncertain light. No further sound of the pursuers came to them as they raced. That one shot had been an inadvertence, an overzealous act on the part of the Triangle J

riders. No more than three could be after them, perhaps only one, reflected Kelly.

"Don't break your neck," he called. "I expect someone saw my cigarette as we rode off, and took after me—just one of 'em. The other stayed to fight fire. Take your time and I'll collar this bird later on."

The glare was rising high in the sky behind them, by this time.

THERE was no chance for further talk; Kelly pushed the pace hard, careless of the horses so that only they might reach their goal ahead of the pursuers. All cats are gray at night, and he had no mind to put Jennie Manton in danger from that rifle behind. They drove on fast, furiously, taking chances in the moonlight. Once, the wild fierce voice of the dog came to them as proof that their supposition was correct. Mile after mile dropped behind. When the dog's voice reached them again, it was closer—the horses heard it, and spurted frantically. No need to urge them now!

The glare had dropped behind and under the horizon, but the reflection of it was painted redly on the sky. Kelly called a question, and the girl made response.

"Almost there, Red! Straight up the valley—"

Kelly whistled shrilly between tongue and teeth. A like response came from dead ahead of them, and Red slowed down the headlong pace of his mount. Presently dim blurs were seen—covered haystacks, bulking large in the moonlight. Two mounted figures detached themselves and came forward.

"What luck?" sang out Kelly.

"Got two hombres," returned Chuck Pearson. "Got 'em dead to right. Dropped one with a broken leg, tied up the other. Killed their hosses. Suit you?"

"Fine," said Kelly. "Triangle J boys?"

"Yep," said Denver with satisfaction. "The hurt one was old Dad Chambers, blast him!"

"All right." Kelly spoke briskly. "Not a minute to lose, now! Denver, gimme that rifle—thanks. Jennie, you go along home and take Denver with you. I expect Aldrich will call to see if you're there, along toward dawn. If he does, get rid of him without a fuss, and wait till we show up. No argument, now—time means a whole lot."

"Very well," said the girl quietly. "And, Red! I'm sorry I said that, about being wrong. I'll trust you. Go ahead and fire the stacks if you want."

"Thanks. Get a-moving! Chuck, take our hosses in between them stacks, then come back here pronto."

Kelly dismounted. Denver and Jennie Manton moved off and disappeared. When the two broncs were disposed of, Chuck came running up.

"Well, what's the good word?"

"Dog on the leash after us—one man, maybe more. I'll get the dog. You get the hoss, but not the man if you can help it. Spread out!"

The two men dropped in the grass, here cropped short, and shoved out their rifles.

"You start that blaze over yonder?" asked Pearson.

"Nope. Done started by lightning. Don't you hear the thunder?"

Pearson chuckled. *"Oye los truenos, coyote?"* he responded with the proverb. "Hear the thunder, coyote? There she comes—my gosh! That ain't no dog! It's a young maverick!"

Shapes were sweeping toward them—two horses, it seemed in the deceptive light. These became a rider and a huge whitish wolfhound. Red Kelly cocked his rifle, snuggled down to it, waited. A hundred yards, fifty yards—the Triangle J rider obviously had no suspicion of any trap. The dog, bounding lithely and easily at the end of a rope, suddenly leaped high and somersaulted: Kelly's rifle crack was echoed by a second shot, and the horse pitched down headlong, flinging his rider a good dozen feet. The man lay still.

The two friends rose and advanced.

"Durn it all," said Pearson morosely, "you and me have done a dirty trick, all right. I never thought I'd come down to shooting a hoss—and I done shot two tonight."

"I've done worse'n that," said Kelly, "so shut up."

They turned over the unconscious rider, who was unhurt except for the shock of his fall. An exclamation broke from Chuck Pearson at sight of the unshaven features. "By gosh! Know him, Red?"

"Nope. You?"

"Sure! Hombre called Jake Porter. I knew him a year ago down to Silver Bend—he was with the Circle Dot outfit. They proved up on him that he was a sneak thief and he slipped out of town with a hoss belonging to the outfit. And this is him."

"All right. S'pose you tie him up real good, and snake him a couple or three hundred yards, off among them trees—no, better keep him free of the trees in case they catch. I'll take care of the broncs. Move sharp, now! We got ridin' to do."

While Pearson attended to the unconscious Jake Porter, Red Kelly returned to the horses, put away the rifles, took the reins, and then held a match to the nearest stack. He hurried away the horses before the blaze shot up, and Pearson joined him.

"He's all set. Where for?"

"Circulate. Tell you later."

THEY mounted and rode swiftly, and behind them the yellow flames licked up the side of the tall stack.

"I figure it like this," said Kelly, as they jogged away in the general direction of the MT. "Aldrich ain't had any news from Salinas, savvy? He's right sure in his own mind that he done killed Slim, but Bain ain't come back to verify it. Consequence is, Aldrich is up in the air.

"Well, things happen tonight. He bails Harper out of jail and starts home late with him and Morgan. They see the fire and ride hard. About the time they get toward home, they see this here glare," and Kelly jerked his thumb toward the reddening sky behind. "He'll know it's his stacks, all right. Morgan, his foreman, will come over to make sure and will find your friend Jake Porter. Meanwhile, them two jaspers that went out to kill MT broncs won't come back a-tall, if you did a job of roping."

"We done it," said Pearson. "And set the one gent's broken leg to boot."

"All right. What does Aldrich do? He won't know what's up nor who to blame. He'll suspect the red-haired stranger is mixed in it, but he's heard conflicting yarns in town about that there stranger. He'll likely ride over to the MT to see did Jennie and Denver have anything to do with it, and sort of blow off steam. That'll be about dawn. Do you coincide?"

"So far, so good," said Chuck. "You aim to meet him and perforate him?"

"Not me."

"Well, them Triangle J fellers are sure going to be riding, I'm telling you. And looking out for all strangers like you and me."

"Sure. And come sun up, the sheriff'll be out this way, won't he?"

"Prob'ly. I would if I was him."

"Well, you go meet him and leave me to consult with the stars, savvy? You're a good liar, Chuck. Tell him a real hearty story—" and for a little Kelly spoke, outlining what was to be told and something of his own plans.

Chuck Pearson shook his head. "Feller, this here moonlight riding has turned your brain! Addled 'em. Aldrich will put two bullets into you and kiss you goodnight."

"Wait and see," said Kelly confidently. "You and me part company here. So long!"

So long, you durned fool—I hope you have better luck than you deserve!"

VIII

COUNTERPLOT

DAWN was broadening into daylight, though as yet the sun was under the horizon, when Aldrich turned back to the two waiting men.

They had come upon Jennie Manton's house from down-canyon, openly riding in, Morgan and the other rider waiting while Aldrich went up to the house. He did not have to wake up anyone, for Jennie Manton came out on the porch with a shotgun, and the ensuing talk was short and cool, so far as Jennie was concerned.

It was otherwise with Aldrich. He had been riding most of the night, he was infuriated and weary and deeply perplexed, and he came so near to losing his temper that the girl threw up her gun and cocked it. Mr. Aldrich retired. He was a heavyset, powerful man, rugged of face and hard of hand, with black brows that met above his eyes in a straight bar.

"Find out anything?" asked Morgan, as he came back to them.

"No, blast it," said Aldrich. "And we got to go around to get home. She'll shoot

sure as fate if we go through her wire up yonder."

"No sign of that feller with red hair?"

"No sign of anybody. Can't see what's in the corral. She never set the fire—it was that cussed old Denver, I reckon."

"Somebody comin' down the canyon—likely him," said the third man. The other two turned, hands darting to booted rifles. Then they paused.

"Ain't Denver," said Morgan. "I know his stoop. Looks like the red-haired gent."

Kelly it was, blithely whistling as his horse came down the trail to where the wire was strung, above the house. He dismounted, cut the wire, led his horse through, left the wire looping, and mounted again. He waved his hand at the three men and came toward them.

"Howdy, gents!" he exclaimed cheerfully, apparently ignoring the figure of Jennie on the porch. "I'm looking for Aldrich. He ain't one of you, by any chance?"

"I'm him," said Aldrich flatly, aggressively. "Who are you and where from?"

"Name's Kelly, Red Kelly," said the latter. "From a number of places, and just now askin' for a word with you in private. I got some information you might like."

SO GENIAL was Kelly's air, so entirely free of constraint and so blandly guileless, that the suspicions of the Triangle J men wavered. As a matter of fact, Kelly was gambling heavily on the next act, the next word; but he did not show it. If Aldrich knew that Slim Johnson had been partners with one Red Kelly, his game was up then and there—but he did not think Aldrich knew it. He waited, to all appearance quite negligent and unfearing, quite off guard; quite concerned with seeing Aldrich aside. And, in his present state of mind, Aldrich could not ignore any source of information. He urged his horse forward.

"You the marshal I heard about in town?" he demanded.

"I don't want to tell anybody I'm a marshal or anything else," said Kelly, smiling. His words were entirely truthful—thus far. "I been after a feller, and I got him, and he got away, and I been chasing him—that's why I been up thisaway. Well, I come on a mighty queer thing back up the line a ways. You know anybody name of Slim Johnson?"

Aldrich started violently, and his hand shot down. Kelly did not move. He looked at the rancher so innocently, so wonderingly, that Aldrich blinked and checked his motion.

"Heard of such a feller," he said, scrutinizing Kelly closely. "Why?"

"Well, sir," and Kelly lowered his voice, "I done met up with him an hour or two ago—"

"You what?" said Aldrich, in a strangled tone. His gaze widened. "You—*what?*"

"Met up with him; why?" Kelly laughed easily. "Was he hard to meet up with?"

"My gosh!" exploded Aldrich. "My gosh—this explains it all!"

"Huh?" Kelly stared at him. "Explains what?"

With an effort, Aldrich got himself in hand. "Go on, go on," he said. "Where's this man Johnson?"

"Dead, I reckon, by this time—looked like it last I seen of him," said Kelly. He eased himself in the saddle, shoved back his hat, and waved a hand at the girl on the porch. "Right pretty little lady yonder, huh? I met her yesterday when I come this way—done rode out from town with her last night, too. Tell you what—"

"Spit it out!" snapped Aldrich harshly. "Johnson! You say he's dead?"

"I reckon, by now. There was some shooting, and I headed for it like a fool. Well, sir, danged if I didn't come on two fellers, both of 'em bad hurt, and their hosses dead. They were from your outfit, they said, and were over there on some private business and somebody had opened up on 'em. They had done got him, and says for me to see. So I done what I could for 'em both, then investigated the other feller. He was sure done for, or it looked thataway. He says something about Slim Johnson, and I reckoned it was his name. I done lost myself and follered this track, and here we are."

ALDRICH looked past Kelly, up the canyon, his face set in harshly drawn lines. If this story was true—and he had no reason to doubt it—everything was explained. His attempt on Slim had failed, and Slim had come here to exact payment.

Aldrich knew, naturally, that his two riders had intended a raid on the MT stock during the night—and it looked like he had better see to things himself.

His mind and gaze came back abruptly to Kelly. "Where was all this?"

"Back a ways," and Kelly nodded up-canyon.

"Well, see here! You lammed one o' my riders over the head yesterday and had him locked up on a fool charge, and I had to go to town and bail him out. What's it mean?"

Kelly's eyes widened. "Mean? Why, what would it mean? The little lady over yonder asked me to fix up a fence for her, and I done it. Along comes a feller and figures he can make me quit. He goes for me and I lammed him. It was a good joke, locking him up on that charge—you ain't going to make war talk on account of it, I hope?"

"Huh!" said Aldrich. "I reckon not, if that was the way of it. Them two riders of mine, and Johnson—are they on my range?"

"I guess not," said Kelly reflectively. Aldrich swore to himself. It meant that to reach them he must go miles around. "They're up by a shack—I ain't right certain where."

"Shack, huh? That's the one the MT riders use."

"You want to go there?" asked Kelly. "I can take you up, I expect."

"Me and the lady over there don't get along," said Aldrich. "She'll sure as hell shoot if I go straight up—"

"Lemme speak to her," said Kelly confidently. "I'll ride back with you. I reckon I can fix it with her."

And, without giving Aldrich time to think, he whirled his horse and started for the house. Jennie Manton came out to the steps to meet him, eyes anxious. Kelly was laughing, and, with a burst of exuberance, he leaned forward swiftly in the saddle, his arm shot about the girl's shoulders, and his lips brushed her cheek.

"Wait a minute—wait a minute!" he exclaimed quickly. "Me and Aldrich are riding up your canyon a spell, Jennie—don't shoot! If we have any luck, this here game will be won before noon, everything's lovely and the goose hangs high—so cheer up and get some sleep and don't let old Denver slip off the place to ball things up. See you later."

Without pause, he went on back to Aldrich. Morgan and the other Triangle J man had turned their horses and were riding down the canyon, and riding hard. He frowned after them, wondering where Aldrich had sent them in such haste, but had no time to ask questions.

"Come on," he said to the rancher. "You and me can investigate without getting shot, I guess."

Aldrich nodded, and gathered up his reins.

Jennie Manton watched from the porch, in evident perplexity. Kelly waved his hat to her, as the two men rode up the canyon and passed the blockading wire, and chuckled to himself. Luck had served him well thus far—if it would but hold!

"Who's the gent you come up after?" asked Aldrich, presently.

"I got two or three in mind," said Kelly. "One of 'em's wanted for stealing a hoss down below—feller named Jake Potter."

"Huh!" said Aldrich. "He's workin' for me."

"That so? Well, we can see about him later. I expect we'll have to get the sheriff here on account of this shooting."

"He should ha' been here already—I sent for him a long while ago," said Aldrich. "What d'you know about my house and stacks burning last night?"

"I did see a glare," returned Kelly. "Your house? That's too bad. Good house?"

"Middling," said Aldrich, and relapsed into silence.

THEY jogged along steadily, slowly climbing the canyon and reaching the higher land beyond. To their destination was no great distance, although the shack lay at the other end of the MT range.

That the sheriff had not shown up was cheering information to Kelly, who was gambling very largely on a number of things. He was not perturbed by the fact that he rode stirrup to stirrup with the murderer of Slim Johnson; he no longer wanted to put a bullet into the man, for he had quite different ambitions. However, it was a stiff wager. So far luck had favored him. Things had fallen out exactly as he had

foreseen, and he had found Aldrich exactly in the frame of mind he had hoped to create.

"The rest," he thought to himself, "depends on Chuck Pearson. If he's met the sheriff and done what I said—then all right. If he ain't, I'm knocked in the head and no mistake! We'll see pretty soon."

Presently Aldrich spoke out dourly. "Did them two riders of mine say what they were doing over on MT range?"

"They didn't mention it to me," said Kelly. "I wasn't inquiring into their business. Sure beats all, me running into a range war up here! What you folks got against each other?"

"Nothing much," said Aldrich. "This Johnson and me just don't hitch. He's a no-account sort o' jasper anyhow."

Kelly carefully turned away his face, lest the other man read the mounting fury in his eyes. The sun was just above the horizon by this time, reddening the world with morning splendor. Wishing vainly for a bite to eat, Kelly rolled a smoke instead.

The trail turned off to the right, where Kelly had wired up the gap; they continued on by the fainter trail leading to Denver's shack at the north end of the range. Aldrich, obviously turning things over in his mind, spoke again.

"Sheriff told me last night you were running things on the MT. Don't seem to jibe, someway, with other reports. What's the straight of it?"

"Shucks, I was lending Miss Manton a hand," said Kelly easily. "One of her riders done got hurt yesterday and she was all broke up about it. She ain't in love with your outfit, that's certain, but I guess things will work out all right. Some right good cow ponies over here."

THEY sighted the shack at last, lying near a group of small piñons. Lobo Draw was off at some distance, not in sight of the shack, and Aldrich's gaze roved over the landscape, vainly trying to pick up some sign of his riders.

"Don't see no battle sign," he observed.

"In among the trees," said Kelly carelessly. "Johnson's in the shack, or was."

"Looks like hosses back in them trees higher up," said Aldrich. "Stock, maybe."

They rode up to the shack, a one room affair with a leanto behind, and dismounted. Kelly saw that his companion was nerve tensed, inwardly excited, alert and wary. He went to the open doorway and peered inside. The one room was empty, none too clean, two stools and a table the only articles of furniture. The doorway of the leanto was hung with a ragged old Indian blanket. A corner fireplace, native style, held a fire ready laid.

"All right," said Kelly, without turning. "He's here—come on."

He stepped inside, then turned. Aldrich followed—and Kelly's gun slid into him, with Kelly's eyes blazing over it.

"Up!"

Aldrich mechanically raised his hands, stiffened, and glared at Kelly. One glance had shown him the empty cabin. "Huh? What's this?"

"You and me," said Kelly. He reached out, took Aldrich's gun, and tossed it through the doorway to the ground. Then he backed a step.

"Come in and set down, mister. Lots of time ahead of us."

Kelly had changed appreciably. His careless good humor had vanished, and from his eyes blazed all the hot eager hatred he felt for the murderer before him. He gestured to a stool, and Aldrich, fully aware of the danger signals, obeyed. Kelly took the other one and kicked it against the wall and seated himself, facing Aldrich. He put up his gun and began to make a cigarette—but did not take his eyes from the rancher.

"Well?" demanded Aldrich harshly. "What's this play of yours, anyhow?"

Kelly smiled unhandsomely. There was no hurry, and he had reasons to draw out the scene and the man before him as much as possible.

"As you can see for yourself," he said calmly, "there ain't no Slim Johnson here. But them two riders of yours were caught dead to rights—caught in the act. And they've done some talkin' since."

Aldrich's jaw set as he listened. "What you mean?" he demanded. "Who are you anyhow?"

"I'm Slim Johnson's partner—or was until you shot him," said Kelly, and licked his cigarette.

IX

CORNERED

ALDRICH started slightly, then sat motionless. The harsh lines of his face deepened, a flush crept up his dark cheeks and died again; but his eyes, narrowly fastened upon Kelly, grew alight with deep fires.

"That's all right," said Kelly easily, as he leaned back and fished for a match. "I'm not a bit worried no matter how bad you look. You and me can have a quiet little talk without anybody to bother us, feller."

"What d'you mean by saying I shot Johnson?" snapped out Aldrich suddenly.

"Why—didn't you?" asked Kelly with an air of surprise.

"Course not. I ain't seen him in months."

Kelly lighted his cigarette and settled down to enjoy it. "Well, that's right funny—yes, sir!" he said reflectively. "Just for the satisfaction of it, I did sort of aim to see you 'fess up, before I put a bullet into your hide."

"You mean to murder me?" demanded Aldrich.

"Why, no, not just that," said Kelly. "Not if you come out like a man and spoke your piece. I got some use for a man and none a-tall for a coyote, Aldrich. If you come across right, you might get an even break—your gun's laying out there in the sun."

"Huh! I didn't know Slim Johnson had any partner."

"You've learned something. As I say, them riders of yours were caught dead to rights last night. Got both of 'em, before I burned your house and stacks. Didn't know I done that, huh? Well, I did. Just to sort of even up for what you been doing to the MT. There won't be no prosecution for it, neither."

Aldrich was startled enough now and no mistake. This calm admission cleared up things for him, and showed him he was dealing with a man who would stop at nothing.

He kept silent for a moment, studying Kelly. Then, "How come you brought me here with all your lies to talk about it? If you'd meant action, you wouldn't go for talking."

"True enough." Kelly's lips curved in a smile. "But privacy was essential, you see. I reckoned we might discover you, later on, with them two riders of yours who had been killing MT stock. I let 'em do some killing before I dropped on 'em, so's everything would be plain for the sheriff to see."

This was a bad blow—the lines in Aldrich's face deepened on finding that his riders had indeed been taken in the act.

"What you want?" he snapped, his fists opening and closing helplessly.

"Talk," said Kelly. "Now, you might as well come across real confidential, Aldrich. You see, I done killed your man Bain—killed him good and dead. In self defense, too; I seen to that real careful."

A slight pallor showed in the tanned face of the rancher. Kelly drew at his cigarette, flipped it through the doorway, and leaned against the wall.

"You see, Aldrich," he went on, "you sort of slipped up when you stopped for supper at that place this side Salinas. I was there, only you didn't see me. And when I seen your hoss brand, I sort of trailed along."

"Oh, you did!" sneered Aldrich.

"Yep. Too bad I was a trifle slow in town, or I could have stopped you. Well, you slunk in and got over betwixt them buildings, and when Slim was singing you took one shot and got him dead center. Then you went back to your hoss and beat it for home. There's the way you murdered Slim Johnson, in a nutshell. Now, are you going to lie about it further?"

Aldrich glared at his tormentor in futile rage. Most assuredly, he was up against a cold-blooded man who meant to exact blood for blood; they were alone here in this shack, miles from anywhere—just the two of them. The craft of the man came to the fore. After all, he held one trump—one card of which Kelly knew nothing, guessed nothing! And remembering it, his face cleared.

ALDRICH reached to his pocket. Kelly touched his gun, but Aldrich smiled grimly and produced the makings, rolling himself a cigarette.

"Red, you done mentioned an even break," he said coolly. "Does it go?"

"It sure does," said Kelly, thrilling to the words and the change of manner, seeing victory in sight at last. "I ain't lowdown dog enough to shoot a man, even if he does deserve it, without givin' him a show. But I laid out to get you, and I aim to get you—don't forget that, Aldrich!"

"Then why the confession?"

"Just to sort of ease my mind and make me feel better."

"Well," Aldrich deftly turned the cigarette, licked it, and felt for a match, "seeing your mind needs easing so much, I reckon we can have it out straight. You figured it out all right. I got Johnson like I aimed to. And now, what about it?"

"Plenty of time," said Kelly. "You done plugged him when he didn't know you were even around—while he was strummin' a guitar and singing! Proud of it, are you?"

"Sermon included free?" said Aldrich with a sneer. He lighted his cigarette and broke the match and dropped it. "I didn't start out to indulge in no duel. I set out to get Slim, and I got him first chance that turned up, and that's all of it. And," he added defiantly, "I'll do my durndest to get you likewise, if I get a show."

"Yeah, I reckon you will," assented Kelly. "Only I aim to do the getting. S'pose you set that coffee pot over the fire and light her, will you? We might's well have a mite of refreshment before we go to shooting."

Aldrich was suspicious, but moved to the corner fireplace. The pot was half full of coffee, and he set it on the iron grid, then touched a match to the laid fire, and resumed his stool. Kelly grinned and answered his unspoken thought.

"Nope, I don't aim to plug you before the time comes. I reckon them MT riders must have fixed up for a meal—table all set. Say, how come your boys to kill that feller yesterday? You and I know, both of us, he wasn't on no hoss and didn't fall off. Who done it? You?"

Aldrich shrugged. This frank and intimate talking over things had a grimly humorous side.

He was sparring for time, however, and playing a hard game.

"Nope," he said. "Dad Chambers—that old feller with Morgan yesterday when you met 'em. Him and Sime weren't friends anyhow. From what I heard, both of 'em drew at once."

"Who seen it?"

"Morgan."

"He set out to do it, didn't he?"

Aldrich laughed. "Search me!"

"Oh, come across," said Kelly disgustedly. "You know durned well he had orders to do it, like them two riders last night had orders to kill MT stock. Dad Chambers was one of 'em, too. You laid out to ride Jennie Manton, huh?"

"Well, if you're so durned curious, that's about the way of it," and Aldrich abandoned his mask. "A girl like her hasn't got no business trying to ranch, and using up good land."

"No, she'd ought to marry the first neighbor that takes a shine to her, huh?" jeered Kelly. "And if she don't do it, then she deserves all she gets. By gosh, I admire to meet a feller like you, Aldrich! I reckon you got some good points, but they're well concealed. I never did meet a feller before who had so much meanness in his hide as you've got."

"Thanks for your opinion," said Aldrich. "Looks like that coffee's hot enough."

The roaring blaze of manzanita and juniper root had set the coffee steaming. Aldrich went to the corner, lifted off the pot, and came to the table. He looked at Kelly, and found the latter watching him, pistol in hand.

"Just in case you have a notion to sling the pot this way," said Kelly.

Aldrich sneered, filled the two cups, and set down the pot. Sugar was on the table. Kelly reached forward, sugared his coffee, and sipped it. Aldrich stood at the table, gulping until his tin cup was empty. His gaze drove out the doorway, his eyes flickered suddenly, and he looked at his captor. But Kelly had not observed the look.

"What sort of a break you aim to give me?" demanded Aldrich.

Kelly set down his cup. "More'n you'd give me," he said. "Judge and jury."

"Huh?" The other stared. "You fool, you got no evidence against me!"

"No?" Kelly looked up at him, and

chuckled. "That so? Maybe you've fooled yourself, feller—"

He broke off abruptly. In the doorway appeared a shadow—a long-cast shadow in the level rays of early morning. Someone was outside.

With a leap, Kelly was at the door. And there, grinning at him, stood Morgan and the other Triangle J rider—they had circled and come upon the shack quietly.

"Got you!" cried Morgan. "Put 'em up, feller—up!"

X

THE LAST SHOT

KELLY stood in the doorway, hands out to the jamb at either side, blinking into the sunlight. Both men facing him had their guns out, holding him covered, and Morgan grinned exultantly. "Hey, boss! You in there?"

For response Aldrich, standing behind Kelly, shoved him violently forward so that he staggered out into the sunlit morning.

"Get him, boys!" he cried. Then, oddly enough, he fell silent and did not emerge.

No one was observing him, however. Kelly, taken off guard by that shove, went forward on hands and knees. His right hand came down on the gun belonging to Aldrich, which he had flung out here. He shifted his balance, gripped it, hammer and trigger.

Morgan saw the slight motion, cried out sharply, threw out his gun. Kelly fired from the ground, without rising, then dropped and rolled over. Morgan staggered back against his companion, flung out his arms, went down in a heap. The other puncher shot twice—then went whirling around. From the shack came the quick bark of a gun. The rider fell across the body of Morgan.

Kelly came to his feet, and wiped a trickle of blood from the stinging burn in his neck, where a bullet had seared across the skin.

"Pretty near too slow, old-timer!" he exclaimed, as he turned to the doorway, where Chuck Pearson stood gun in hand. "Much obliged. Hurt him bad?"

"I got him," said Pearson simply. "Come on in."

There was no use looking at either of the two men lying in the sun. Kelly knew already that Morgan was dead.

In the shack, Sheriff Mason stood across the limp figure of Aldrich. He had hit the rancher from behind, stunning him, and was now fitting handcuffs to the man's wrists. He straightened up, and gestured toward the curtained doorway of the leanto.

"Both?" he said, and read his answer in the eyes of Kelly and Pearson. "By gosh, that was close work, boys! Good thing you had us waiting in there, Red. This gent didn't know he was talking before witnesses, o' course. Well, Red, you sure handled things!"

Kelly looked the sheriff in the eye. "I'm going to ask you to swear in my friend Pearson as deputy, Sheriff, and take Aldrich along to jail," he said. "You know the charge. Soon as we can bring in his two men who are lying up in Lobo Draw, we'll do it and lay charges against them. Now, about this shooting here in front—"

Mason held up his hand. "Red, don't you think twice about that," he said quietly. "Aldrich has run a lot o' folks in this county, and he thought he run me—but it's done with. Pearson and me will attend to him. This here shooting was the clearest self defense ever seen—I'll answer for that. Hey, where you going?"

Kelly had turned to the door. He halted, and glanced back whimsically. "Me, I got a date with a lady," he said. "I'll leave the dirty work to you for a spell—yes, sir, I got a date! And she'll prob'ly come into town with me."

"That's him," said Chuck Pearson to the sheriff. "I'll bet a dollar he gets married today—Sudden Kelly is him all over!"

"Nope, not before next week," and Kelly laughed over his shoulder. "So long, folks! See you later."

Too Much Talk in the Post Office Led to the Theft of an Unusual Mail Shipment—Twenty-five Thousand in Pearls

THE TRAMMEL FORK PEARLS

By
RAYMOND S. SPEARS

BUTTONSHELLS were scarce and pearl buying wasn't so good. Dolan Burton hadn't even made expenses when he came through the doorway on his return from a disappointing trip into the Indiana mussel fisheries, scuffling the mail the postman had thrust through the large slit in his front door. Advertisements, papers and magazines—he stooped and caught up the heap from the floor; he ought to have a box to catch it! He always forgot the need, though. Two weeks' deliveries made an imposing pile on his flat-top desk. His thought was of the bother, which showed his scant faith in Uncle Sam bringing him anything worth having.

He sat at his desk, began at the top and took whatever was next to his hand. He felt lonely. The money he had brought to the city to rent an office and establish himself as a fresh-water pearl buyer was about gone. Fortune had deserted him when he branched out. No one knew pearls better than he did. He was an experienced jeweler—young but competent. Luck had brought into his hands seven beautiful freshwater pearls on Scrup Fork in the Illinois Basin. For three years he had traded, bought and sold, visited the pearling streams, making a good living. Then baroques, seeds, small shapes had paid his expenses—the shapes were all profits from which he made a stake. Surely $8,000 above his field-money would carry him along!

Now he was living on his buying money. His occasional visits to the city had been profitable. The idea that he would find a good living there, with a headquarters covering the pearling of the limewater run offs had grown till he could not resist the fascinating venture. Now he was there—about to break.

His waste paper basket, a big toy carton from a peddlers' headquarters across the street, caught papers, advertisements, odds and ends, most of his mail with only a glance. And then he found a box ten inches long, more than two inches wide and half an inch thick, sealed for letter postage. He shook it tentatively and felt weight inside. Opening the wrapper with a paper blade, he gazed at a typewriter cushion key box. Shoving the slide out, he found it full of tissue paper and little card envelopes, each with a lump in it, and his hands trembled as he picked one of the crumpled containers to empty it onto a bare place on his desk.

A pearl! His jaw dropped. Never had he seen the like in the field. A quick roll and then a close examination in the north light—a touch with his tooth and he was weak. The gem was worth a thousand dollars! And when he had looked into each of

the thirty tiny envelopes he was gasping for breath. Of course, in that frame of mind, his astonishment immeasurable, he couldn't even guess the values—but $25,000 would be cheap!

A quick look at the wrapper, and he found the name, T. M. Lauson. This meant nothing to him, and neither did Pretty Kettle, Tennessee. The map showed him, however, that this was in The Knolls country, and he remembered having heard that two or three pearls of price had come out of there, but no fishery had been established for pearls or buttonshells.

"My luck has changed!" he reflected. "These'll put me on my feet—"

He found the letter with the pearls.

Pretty Kettle, Tenn.
October 12th.

Dear Mr. Burton:

I herewith send you some pretty tricks out of the creek here, which I am sure are pearls. My cousin who is a sheller and pearler in the Lake Nicormy Swamps gave me your little book about pearls and slugs, and so I am mailing you these which I hope you will be able to sell for me the way you done for him. Please let me know what you think of them but don't call them pearls because I don't want anybody to know about them. Call them mink skins, and if they are worth $100 call it $1, or $500, make it $5, and if they are very good you could ask me about otter skins, for I have my reasons.

Yours sincerely,
Theda Macon Lauson

Burton did not even think of the opportunity such a shipment, not even registered, had brought him. He turned to his typewriter, squirted a little oil on the ribbon spools and cleaned up the rest of his mail in a hurry. Then as the oil was light and had seeped pretty well through the ribbon, he wrote his answer to his correspondent, sister of one of those shellers and pearlers he had known over in eastern Arkansas, back from New Madrid, but he couldn't tell which one.

His feeling of relief, hope revived, success beckoning again was immeasurable. The strain of weariness and dejection had grown upon him slowly; only when the incubus was gone did he realize its weight. For a little while he seemed unable to move, his breath shortened.

Behind him the door clicked; he felt the draft from the dark and narrow hallway; surprised, he cocked his head, listening.

"Hi-i-i!" a soft voice exclaimed. "Hyar they be! Keep yo' haid thataway! Don't move, suh!"

Frozen, he felt the cold ring of a shotgun against the back of his neck and a left hand reached past his shoulder and clutched up the little envelopes, a dozen of them, in the first grab, and then the others till all of them had followed the first handful. Stunned, he could do nothing. It was a small weapon, a low caliber, he could tell by the feel.

"If'n yo' look I'll cut yo' throat—have to," the voice declared. "Now put yo' hands back—thataway."

THE next instant he was being bound, his hands to the legs of the chair by stout cord. Something was jammed into his mouth, and he was gagged, and blindfolded. A minute later he heard the door close behind him as the latch clicked shut. He began to pull and struggle, but though the scoundrel had worked swiftly, he had tied good knots and done a thorough job. His office was at the end of a hallway, around in a jog where no one came but those to see him. He might remain there for hours, days, indefinitely, for he was seldom there, and he had come unseen that morning, he recalled. In his ears rang the chortling satisfaction of the holdup who had stolen those pearls belonging to his customer.

His position was desperate. Getting his fingers around to where he could feel the cord on his right wrist with his fingertips, he recognized the kind—it was a trot line, white, hard-twist cotton rope used in making guys for nets, for fishermen's tents and even for skiff anchor cables. Men had been hung on those light lines! With difficulty he suppressed the feeling of panic terror. His heart was thumping, and with the gag in his mouth, it was hard to breathe fast enough through his nostrils.

"I must keep calm. I mustn't get excited," he told himself, sagging determin-

edly against the high back of his swivel chair. Then he discovered that by shrinking down he could scrape at the knot across the back of his head. Little by little he worked the tie up and with relief shook the scarf clear and spat out the wad of cloth he had used to wipe his typewriter.

He could yell now, but night had fallen. The chance of anyone hearing him at that hour was scant. True, some of the occupants of the office building occasionally stayed late, but usually they were gone by this hour—at least six o'clock, and perhaps later. He could not tell.

His wrists had been tied to the bracket of the seat. Now that he was able to breathe freely, see around, feel sure of making his escape in the morning, when his yells would be heard, he slacked the cords and by straining and twisting about, he presently reached a knot which yielded to his thumb and finger nails. At midnight he was free, with deep red lines around his wrists which were burned and scraped. And he stood now in full realization of his predicament. One of the oldest of alibis, that of being bound by hold-ups when other people's money and valuables were lost, had been worn threadbare. Insurance companies, commercial interests, bankruptcy courts, all questioned those secret robbers who come and go unseen.

Dolan Burton looked at his desk. There was the carbon of the letter he had written to Theda Macon Lauson; he looked around for the envelope in which he had placed the original, ready to mail out. It was nowhere in sight though the letter the woman had sent him was there, under the carbon paper. The outlaw had not discovered it, or at least had not taken it with him.

The pearl buyer reread his answer:

Dear Miss Lauson:

I have this day received from you the mink skins as per yours of recent date, October 12th. I have as yet been unable to appraise them, but from the cursory examination I believe that they should range well above $5 per, as they are apparently full prime and first quality, unusually dark and lustrous in mink skins from your locality. Of course, otter skins are very uniform in winter prime grades, north and south, and I judge what ones of this species you have are of superior grade. I shall examine these skins with utmost interest and report to you, immediately.

If you prefer, I shall sell them on a 10% commission basis, which is probably the most satisfactory way, since the trade is considerable and in this quality it may take some little time to arrange satisfactory sales.

Thanking you for the business, I am
Very sincerely yours,
Dolan Burton.

He had informed her in code that the pearls were worth thousands of dollars, "well above $500 per." Now he had lost them. The bandit was gone and there had been no outcry. No matter what he said, how frank his avowal, he would be a person suspect. The woman had found an amazing pocket of freshwater pearls and mailed him ones worth more than $25,000 in a commonplace container. Trust like that in Uncle Sam's Post Office and in men in his business ought to be justified. The thoroughfare on which his office was, being a well known jewelry center, was protected in various ways from invasion by crooks. The bandit himself had braved the rule that a criminal should not appear there under penalty of being picked up for vagrancy.

DOLAN BURTON carefully looked over the office, but he knew he would find nothing there that would help him. The invader had worn thin rubber gloves through which no fingerprints could possibly show.

"But he left a clue," Burton reflected. "He left lots of clues."

The trot line was significant. The pieces of old cord were gray instead of white because of age. One piece had a loop spliced in the end. The tangible cord harked back to any one of a hundred communities on tributaries of the Mississippi or its major streams, like the Ohio, Arkansas, Upper Mississippi. Another clue was over against the bottom of the wainscotting. In his eagerness to pocket all those little envelopes the raider had dropped one. He had picked it up, found it empty and, wadding it into a little ball, he had thrown it down. The pearl which had rolled out of the stiff linen paper

container had gone against the wall and stopped, unnoticed.

The pearl was like a large pea in size. It would weigh more than twelve pearl grains at the least. Its value, depending on its luster, was problematical, but Burton wasn't thinking of that when he put the glass on it, studying the color, the network of horny matter and lime. Just that kind of luster, just that loveliness of white, with a faintest of pink hues flaring through the translucent depths was new to him. Every stream, every source of pearls, has its own peculiar mark whereby the experts trace it. Burton knew before long that he had never seen a pearl like this one before.

A new pearl stream might have been discovered, though he knew he had not seen all the kinds of pearls produced in the hundreds of known streams. The beauty was like that of White River, Caney Fork, Clinch River, and New Jersey. Farther south the pearls grow faster and longer in a season, and farther north they grow more slowly and the layers of shell were finer, thinner and generally lovelier.

Burton formerly had always carried insurance on his pearls, but the policy had lapsed. Many business men had let loss and theft insurance go. Most of them were like Burton without anything much to insure. He was almost unable to believe his experience. The trotline and pearl were proof enough however, that he had not endured an ugly nightmare. He went to the office of the Carcajou Investigations, Inc., and frankly told Manager Drenn his story, showing the investigator the pearl which had been dropped and the two pieces of cord. Drenn examined the pearl through a glass. It was a beauty, and probably the smallest in the collection which had been sent to Burton to be sold.

Drenn examined closely the deep lines around the pearl buyer's wrist, and to a question Burton described the knots, and how he managed to slip them because his hands were flexible.

"Well, what can I do?" Drenn inquired.

"Those pearls are stolen goods," Burton answered, "I don't know what to suggest. You don't owe me anything, but this is a jewelers' trade matter. I thought perhaps I ought to tell you. This puts me in a bad hole. I shouldn't be surprised if the case came to you presently from the other side. You know when a customer submits pearls for sale to a pearl buyer, as these were submitted, he has to take care of them."

"You never asked her for them?"

"Never heard of her! But her cousin, she wrote me, told her about me," Burton said, "I had a good—a good reputation. I'd satisfied the pearlers. Now I've let me in for $25,000 or so worth of suspicion."

"The door was locked behind you?" Drenn asked.

"I unlocked it with my key, and didn't set the latch to work the outside knob. I heard the click—this fellow had a key to it."

"Looks bad for you," Drenn remarked. "What are you going to do?"

"Look for those pearls," the victim answered. "I've told you what the thing looks like. If they show up here, if you'd let me know at Pretty Kettle, I'd be obliged to you."

"Don't use your own name," Drenn remarked. "I'll look around for you, here. You notified the police?"

"No, I didn't," Burton shook his head. "This thief'll watch the papers and if he doesn't see anything about this, he'll get to worrying, perhaps more than if it was spread all over the front pages."

"Yes, that works with some of them," Drenn nodded, and gave him some suggestions, advice, to use or not if conditions warranted.

DOLAN BURTON had canvassed hundreds of miles of pearl and button-shell rivers in search of baroques, seeds, slugs, shapes of all kinds. He knew swamp brakes and mountain hardwoods. The more he reflected on the kinds of regions where he had been to buy pearls, the less he could foresee what to expect when he went to Pretty Kettle to find who had sent him those beautiful pearls and whether he could pick up a trail which would lead him to the bandit who had known he had the gems before he did himself. The scoundrel had located Burton's office in town and come in, perhaps not expecting to find the buyer there, perhaps not realizing that the pearls were actually among the mail on the floor.

Fortune had favored the robber, whether he had worked by chance or by plan.

Pretty Kettle was on the Trammel Fork. Burton thought of going up the regular route into the valley whence the packet of pearls had come. He changed his mind, however, and took the railroad into Sourmash, over the State Line. Here he left the train and went on the mail stage into the fastnesses of Candle Court. This was just over the divide, seventeen miles from Pretty Kettle. The highway map didn't show any roadway over the mountain, but the stranger had a compass and camping outfit in a pack-basket. He claimed to be a game hunter, and spent a day at Candle Court, asking the gunsmith in the hardware store about the high range.

"I don't want to go where bad friends might be made," Burton said. "I'm new, here. I mind my own business. I don't want to know anything that might bother people. Mainly I want to keep on the spurs and hogbacks, camping where I'll find turkeys, deer, squirrels and maybe quail in old clearings."

The gunsmith was tall, gaunt and friendly. He walked with a perceptible limp and he watched his visitor with a shrewd directness. He had been a rider in several of the Western States and long ago he had gone out into the Big Range where he worked cows. He had left in a hurry, but presently after some thirty years he had returned to Ol' Kaintuck, broadened by experience on plateaus, in vast basins, in Bad Lands and open country. He could tell a stranger where to go and how to avoid trouble.

"If'n you keep on the high backs," he said, "yo' won't git into trouble along the runs. Course, if 'n yo' happen to meet a scouter, he mout think something. That's one thing yo' cain't count out, no how. A man keepin' out of touch with the law is sho' apt to be sensitive. Personally, I'd ruther hunt where game is scarcer."

Burton reached the top of the world. The scene was a narrow razor-back ridge with slopes on either side that extended down and out for mile after mile of forested valley, spurs, ridges and varied mountain lands. A pearl buyer would just naturally keep in the bottoms along the streams, but anyone hiding out was more apt to go high up and stay there.

THERE was Pretty Kettle and the sparkling flow of the green Trammel Fork. The settlement was on a flat bench along a stillwater. Where the steep of the valley came down to the water banks, the slope was covered with timber. The stream and the valley road went through farm clearings of fifty or sixty acres and stumpy pastures wherever there was a flat on one or both sides of the stream.

Cabins, frame houses that moonshine built, a street with several stores, or commissaries, a drug store, a hotel, an overshot gristmill, and other structures for perhaps five or six hundred population rested there. It didn't look like a community that would mail out $25,000 worth of pearls—but it did seem to be the kind of a place where people lived who would seal just such pretty little tricks in a box and mail them, kindness of Uncle Sam, without registering, to a pearl buyer off yonder in the big city.

And somewhere thereabouts was a shrewd, daring, unscrupulous scoundrel who would have ideas and use them, even though they required a stickup with a shotgun and the theft by robbery of a fortune. Here men struggled to make a living and some few in their desperation and their pride stopped at nothing; they robbed, cheated and killed; and insults called for deadly reprisals.

Through his binoculars Burton watched Pretty Kettle, and at sundown he shouldered his pack and went down the point into the gap where the trail crossed the Divide and followed the road into the valley just above town, arriving at the boarding house, Hotel No. 2 of Pretty Kettle, kept by Kumby, a genial, burly, black whiskered man with bright blue eyes and a direct gaze that twinkled—seeing everything.

"I reckon we c'n accommodate yo'," he smiled. " 'Tain't Co'rt week. No special doings. What yo' packin'? Looks like yo' mout be soldierin' an' lost yo' army, suh. No 'fense, Strangeh! We 'low to have our leetle joke on Trammel Creek, suh."

Supper was ready. Kumby sat down with the newcomer just to be sociable. Thus he learned that his patron was chiefly a Yankee,

but his name was Wright, his father's people having lived over at the Kentucky-Virginia line ever since time began, practically.

"My excuse for coming along the Blue Ridge and Cumberlands is just that I like to hunt, camp out, visit folks along," Burton covered his ideas, and Kumby said he had traveled in his day, out West, Texas, Colorado, and even as far as Oregon.

"I was worried and kept moving—jes' a leetle shootin' scrape is all. A good lawyer cleared me on se'f-defense grounds, presently. Ched Lauson's legally reliable, fine, educated an' honorable. Gains ev'y point, neveh loses a possible case. If he'd be'n ambitious, not lovin' Pretty Kettle, he'd be'n big in the high co'rts, but he's content to live in Pretty Kettle, ride circuit, satisfied jes' to live."

"He's married?" the visitor inquired.

"He's a widower, but he's got feminine management," the man said, "his daughter Theda Macon Lauson. My land, she practically raised herse'f to a liberal education, riding, shooting, co-eding, up the mountangs, down the valleys, university an' experience school graduated! She's a right an' lef' handed shot, rifle, scatter an' shortguns, suh. Ve'y fine, friendly, cleveh, an' honorable young lady, but rampageous, suh. She's a dep'ty sher'f now an' totin' a bench warrant fo' Bald Knob Pete Stubbors."

"What has he done?"

"Jes' meanness, interference, all arounc cussedness!" Kumby sighed. "He's one of them mountang Hill Billies that gives ev'ybody a bad name, back thisaway. Mist' Lauson defended him in his latest but one homicide case. Pete handed his attorney $100 cash in hand an' took the rest of his law on tick. Lauson acquitted him— a sho' close squeak. Now Mist' Lauson's a ve'y easy going gentleman, financially, but that gal of his is plumb disgusted an' don't stand no economic nonsense. She told that Pete Stubbors he'd git the worst of hit, cheatin' her daddy, an' he jes' laughed. Huh, he practically growed up parallel to Theda! He's 'bout five yeahs older'n she is, but yo' know, that's jes' 'bout how far a man is behind them women, mentally. He don't know hit, though.

"Co'rse, Pete was real good-natured, calm, indiff'rent till his pap gits killed up, when he comes back an' self-defends his fambly, poppin' oveh Juck Skimpin—an ornery bushwacker—savin' his fambly the $1,000 reward on him, thataway. Then havin' tasted blood Pete killed up two fellers—moonshiners an' chicken thieves. Nobody said nothin' 'bout that. They were Juck's pals an' had talked they'd kill Pete. Then Pete stretched his se'f-defending a leetle too fur, killin' a feller in obscure circumstances one night on the way home from a dance. He got indicted an' Mist' Lauson acquitted him in jig-time. But hit left kind of a feelin' in the famblies, and theh's come two-three otheh killin's that gits tried out, an' yo' know yose'f public sentiment don't stand on'y about jes' so much.

"An' now this last killin' gits him rewarded $1,000, daid er alive. Hit'd be kind of a joke if Theda c'lected her daddy's due-fee of $900 killin' his client, now wouldn't hit? Anyhow, Pete jes' laughs, sayin' he'll marry her yit. She jes' boils!"

BURTON was sure glad he had given his name as Orton Wright. After some uneasy sleep, he went to the post office and received mail addressed to Orton Wright—papers and magazines he'd subscribed for. Manager Drenn told him attempts to sell freshwater pearls had been made by a soft-spoken, proud and handsome man, but one who never came back twice. Drenn added:

"Obviously, he knew nothing of the pearl trade, nor about pearls, and we found where he had left his shabby hotel before we could contact him. He signed himself Rhule Plamer of Ozark, Missouri. Nobody of that name lives in or near Ozark. He's a Hill Billy, and bad."

On his way back to the boarding house, Burton met a tall, rangy slender young woman with wide, frank blue eyes and the swing of an outdoor person. She had a repeating shotgun over her left elbow and a belt of shells from which dangled a holster for a long-barreled automatic pistol. She was square-shouldered, tight-bosomed, and smiling just naturally, her gem-blue eyes surveying the stranger from beneath a wide-brimmed man's hat of light gray. She wore

laced hunting boots, knee-length walking skirt and fine gauntlet gloves.

"I understan' Mist' Wright that yo're a Yankee from 'way off yonder," she stopped him. "What kind of a reputation has Dolan Burton, the pearl buyer, got theh'bouts?"

Thus queried, he swallowed, blinked and hesitated.

"Well, of course," he frowned, "the East's a very large place. I don't know lots of people there. Mr. Burton has been there only two-three years. I understand he's been getting along tolerable—"

"I jes' wanted to know." She shrugged her shoulders. "Just so he's reliable, I'm satisfied. Somebody said you were from Down East, so I inquired.

"Sure sorry I can't be more explicit."

"Oh, that's all right, Mist' Wright. You're one of those old Johnson county-Pound Gap Wrights?"

"No-o, not lately," he shook his head. "My father was in those parts. He married a Yankee girl and moved up north. I was borned out west in Ohio, but been back east, and around. I'm just sporting around, hunting game—I see you're shooting, too. Quail I suppose, squirrels, perhaps turkey?"

"No, suh—I'm loaded with buckshot." She shook her head. "Around town I prefer a shotgun—buckshot are more reliable and less apt to keep on going afteh they've done their business. Out around, I pack a rifle. Ranges are pretty far in the hills, sometimes."

"Oh, you hunt deer then? Big game?"

"Oh, theh's some deer!" she assented. "Then there's razorbacks, which I kill me when convenient. What I'm interested in, Stranger, is did you meet a tall, handsome man with a three-cornered face and a mirthless grin when you crossed the mountain back, yesterday? He still claims the name—Bald Knob Pete Stubbors."

"No, I saw no one." He shook his head thoughtfully.

"You're sure lucky," she remarked. "The sheriff has a thousand dollars reward on him, for meanness. Before he went bad, Pete was fairly respectable, but now he's moonshining, killing for hire, and he don't even pay his lawyer. I reckon he figures lawyers cain't do much for him now, the way things are. No use wasting money on 'em."

While she talked, she gazed steadily at the stranger she knew as Wright, watching him as if for a sign. Buying pearls, he had met these mountain people. A mistake would be costly. Here was the young woman who had sent him those marvelous pearls. Her hands were long, her fingers slim and yet he could see the telltale scars showing that she, herself, had opened the mussels and cut herself on the sharp shells. Probably she knew from his letter that her pearls were worth many thousands of dollars; how could he ever tell her they had been stolen from him? All he could do to make amends was place himself at her service, bonded for life, trying to pay back to her what he had lost.

"Of course, Miss Lauson, I'm a stranger in these parts," he said. "I'm just a wild-crafter, nature lover and sportsman. I'm quite poor. But if I could be of service, I'd surely be glad to help."

"You hunt squirrels, Dicky birds, cottontails," she jeered him, "I don't reckon you'd eveh even dream of hunting a man!"

NOT meeting her searching gaze he thought of one man he would hunt to the ends of the world and bring to chains, prison or his tomb without compunction—the scoundrel who had ruined his business and his profession! Next to getting that rascal, he would wish to show his willingness to make amends to the young woman whose loss, though she did not know it, was as great or greater than his own.

"I never expected to turn man-hunter," he admitted, "and I hope you won't mistake my meaning if I say it would be a novel experience for me, if I could do it legally. Of course, a man has to learn how to hunt men, the same as hunting anything else."

"That's so." She squinted thoughtfully. "Suppose I took my rifle and we hunted potluck up yonder on the long mountang? Don't brag none of what you're intending. Neveh mind a snack—I've got one put up. You got your mail. Go to the boarding house, act ordinary, and tell Fallis you're strolling up the points learning the country. Follow the run up till you find a sugar maple tree like a footlog across the gully. Wait theh, suh!"

He found the tree and sat on it with

patience. A whistle and a look—there was the lawyer's daughter, carrying a .30-.30 carbine and a big gamebag over her shoulder. He took it, and she led the way up the spur of the mountain and two hours later they were up the steep slope on the crest.

Along the extreme top of the long razorback mountain was a wagon road used when high water made the valley roads impassable and the fords were too deep to swim or wade. There she turned westward and they strolled along, side by side, his rifle in his left elbow crook, hers in her right elbow hook, walking noiselessly in the roadway which the wind had blown clear of autumnal leaves.

"Down theh," she nodded into the deeps of Trammel Creek valley, "I couldn't get even a deputy sheriff let alone a citizen to go with me, hunting that Bald Knob Pete. They're afraid of him. He shoots from the bresh. For nine years he's been killing-mean. He was seventeen when he killed his first man, at a dance oveh a girl. In college he prob'ly paid his way selling moonshine. Oh, he's sly! I always suspicioned he did the shooting in Thunderland Café, one night of a killing theh. When he came home he could sure chemistry his stilling. He made and spent money freehanded these years, since. Hot-headed, rambunctious and plumb careless, he fell out with Tuck Wraggan, his partner. Tuck carried a girl to a party in Thunderland Gap, and Bald Knob was theh, and they went at it. Tuck died. If my father hadn't defended him, Bald Knob sure would have gone to the electric chair. As it was, he come clear again on self-defense. He's been cleared less'n three terms of court—and now he's rewarded, like I said, $1,000 for killing Ruben Dickers of the Thunderland Café; shooting him down in cold blood for $100 cash in hand. He's murdered once too often. I told him if'n he didn't pay up that $900 he owes my pap, I'd c'lect it, with $100 interest.

"'A woman c'lect that reward?' he laughed. 'I'm going to collect from you, instead.'

"That made me plumb indignant. He's got four-five hideouts back on this mountang, 'sides places he c'n go in—stillhouses, cabins, p'or white shacks. Theh's root-diggers, fortune hunters, trappers out around. All we got to do is locate him, an' if we cain't catch him alive, shoot him daid."

"I'd hate to think of your being around—he might shoot," her hunting partner said.

"I reckon he'll shoot at you, first," she answered. "That'll give me a chance to locate him and do some shooting myself."

"I'll try to spoil his aim, if I have the chance," Burton remarked. "Probably he's a good, cool shot!"

"Oh, yes, indeed!" she spoke admiringly. "He uses a terrible fast bullet, though, and it flies to pieces the minute it hits anything, wood, bones, or anything like that. Blows a hole out of a man you could put a muskmelon into. They mess things up but his ammunition is irregular—he misses oftener than he hits if he's any distance away. That's a point in our favor. He's careless and impatient. If he's waiting to bushwhack a man he's apt to quit afteh three-four hours, even if hit means a hundred dollars to him. He neglected four-five men we know about thataway. Hit's come time to eat our snack." She looked at her wrist watch. "Just keep watch around while I'm spreading our eats."

"Perhaps Stubbers has gone to Texas," Burton suggested.

"No, suh, I don't expect," she shook her head. "I thought I'd lost him. He was gone three weeks, nobody seeing him. I 'lowed maybe I'd run him out the country, myself. I'd told him we had to have that $900. He kinda laughed. He said likely he'd pick it up around, somewhere. He was just mocking me. He showed back again last week. He'd been away off yonder. I heard it straight. I wouldn't put it above him to rob a bank or train or payroll."

THEDA LAUSON knew the mountains like a fugitive from justice. Her head turned in the restless, searching watchfulness of those who walk in a land where men shoot from the brush at an enemy. Her voice was low and clear. At every squirrel jump, flutter of wings, stir or cry of the wilds she was alert and ready. Her companion listened to the indignation in her strained voice.

"'Tain't the money bothers me!" she gave this stranger an odd confidence. "It's

just an excuse. Bald Knob is bragging. Some men are thataway. Two men came courtin' me. One's a fox hunter and Bald Knob sized him up. One shot an' Carter took to his toes. The next an' that man was bounding down the mountang. Shu-u, I never saw a man so comical scairt up! But Bald Knob didn't show himself to me. I'd 'a' killed him! But I didn't get the chance. I had my revolver, but just out of college, I was out of practice. Now—"

She drew a revolver that looked like a .38 or .45 but when she shot he recognized it as a .22-caliber, and a pheasant, a ruffed grouse, flopped down out of a spruce-pine tree onto the dry leaves beside the trail. Theda Lauson could shoot now! She put the bird in the game sack.

"Bald Knob wouldn't be along here," she explained her shot. "If he's on this stretch of mountang he's on the Footstool. He c'n watch the valley road for miles there. No telling where he is, but he don't fool me, none. He showed himself across the valley in those hump-heads just yesterday. That's an old trick. He shows himself just before he moves away off yonder. If he didn't come here, he's gone to the head springs of Trammel. Or maybe he's gone down into Yellow Water."

Presently they could see the castellated limestone ledges and knobs ahead of them. Theda left the trail to skulk along the side mountain for a quarter of a mile, following hog runways. When she came up to the crest again, they crossed the divide in a little sag and she searched down through the breaks among the pillars and heaps of stone. They discovered no one and they stopped on a ledge with a sheer drop of a hundred feet or more down a gray cliff. There amid the shrubs they could look down on Trammel Creek, the valley highway, and for ten miles along the farm widenings and woods slopes. This was the Footstool.

"Let's eat," she suggested, "but keep your eyes peeled. He might be coming this evening to sit here. If he traveled all last night, he'll sleep this morning and begin to stir around this evening. I don't reckon you know how serious this is, Mr. Wright."

"Don't I?" he chuckled. "I've been around, Miss Lauson."

"What doing—scouting troubles?"

On the tip of his tongue he checked in time the answer, "Pearl buying!" The shock of so nearly betraying himself made him tense.

"No—I'm hunting, you know," he answered quietly. "I never hunted a man before, but I've been in rough country. I thought I'd hunt wild turkeys here in the Blue Ridge Cumberlands. But it's like that when a man goes into new country. He expects one thing and finds another. Personally, I take what comes."

"Plenty will be coming yo'r way!" she spoke absently. "Jes' wait'll Bald Knob hears we all are traipsin' around in these high trails together. He'll come like a buck to a salt lick!"

She watched his expression out of the corners of her eyes, and he laughed. A flutter of a smile broke the determined lines of her countenance. Somehow she had veiled her desperation and recklessness, but now he could realize the grim hate and intention that drove her. The mountain outlaw had claimed her for his own. He had driven from her the friends and suitors she might have had. No one dared be seen with her now. She had inveigled this stranger into the peril of the mountain bushwhacker, if only to seek and fight the scoundrel in the wilderness. Nor could Burton object! He must expiate his own misfortune in her service. If she had obtained the pearl money, she would be rich, independent.

"He watches you, spies on you, Miss Lauson?" he asked.

"When he isn't delivering he's watching me," she answered. "I go down the creek, fishing, and theh he'll be. I go to a dance, and he claims to carry me home, no matter who I go with. I ride out on a bridle path, and theh he'll come. Like a panther cat he circles around me. Oh, I'm desperate! If it wasn't for Pap I'd light out. I'd go till salt water stopped me. I'd scout to Texas or Oregon or Florida, but Pap needs me. Pap's wonderful. No man knows law like he does. They claim he influences and corrupts the courts, but he neveh does. He shapes the testimony, he refers to the precedents, he states his case. He's honest, according to the Law. Maybe 'tain't always Justice! With him it's a game. But he stands back of his clients. He's defended in more'n two hundred cases

of homicide. He never had a man hung, or executed. He counts on the fingers of two hands those who served till they died in jail. Even terrible plain, aggravating killings he's twisted around so his clients looked reasonable and turning them loose seemed fair-minded. But he isn't practical, living. He needs me around to care for him. So Bald Knob Pete figures he'll get me, fair or foul, when his day comes. I'm a-feared—a-feared of him. His game is just to keep us poor, starving us. He reckons all is fair in love or war. But I'd take up with a stranger 'fore I would with him. Theh's a chance a stranger mout be honorable—a slim chance, perhaps, but I know Bald Knob Pete's a scoundrel, an' mean."

"I hope you're playing in good luck!" Burton Wright remarked, eating a chicken drumstick.

SHE burst into a chuckling little laugh, looked at him shrewdly and nodded with a satisfaction and approval she had not shown before.

"Mr. Wright, I just knowed you looked reliable," she assured him. "Probably it sounds insulting, suh. I've told you how come I tolled you up around, thisaway, risking your life. Don't fool yo'se'f! Bald Knob Stubbors'd talk soft, gentle and friendly but he'd shoot you like a dog now. The word'll go all over I favored you. They'll tell we hunted these mountains thisaway. You can go get your pack, suh, and scurry away. If you stay in Trammel Creek country that'll mean war. You never been hunted to the death. I don't reckon you eveh killed a man, did you?"

"I never thought of it, except—" he hesitated.

"You've been sure 'nough bitter?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, I was robbed," he answered slowly. "A man could have stolen my own property, and I would have had to take it. When he robbed me of a fortune trusted to me, I could think of nothing but killing him. I never could pay back what I'd lost. My life was ruined. I don't even know who robbed me."

"Hyah you wouldn't kill even the man who ruined you and you risk your life for a stranger!" She gazed at him oddly. "Dying for a mountang gal wouldn't do yo' any good."

"Perhaps it'd do her good," he suggested. "The Law'd go after Bald Knob right, killing a stranger come as the guest of the mountain country. People would be more indignant about that than about someone they know being killed up. Some would say the local man needed killing, but the stranger had never harmed anyone!"

"Who all told you 'bout us mountang folks, suh?" she asked.

"It stands to reason," he answered. "Where among the people you know is there one who blames Bald Knob Stubbors for wanting you? But he wouldn't be fair, killing an outsider—"

"I reckon you aren't so ignorant as you pretend," she frowned. "If'n you are a detective, like some claim, you'll be right sorry, suh, Well, we betteh git to go—keep your eyes peeled. Any minute that killing Bald Knob is liable to look over his sights at you, Mist' Wright."

SHE repacked the lunch bag, considerably diminished now, and they went back up to the hogback trail. Ready for action, he watched the curtain of the forest. He heard a flock of wild turkeys in the acorns down a hardwood spur. He would have turned back eastward, heading toward Pretty Kettle, but she turned the other way. It was three hours after noon. He was surprised, but she led the way for hours away from the little mountain town. The sun was shining in their faces. The back swayed down and widened out. Sunset was coming.

Then they heard music, fiddle tunes in mountain folk dance melodies, lingering and lively. Theda Lauson turned her head, listening. She left the high-water road and circled. They came to a clearing of four or five acres, surrounded by a fence of rails and poles to keep the hogs out. Sitting on the balcony was a man alone, playing and jumping to the measure in his chair, lifting his booted-foot and pounding the split board floor. The young woman chuckled and her companion laughed under his breath.

"He plays for all our dances," she said. "He's Sawlog Bramer. He married rich, but his wife makes him come up yeah to play.

That fiddle of his is four hundred years old, and I've heard it two miles in the night. He listens fine on the edge of his clearing, don't you think? His high notes are like bird songs in the candlelight."

They watched and listened till the sun went down. Then Theda hailed as Sawlog tightened a string. He stretched his long neck, looking, and then invited them in, bowing and courtly.

"Why, Miss Theda!" he greeted her. "I'm sho' honored."

She introduced *Orton Wright,* and while she took the raw material for supper, the two men sawed some fireplace chunks with a crosscut, and in the log cabin, when the dark came, they sat down to a small turkey gobbler the fiddler had spitted over a pan, having hotbread, gravy, fruit butters, jams, sauces, jellies. Sawlog explained he had brought up a buckboard load of supplies, practicing for a big dance to come on Thanksgiving. His wife, he explained, was sensitive in her ears, and the family dogs howled so much, it wasn't any consolation playing down on the farm. This was just his cabin on the mountain for practice.

The cabin had one room, four beds, and fixings for a considerable of a family.

"You're always expecting visitors, Sawlog," Theda jeered him. "All kinds of visitors!"

"Yas'm," he acknowledged. "Yo' dad's met plenty of his'n clients right yeah by my fiahplace. An' many a gal's be'n stoled down the mountang road if'n her folkses objected. Yo' ain't the fustest gal that come yeah, co'rtin', friendlyin', jes' speculatin'—"

She burst into a light laugh. The old fiddler who had played at a thousand dances and a thousand frolics could hold his talk up with anyone. The fiddle-music cabin was a convenient meeting place for all his friends, outlaw scouters and their relations, lovers and their sweethearts, moonshiners and their customers, attorneys and their fugitive clients. The rawhide hogskin latch string was always hanging out. Sometimes enough people were there to have a dancing or a revival meeting party, if an exhorter happened along.

"I c'n play hallelujah an' glory music, same as step-light an' singin' sprees," Sawlog declared, "but I neveh expected yo'uns yeah, Theda. Not with Mist' Bald Knob Stubbors scoutin' out, I didn't. He don't cyar what he does, an' he's brash, mean, drinkin' his own products, now. I neveh know when he's comin' er goin'. He's liable any minute to drap in. Yo' know how often I've toted yo' word he'd meet yo' hyar, gal. An' yo' never did meet him. What if'n he comes tonight?"

"If'n he don't, Uncle, yo' needn't tell him we come," she said.

"Course, I neveh tell—not these yeah special occasions," he assured her. "But he's killin' mean, des'prit. He's braggin' he's stealin' yo' presently, now. I sho' hated to see yo'uns come in tonight."

"You're expecting him? she asked quickly.

He turned and looked at the door.

"I neveh know," he shook his head, "but he mout come in any minute. 'Ceptin' he was away three weeks back a bit, he's be'n yeah ev'y two weeks, a Wednesday, a Tuesday, a Thursday, same as a mink er weasel circles 'round twice a moon. If'n yo'd come alone, he'd jes' laughed. But hes drinkin' Corn, 30-70, peach er apple brandy—'tain't often he draws a sober breath. Lately, he's jes' be'n reckless. Course, with that thousand dollars reward on him, he's livin' all he can. He neveh knows when he'll be shot down. That makes a man bad, Miss Lauson!"

"It makes a bad man worse," she remarked.

SAWLOG BRAMER played softly on his fiddle, filling the cabin with the mystery of unforgettable folk music of the ages, tunes that gripped the thoughts and made the nerves echo, echoed the days of old into the dreams of the future. The two visitors forgot to talk and Burton lost himself in reveries. When Bramer loosed the strings and hung up the fiddle and the bow, with a start the visitor realized that the firewood had burned down to coals and a chill draft had come through faulty chinking among the logs. He started up to look around. Theda Lauson had slipped away and gone to bed in the shadowy corner. Burton took the bed over next to the fireplace and the fiddler went to his own in the other corner. In the quiet they heard an owl hooting and

the scratching of a weasel hunting squeaking mice in the attic and along the top-plate logs around the shingled-roof rafters, all according to the mountain ways. When Burton awakened in the morning, the young woman was kneeling before the fireplace cooking corn cakes and frying pork sausage, making breakfast. He swung out and finished dressing himself, brought in a bucket of water and filled the coffee pot. The old fiddler awakened with a start, rubbed his eyes and dressed himself. His shrewd old eyes looked at the visitor he knew as Wright and at Attorney Lauson's girl, shaking his head.

"I reckon yo're a Yankee," he remarked. "Course, 'tain't none of my business."

"I was born up north," Burton answered. "Wright is the old family name. My folks came partly from Old Virginia, up around Pound Gap, on the State Line, partly they came from 'way down East, my mother being out of New England."

"I knowed it," Bramer said, "excusen my suspicions, suh. A feller said a strangeh had come huntin' turkey an' game in the mountangs. Yo' came by way of Candle Court. That old gunsmith, theh, betteh hesitate the way he talks. He mout tell the wrong one too much, not mindin' his own business."

"All I asked him was about game hunting," Burton declared. "I asked him how to keep clear of anything that a stranger ought not to know."

"Yo' say yo' di-id! Course, a strangeh has to mind his'n's own business hereaway. More Federals an' detectors come into the mountangs than eveh gets away ag'in. Well, I don't neveh turn anybody away. I'm neutral. I play for ev'y body, Unions, Rebels, Guerillas. If'n I begin a piece, I finish it. When the boys git to fussin' I keep a playin'. I've seen 'em fistin', shootin', clubbin', stabbin', kickin',—markin' time to my tunes. That last fuss when Tuck Wraggan was killed up, they slammed and banged away theh in Thunderland Gap. They was at hit all ways, fists and chair laigs and guns! They jes' squandered their bullets. I thought I'd stop one fore them two fellers did. Then Tuck pitched down, the killer yelled, 'S'long, Sawlog!' an' he scouted out. They drug Tuck oveh into the corner an' went to dancin' ag'in. My lan', but theh's sho' Devil-may-cyar theh in Thunderland Gap! So I played on an' on, an' Tuck sat in the corner, grinnin' an' grinnin'! Well, he went out in a dance. If'n I'd been killed, I'd died with my bow in hand. I live fo' music; I'd die fo' music! That's all I know, jes' tunes. I don't ast to know any more."

AFTER breakfast when the day was light, Theda packed the game bag full of leavings, but left two pheasants and two rabbits she had killed the day before. The fiddler wanted them to stay, for there was a storm coming, a cold and sleety rain, he said, but she wouldn't. They went on east along the mountain back.

"Keep ready, suh!" she warned her companion. "I feel in my bones Bald Knob Stubbors is near-close. Yo' heard Bramer say he circles around like a weasel or panther, every two weeks. He's due now. He's through here. Maybe he'll hole down in rough weather. Rain er sleet is coming. Mister, I'm treating you mean, risking your life and abusing you, raiding around and the rain is beginning. Feel it? 'Tain't ice—'tain't water—hit's sleet! I reckon you're chillin' and begrudging!"

"I'm not, Miss Lauson. Oh, I like it. A storm in the woods—why, it's—it's just exhilarating!" he cried.

"And you love the wind and rain!" She spoke as if to herself. "How come you come to me, stranger? Who told you I loved the storm, too?"

Again his tongue nearly slipped in self-betrayal. If she would risk so much against a scoundrel who had welched on $900 of a legal fee, what wouldn't she do against a man who had lost her fortune in pearls? She watched his expression as he looked around—the fine misty drive of wind and sleet gathering in drops wherever it fell; it struck her pink cheeks, it clung in tiny sparkles on her curly bobbed hair, and stuck to the nap of her gray felt hat.

A black shadow—a figure like a storm shade in the gloom—flashed along the trail ahead, darting sideways out of sight.

"Somebody!" he exclaimed, and thrust her aside out of the wagon road behind a laurel bush.

"Somebody?" she whispered. "It'd be

Bald Knob, likely. Maybe hit's somebody we don't cyar about."

"I'll go find out," he said, starting, but she caught his arm.

"He won't shoot me," she said. "I'll go meet him. If I drop my hat it's Bald Knob Stubbors. I'll just go 'long, slow. But he'll be watching, yes indeedy! If'n he saw you, he'll shoot—shoot—shoot—"

"Go on," he urged. "He couldn't see me plain, if he saw me at all."

She saw the good sense of this and went on again, slowly. Burton dropped down the side hill slope behind the laurels, took advantage of the windfall trees along the mountain and circled wide on the north side. Whoever he had seen had darted to the south of the trail, and whatever he did, he would not cross back again in sight of the young woman who sauntered along slowly with her carbine in the crook of her elbow, glancing around in the way of a stillhunter, blasts of wind sweeping over the mountain crest which narrowed and rose again beyond the low saddle, blowing the flap of her hat down against her ear and cheek.

"Hi-i!" a voice abruptly yelped in the wind, and Burton heard the hail. He ventured to peer through a screen of shrubs and there was a tall handsome man wearing two wide cartridge belts with two holsters for a revolver and an automatic on the left side. He was carrying a bolt-action army model Springfield in the crook of his left arm.

The young woman took off her hat and whipped it as if to get rid of the sleet-drops on it, accidentally dropping it. She stopped short, facing the outlaw, who was grinning, gazing at her, his long, narrow lips whipping about as he talked, whatever he was saying.

Seeing Theda Lauson he forgot his caution, neglected to be on guard. When he had inched nearer and nearer to her, and she did not give ground, he turned and looked back along the hog-back road over which he had come from the west on his way to the fiddler's open cabin. Then suddenly he reached and caught his arm around her, dropping his rifle and snatching her carbine away.

"I'm a kissin' yo,' Missy!" he cried out, laughing boisterously. "Now keep yo' haid thataway, Theda Lauson! I tol' yo' I'd make yo' pay, instead of me!"

A voice, clear and sharp, pierced the roaring of the wind and swashing of the sleet. The lithe young woman whirled out of his arm and he flung himself clear and on the instant Burton shouted:

"Hold on, you damned pearl thief!" and the scoundrel froze at that summons from behind him, stood for an instant with his arms bent and his hands drawn into hooked claws. Burton would have recognized that left hand among hundreds—long, slim, brown, the fingers big, spatulate, on the tips.

Bald Knob Pete turned and his dead-brown eyes bulged, showing the whites all around—a mean killer's eyes. Bent at the hips and knees, ready to leap, he turned to face the interrupter. He narrowed his lids as he conquered his panic surprise, his shoulders drawing down, his right foot slipping back in the wet clay hardpan.

"Look out!" the young woman exclaimed, but the desperate man had taken his chance against that man he knew to be chiefly a city fellow who he hoped did not know the technique of getting and keeping the drop on a man.

But it was a high-speed shell in the chamber of the stranger's rifle that stopped his charge. Bald Knob was sure bad! His brags of never being tried for murder again were made good! He couldn't hope to keep up against those terrible, trifling little slugs. The desperado turned and darted over the brink and down the mountain slope, bounding in frantic leaps of five, ten perpendicular feet. They saw him leap over a log and

drop out of sight. They heard him fall, heard him crashing, and watched the switch-hickories threshing and jerking as he charged down through them. Then they heard him thud into something and after a little crash, the sound of the roaring wind grew again upon their ears.

THE young woman stood with her hands pressed against her throat. Her incubus, her terrible dread was gone. She was safe! She had not realized the weight of that burden on her every thought and act until it was removed—forever. She nearly fell when she picked up her rifle. Burton caught and held her, while she gave way to feminine sobs, and clung to him, trembling and relieved.

"Oh, stranger, yo' he'ped me!" she cried. "I c'n neveh pay yo' back, suh, gettin' shut of that scoundrel!"

"You can forgive me!" he exclaimed impulsively.

"Forgive yo'?" she repeated, inquiringly, puzzled.

"I'll go down to him," he said. "Sit in the lee of that big hollow tree till I come back."

He scrambled down the steep slope and found Bald Knob Pete at the foot of a tree trunk against which he had bumped in his last blind and instinctive rush. Burton ransacked his clothes and in his cartridge and money belt he found the pearls, the envelopes stained but the gems intact, glowing in the clouded daylight.

He hurried up to the hogback crest and sat down beside the young woman.

"Theh's a thousand dollars reward on him," she reminded him. "I reckin hit's yours, suh."

"No," he shook his head, "$900 would pay your father's fee."

"You wouldn't do that, would you, Stranger?" she asked. "That'd leave only $100 for you, suh. That's a terrible lot of money."

"Not so much." He shook his head, and emptied into the lap of her skirt, one by one, those thirty-odd pearls. "But these are right much! They were in Bald Knob's belt, Theda. And," he felt in his watch pocket, "here is one more—one he dropped when he grabbed the others."

Open mouthed, she watched them. At first she was puzzled, but when she heard the count, she comprehended.

"Why, how come that scoundrel had those pearls?" she demanded. "I found those pearls in Trammel Creek and sent them to a pearl buyer 'way up north! How come Pete Stubbors had them?"

"He followed the mail to the city office building and stuck up the pearl buyer, stealing them," he answered. "Somebody talked in the post office, probably."

"And yo' said your name is Wright!" she accused him. "That's what yo' said!"

"Yes, Dolan Wright Burton," he squirmed unhappily, "and when I lost your parcel of pearls, worth all those thousands and thousands of dollars, I sure despaired!"

"*Thousands* of dollars?" she gasped. "My land—I thought perhaps five hundred—perhaps a thousand. And then I thought maybe they were no good!"

"Thirty or forty thousand," he assured her. "I'd written to you—why, here's the letter. He never mailed it."

Theda read the letter, then she nodded.

"How'd that scamp know I had them, that I'd sent them?" she grew stern of features again. "Course the postmaster told him."

"Perhaps he saw you fishing for them, finding them?" he suggested.

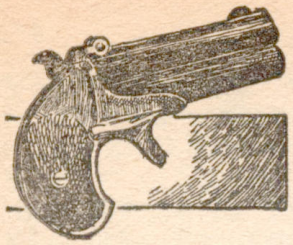
"I reckon, yas, suh, I expaict!" she frowned. "I remember, now. I heard a day-time owl hooting. If I'd known—but he's daid, now. Well, he's daid enough."

"Would you trust me to try and sell those pearls again?" he asked.

"Take them!" She thrust the whole packetful at him.

"And—and then I'll come back," he went on determinedly. "And we'll go honeymooning on the ten per cent commission I'll charge you."

"Yes, suh," she assented. "I reckon, Mr. Wright, Mars' Burton!"



WINGS IN THE SILENCE

By
EUSTACE L.
ADAMS

OLD GALLON SIMS was on the wharf-like porch, sorting out a new batch of snake skins, when the broad-shouldered young man emerged from the cool dimness of the store. Gallon Sims spat into the water, wiped his white beard with the back of his hand and deftly kicked a wicker-covered jug behind him. Then he focussed his astonishingly bright eyes upon the suspicious bulge beneath the linen coat of his boarder.

"Mornin', Mistuh Ames," the old man said, still eyeing that bulge. "Studyin' on seein' some new birds today?"

Timothy Ames winced as the violent Florida sun struck down at his pinkly-burned skin.

"I'm looking over toward the Gulf of Mexico today," he said pleasantly, pulling at the painter of his rented motor boat and easing a Seminole canoe out of the way.

"Us-uns in the islands see some purely curious things in a lifetime," said the patriarch mildly, "but 'peers like this be the fust time I ever seed a ornary—orni—"

"Ornithologist?" the young man prompted. "—ornithologist totin' a cannon that-a-way."

For a brief instant the eyes of the young man chilled and became almost black. Then he grinned, and they were again blue. He slipped his right hand beneath the lapel of his coat and produced a heavy automatic pistol. Gallon Sims regarded it with profound pessimism.

"A red-headed feller," he said, glancing up at Timothy's crimson thatch, "and a gun like that-a-one can't rightly help but find trouble here in the islands."

A Certain Red-headed Investigator Along the Florida Keys Found a Bullet Hole in His Hat.

"They warned me in the North," said the young man, sliding the gun back into its armpit holster, "that the Ten Thousand Islands were pretty wild, and that some of the natives might not like my cruising around." He pulled off his straw hat and pointed at a small hole in the crown. "And they were right, Mr. Sims. A bullet missed my head by a quarter of an inch the day before yesterday."

"Must be they's some strangers hereabouts," Gallon Sims said meditatively. "Wuz it a native who cracked down, he wouldn't of missed.

"Who ever it was," said Timothy Ames quietly, "he'd better not miss again."

The old man, with a dexterity born of fifty years' practice, reached behind him and swung the jug to the crook of his lifted elbow. He glanced warily at the store door, then drank thirstily.

"Wah!" he said contentedly. "Have a little bite of the mule?"

Timothy, who had once sampled the explosive contents of that jug, repressed a shudder.

"Thanks," he said politely. "It's a little early for me."

"A 'shiner over in the Glades makes it for me. A gallon a day. On'y thing I ever seed would keep the skeeters off'n me. Years ago one bit me and died of the tremens. Must of passed word 'round amongst themselves. Ain't been bit in nigh onto thutty years."

THE young man dropped into his boat and stowed away his ornithologist's handbook, his field journal and his eight-power binoculars. Gallon Sims, glad of an excuse to stop working, watched him with great interest. Not many strangers from the mainland came to board at the Sims place. A few fishermen in the winter, and now and then a Border Patrolman, or a Game Warden, or a deputy from the Audubon Society, but for the most part the store was a gathering place for the tight-lipped, hard-eyed men who gained their living in many and often devious days in that far-flung area of mangroves and swamps and uneasy water.

The house, like most others in that low-lying archipelago, was perched on lofty pilings to escape the high tides which came with the big winds in the fall. Through the years one room after another had been added to the main store until the building now sprawled on its stilts like a many-legged centipede.

The old man was tall and gaunt. He was lazy, a thorough pessimist, and very wise in the ways of men. He was justice of the peace, lawyer, banker, hotel-keeper, and catch-as-catch-can doctor for an area as large as the State of Connecticut. He had founded a dynasty and his progeny had multiplied beyond all reason. A dozen families of them lived in raised shacks near the main house. One son was a successful merchant in New York. Another was serving a ten-year sentence in Atlanta for alien-running.

For two weeks, now, the old man had been bothered about his boarder. Timothy Ames knew birds; of that there was no doubt. In his suitcase were several textbooks on ornithology, and nothing else to indicate what his real mission in the islands might be. But Gallon Sims had his suspicions.

"Did you find this Roger Jamison feller," he asked, presently, "that you wuz a-huntin' for?"

"No," said Timothy, preparing to shove off. "But it doesn't matter."

It did matter, and Gallon Sims knew it. Word passed quickly in the islands, and the old man heard every whisper. At one time or another during his two weeks' stay the young man had ranged from the Everglades to the Gulf, from Marco to East Cape, and everywhere he had asked about Roger Jamison.

"Well," said Gallon Sims, "wuz I you, and it didn't matter, I'd kind of stop askin'. 'Tain't considered purely friendly to ask about folkses down here. Mought be that's why you got that there bullet hole."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Timothy Ames cheerfully. "Well, I'll be back about sundown. So long!"

Timothy turned the bow of his boat to the westward and was soon lost to sight beyond the next bend in the labyrinthic channel. Helping himself to another sizeable drink from his jug, the old man sat there, marking the diminishing sound of the boat. Then, turning his head, he called·

"You, Bolivar!" A lanky youth shambled into view from the direction of the sons' quarters. "Git into one of the boats," Gallon Sims said, "and traipse over to M's Jamison's island. Cut north of Hurricane Pass. Tell her the stranger's been most everywheres else and now he's fixin' to head her way. He's like to find her. Scat!"

TIMOTHY AMES, standing in the bow of his boat, studied the shabby house with no particular enthusiasm. In one way or another he had managed to learn who lived in fifty just such houses during the past two weeks. And the net result had been the bullet hole in his hat, twelve well-scribbled pages in his ornithologist's notebook and a sun-burned skin which made an agony of his nights. But of Roger Jamison he had found not a single trace.

The house, like that of Gallon Sims', was perched on stilts. There was no air of permanence about it. Poised uneasily in a tiny clearing cut out of the mangrove jungle, it looked as if it were ready to scuttle away, instantly, at the approach of any stranger. Turning his boat toward the island, Timothy freed his automatic in its holster. He was not afraid of Roger Jamison, but he had learned that it was wise to be prepared for trouble when nearing any house in this savage wilderness.

A white heron, unbelievably beautiful, spread its immaculate wings and flapped off to the southward. Tim's level gaze followed it, noting its size and markings for recording in his field book. Then, remembering, he jerked his eyes away. Time enough to watch birds when he found out who lived in one more shack.

Upon the sagging porch appeared an overall-clad figure. Tim, with something of a shock, saw that it was a girl and that she was holding a shotgun in her arms. She was small and slender and her closecropped hair was very black. Tim, staring at her, felt his heart miss a dozen beats. Excitement raced through every nerve end as he cut his engine and steered the drifting boat toward the raised porch.

"Keep off!" the girl called.

Timothy remembered that husky contralto voice, and the hard lines of his face softened.

"You wouldn't shoot me, would you, Holly?" he asked.

The gun wavered. Holly Jamison shaded her dark eyes and stared down at the boat. But Tim was no longer looking at her. His mouth had tightened and his right hand had crept toward the opening of his coat. He was watching the doorway, waiting for Roger Jamison to appear.

"Are—are you the man who's looking for Roger?" the girl asked in a small, tired voice.

"Where is he?"

The girl's fingers tightened around the barrel of her gun. "You go away from here, Tim, and don't ever come back! Ask Gallon Sims what happened to the last two game wardens who came snooping around."

Tim knew what had happened to them. They had been murdered by plume hunters. "I wouldn't be interested, Holly," he said quietly, "because I'm not a game warden."

FROM the dark patch of the doorway came a child, a black-eyed boy whose resemblance to Holly was startling. His hair was as dark as hers, and came down to a little widow's peak in front. He had her high cheek bones, too, and the same scattering of freckles on the bridge of his nose. There was, however, one great difference; he was smiling, and it changed the entire expression of his face. A stab of poignant memory knifed through the young man in the boat. Once Holly had smiled like that. Now she looked as if she had never smiled in her life. The child came to the rail and looked down.

"Hello, son," said Tim, grinning up at him.

"Hello, man," said the boy, with manifest approval.

It was always that way with Tim. He had a way with children and with old people. Men liked him instantly. Girls, however, were not quite certain. There was a quick sharp focus to his eyes that was disconcerting, and his humor had a habit of bubbling over when a meaningful glance, or a squeeze of the hand, would have been much more romantic. He was hard-boiled, intensely masculine and lived in a man's world where good muscles, hard fists and an enthusiastic readiness to use both were

more desirable assets than a good "line" on a moonlit evening. Perhaps, he had sometimes thought, that was why Holly had married Roger Jamison.

Now that intent gaze of his swung away from the small boy. "That would be the baby," he said. "I remember. He was born just before the—the trouble."

Holly stared down at him and there was no friendliness in her dark, bitter eyes. "I never thought you would be the detective who was hunting for us, Tim," she said. "I didn't know you were such a poor loser."

Beneath the pink sunburn, his lean face flushed darkly. "I didn't ask for the assignment. But they gave it to me and it was all right with me. Somebody had to come and take him back to prison. Why should I mind? He was my best friend, once. He lied to you about me, and you married him. Just a real pal!"

"And I'm glad I did!" she flamed. "I'd rather have had him—even if he was guilty—than a detective!"

"Well," Tim said, "you've had him, and now the State of Massachusetts is going to have him back again!"

HE PLACED one strong hand on the gunwale and prepared to vault into the shallow water.

"Stay in that boat!" she commanded, and there was a quick undertone of fire in her voice that made him hesitate.

"I'm coming ashore, Holly. If you have to shoot me, there isn't much I can do about it. But I've got to find Roger."

"You're not coming ashore! And there'd be no use anyway. Roger is dead!"

He did not believe her. Three years ago she had proved that she was loyal to her man. Roger had broken out of the Charlestown Prison. Somehow she and her baby had met him in Boston and they had begun a flight which had finally ended here, in the most isolated spot imaginable. If she, who had once lived on gentle Brooks Avenue, in Newtonville, would live in such a spot as this, she would do anything. But Tim had to make certain whether or not she was lying. He had come two thousand miles by train and God knew how many lonely, zigzagging miles through this swampy wilderness, with every man's lips closed against him, every eye bleak as it surveyed him, and occasional bullets snapping past to warn him that strangers were not welcome here. But her word was not enough.

"Are you trying to tell me," he demanded, "that you and the boy live alone in a place like this?"

"It's a lot better than Newtonville!" she said bitterly. "At least you know who your enemies are. It would be fine if folks would leave us alone!"

Alone? Tim could not imagine anyone more alone than these two, if she were telling the truth. From the eastern edge of the Everglades, 100 miles away, to the Gulf of Mexico, lived only a few hundred people—whites, blacks and Indians. There were honest men among them, fishermen, charcoal burners, farmers and the like, who preferred solitude to civilization. But there were others hidden away among these uncharted islands, alien-runners, plume-hunters, moonshiners and escaped convicts like Roger Jamison who dwelt here in comparative safety because the arm of the law, like that of a man, grows tired from too much groping. Nothing in Holly's experience had fitted her to exist in such a place alone and Tim had no doubt that she was lying.

"I'm coming ashore now, Holly," he said. "Go ahead and shoot if you want to."

Before she could speak, he had splashed into the knee-high water and had waded ashore, not even looking up as he scrambled across the slippery roots of the mangroves. He heard a sudden hiss of indrawn breath from the porch and he knew, instantly, that he had gone too far. Holly, whom he had once loved, and who had loved him, was about to shoot him. He stood exactly where he was, right at the edge of a pitifully small vegetable garden. He let his eyes swerve upward. The twin barrels of the gun were pointing straight at him and the girl's face was set in deep lines of anger. Her knuckle was white on the trigger. He waited, because there was nothing else to do.

"Would you really shoot me, Holly?" he asked, quietly.

"In a minute! I hate you! I hate everybody in the whole world!"

"Why?"

SHE did not answer. The gun wavered in her hand. She lifted her smooth, bronzed face and looked over her shoulder. The sound of a sputtering motor boat came to Tim's ears.

"Marco's boat," said the boy.

The girl looked down at Tim. "If you have any sense at all," she said, "you'll go before he gets here."

"Who? Roger?"

"Marco Joe."

"I wouldn't know him. Who is he?"

She did not bother to answer. Tim was unimpressed by dangers he could not see. He estimated the distance from the garden to the door; wondering if he could cross that twenty-odd feet to find out if Roger were hiding inside. But there was little use in committing suicide.

A fishing skiff appeared from behind the jutting mangroves beyond the stilted porch. A man was standing amidships, steering in toward the house. He killed the motor and stared hard at Tim.

"Howdy, Holly," he called.

"Hello, Joe," she returned, unsmiling.

"Who be this stranger? Be he the law?"

It was queer, Tim thought, how in the first few words, a voice could mirror the nature of a man. Marco Joe spoke in a soft Cracker accent, yet something in the mild timbre of his voice suggested infinite malice, unbounded possibilities for evil.

"He's a man I used to know in the North," Holly said with complete indifference.

"He be the cooter livin' with Gallon Sims," said Marco Joe. "They say he be studyin' birds, but I hear he been askin' a bait of folkses about yuh man."

He snagged his skiff to a stop against one of the porch pilings. He was tall and thinned down by the heat, but his frame was huge and his muscles moved silkily under his coppery skin. His hair was bushy, as were his brows. Both might once have been dark; now they were bleached to the color of a dead palmetto leaf. His jade green eyes swivelled suspiciously from Holly to Tim, who returned his stare with unconcealed dislike.

"You-all be plumb friendly and sociable-like," Marco Joe said, reaching into the cockpit and lifting out a rifle. He clambered over the gunwale and advanced along the thick mattress of mangrove roots. "Studyin' on visitin' Holly, be yuh?"

Timothy's eyes had darkened, and he was balancing himself carefully upon the balls of his feet. Twice before in his life had he seen men with just that expression on their faces. In both cases they were born killers. And one of them had come very close to killing Tim.

"Would it be any of your business, big boy?" Tim asked flatly.

He was watching, wondering when it would start.

"I reckon," Marco Joe said, "these islands be a mout crowded already 'thouten a bait of Yankees traipsin' about. There be hardly room for the snakeses now, seems like. And ary cooter fixin' to sweet-talk Holly—"

"Listen, stranger," Tim cut in coldly. "I'm minding my own business—and you aren't. I don't know you, and I don't like you. I don't—"

"Tim!" Holly cried, from the porch.

Timothy's darkening eyes did not swerve. They were still watching the expanded green pupils of the advancing man.

"I don't," he continued, deliberately insulting, "like the color of your hair, or the way your mouth jerks around, or—"

THE gun swept up in a shining arc, but Tim had already leaped. A savage joy possessed him. The aching bewilderment he had felt ever since seeing Holly was swept away in the clean swift tide of physical combat. His left hand grabbed that upswinging barrel, shoved it aside. His right hand darted within his coat, reappeared with the blue-black bulk of his automatic cupped in his palm. Marco Joe swayed sidewise, trying to wrench the rifle away from that fierce grip. Calmly, deliberately, Tim slapped Marco Joe's head with the side of the heavy weapon. Joe stumbled. The rifle slipped from his fingers. He dropped to his knees and pitched forward upon his face.

Tim slipped the automatic back into its holster. He looked up at the girl. Her shotgun rested across the porch railing. The straight dark line of her eyes was unreadable.

"He'll be all right in a few minutes," he said, carelessly.

"Next time he sees you," the girl said flatly, "he'll kill you."

"Maybe." Tim said, grinning, "and maybe not. Will you let me look in your house now, Holly?"

"I'll shoot you if you take one step nearer."

Instinct told him she had reached the end of her endurance. Incredible as it was, three years in this wilderness had stripped the veneer of civilization from her. He, whom she had once promised to marry, had become simply a menacing stranger from the world outside and she was fully prepared to kill him. But was Roger really dead? There was no way to find out—now. Wearily Tim turned back to his boat. He clambered aboard, started the engine. He waved to the small boy, who was watching him with wide, astonished eyes.

"S'long, son," he called. "I'll be seeing you!"

The boy waved in return, but Holly Jamison made no sign.

OLD Gallon Sims, neither quite drunk nor quite sober, was in the store when Tim returned to Refuge Island. He was

sitting upon an oil drum watching his wife haggle with a charcoal burner over the trade value of a full month's labor, four hundred bags. A Seminole, gaudy in yellow, green and scarlet shirt, was fingering a tin lamp and great longing was on his dark face. A Negress was exchanging a basket of collard greens for a gallon of kerosene. Behind the old man were bales of alligator skins and bundles of snake skins awaiting the arrival of the trading boat from the mainland. Upon cluttered shelves were bolts of gay calico for the Indians and the Negroes, and white goods for the natives. There were great flat bolts of black mosquito bar, rows of kerosene lamps, ropes of tobacco and, mixed untidily with everything else, a grocery department in which grits, slabs of white bacon, canned goods and condensed milk appeared to be the major items.

The old man looked up when Tim entered the store. He cocked a wary eye at his wife and spat into a dark corner.

"I hear as how you found 'em," he observed.

Timothy came to a full stop. "Found what?"

"Holly and her young 'un."

"Yes, I found them. What happened to Roger Jamison?"

"Jamison? He allus called himself McKittrick. Mout be I'd figger better on talkin' did I know who you wuz and how come you're so goddalmighty interested."

Timothy saw no further need of beating around the bush.

"I wasn't lying to you, Mr. Sims, about being interested in birds. I am—always have been. But I'm a detective from Newton, Massachusetts. Roger Jamison was a friend of mine, and so was his wife. He stole some bonds from the company he was working for and was convicted and sentenced to five years in the pen. He broke jail. We got a tip he was here. Somebody saw Holly who recognized her. A sportsman, probably. We asked the sheriff at Key West to return him, but nothing happened. So I was sent down to take him back to jail. Now Holly says he's dead."

"What mout you be goin' to do with her?" the old man asked mildly. "Goin' to arrest her and the young 'un?"

"No. I suppose she might be held as an accessory, but the State isn't interested. I'd like to take her back, but only because—because I think it would be terrible for her to have to live in this God-forsaken wilderness."

GALLON SIMS considered this point at some length.

"T'ain't so God-forsaken," he said presently. "A feller could do hisself purty well, wuz he a mind to. They's plenty of fish, and good places for 'shinin' and—"

"But what would a girl do all alone?" Tim burst out. "Alone—with a baby?"

The old man pursed his lips to spit, met the hostile impact of his wife's eye and swallowed convulsively.

"If it's Holly you mean, she keeps bees and hunts honey in the Glades, where there's a right smart of it, more'n people could ever eat, I reckon. But it ain't so easy fer a gal 'thouten ary man."

"Then Roger is dead?" Timothy asked flatly.

The bright blue eyes of the old man appraised Timothy lingeringly. Then, "Yes. He got hisself kilt these two years. Bein' as how you're fond of birds, you orter feel like that he sort of made up for whatever he done up North. He and that gal young 'un of his'n wuz watchin' a nestin', and two or three days after the chicks done hatched, a couple of plumers come along and begun shootin' out the rookery. Roger, he made hisself purely bothersome tryin' to save the birds and the plumers jest natchally cracked down on him."

"They murdered him?"

"When plumers are fixin' to shoot up a rookery, son, it's a good place for a peaceable feller to be fair off from."

So that, Timothy thought dully, was that. Standing there, watching old Mrs. Sims wait upon the Indian, his memory leaped back through the years. He remembered the Saturday afternoon hikes with Roger and Holly along the banks of the Charles River. All three were boon companions who had somehow become interested in birds. He remembered how Holly, then a freckled, long-legged hoyden, could shin up a tree to peep into nests. He remembered how Roger hated cats just because they killed birds. And now Roger had died trying to save the gorgeous white herons, and Holly was the widow of an ex-convict, hating him, hating the whole world!

Abruptly he turned away from Gallon Sims and strode down the long, unpainted hallway to the cubicle that was his temporary home. There was a washstand in the corner, a dresser whose drawers refused to open, and a sagging iron bed.

He slipped off his linen coat, shrugged himself out of his heavy shoulder holster and sat down on the bed. Absently he leafed over a large book which contained colored plates of the birds of North America. He found the section illustrating *ciconiformes* and tried to lose himself in contemplation of the beauties of the blue herons, the roseate spoonbills, and the white egrets, all of which he had seen that afternoon. But the picture dissolved before his eyes and he found himself seeing a bitter-eyed girl, who was trying to raise her manchild as best she knew.

OVER a miserable supper of fried pork chops, hard-boiled eggs, grits and gray cornbread, Tim looked up at Gallon Sims.

"Know a man named Marco Joe?" he asked suddenly.

"Mout be I do," said his host, hedging promptly.

"I had to slap him down this afternoon."

"You could of picked a better feller to framm," said the old man, in mild reproof. "Tain't figgered healthy to pester Marco Joe."

Mrs. Sims, was pecking, bird-like, at her grits. She lifted her sharp gray eyes, silenced her husband with a glance.

"He found you on Holly's island and acted or'nary?" she guessed. "Yes? Well, he kind of figgers on takin' up with Holly and ain't lettin' aryone pay her ary mind. He's a no-count varmint and his pappy and grandpappy was purely trash afore him. His grandpappy tooken hisself down here to dodge the draft in the War Atween the States. Down ontwel Joe's time they still thought there was a bounty on 'em."

"Holly Jamison wouldn't wipe her feet on that man!" Tim blurted. "She could come north and marry—marry any one of a dozen men!"

"Seems like to me," said Gallon Sims, "she ain't studyin' on goin' north. Leastways I done hear her say that people up there she thought was friends done her nothin' but low-down. I be dog if I see why she aims to have Joe hangin' around if she ain't got some hankerin' for him. Course,

for a gal 'thouten ary men-folks, vittles is pure hard to come by."

One of the several young men and women of the Sims third generation spoke from the lower end of the table.

"I hear," he said, eyeing Mrs. Sims doubtfully, "that Marco Joe's studyin' to marry her come August."

"You, Earlish!" said Mrs. Sims sternly.

The young man collapsed into the silence which enshrouded his brothers, sisters and cousins.

Tim had heard enough. He pushed his greasy plate aside and stamped off to his room. Jerking his suitcase from under his bed he found a timetable. He could leave Everglades City in the morning. That would be Tuesday. He could be back in Newtonville on Thursday night. If Holly wanted to marry Marco Joe, it was all right with him. Once he had loved her. Now, he assured himself earnestly, there was no love left. She could live whatever life she chose. He hurled the folder into a dark corner of the room, blew out the kerosene lamp and tried to sleep.

HEAT lay thick as a quilt across the swampy wasteland. Tim, at the wheel of his boat, watched the mangrove islands appear, swing past and astern in endless regiments, each so like the next that they possessed neither sequence nor meaning. Fascinated, as always, by this tropic wilderness, his eyes widened as he saw an alligator, like a fabled dragon of old, plunge heavily into the water ahead. With an uncomfortable inward squirming he watched a beady-eyed moccasin swim close past his bow.

He was perhaps half a mile from Holly's island when he saw a motor boat adrift in the placid channel. Holly's straight, slim figure was standing in the cockpit. He slapped his throttle eagerly, but his boat was already moving ahead at top speed.

"Hi!" he yelled, waving at her.

Holly made no answering gesture. She just stood there, waiting. Queerly, he found himself remembering one early spring afternoon on the Charles River when he, paddling in search of birds, had come upon her in her brilliant scarlet canoe. How simple, how easy, life had seemed then! He would earn his way through college and then get a job in some museum. He would become very famous for his knowledge of ornithology; he had taken that for granted. Instead, his father had died and Tim had taken the first job he could find that would bring money for the support of his mother. He had become a policeman on the Newton force, and now he was a detective, still loving birds, still hopeful that some day he might know enough to join the staff of a museum. And Holly who, as his wife, was to collaborate with him in his research and field work, had believed Roger when he had said that Tim was going, slyly, with a Brookline girl. After that there had been no more threesomes to walk gaily through the woods looking for birds. Roger, an escaped convict, was dead. And what a future was there for Holly and her dark-eyed son?"

"Engine trouble?" Tim asked, coming alongside.

"Carburetor float punctured."

She was still clad in blue denim overalls and there was a tiny dab of engine oil in her cheek. It was almost like a beauty patch. There was no smile on her long restless mouth. Her shotgun was leaning against the gunwale close by her hand.

"Let's take it to Refuge Island," Tim said. "One of Gallon Sim's sons will fix it."

"Will you promise me you'll just take me there and right back here?" she asked, levelly.

"Of course. Why not?"

"If you try to arrest me, I'll—"

"There's no warrant out for you, Holly. I'll take you right there and back again."

Her cool eyes looked straight into his. Then she picked up a small anchor, threw it overboard and payed out a length of line. She tossed the oily carburetor float to Tim, reached for her gun and jumped into his boat. Tim pushed in the clutch and turned the boat to the eastward.

"Where," he asked, "is Peter?"

"At home. With Tom Otter."

"Who's he?"

"An old Seminole. Roger saved his life once. Now he hangs around. Takes care of Peter while I'm hunting honey."

She turned deliberately away from him and looked backward along the creamy

wake. So far as she was concerned, the conversation had ended. Tim was queerly exasperated.

"Are you going to marry Marco Joe?" he asked bluntly.

She swung around, her face furious. "Do you have to report that to your chief of police?" she demanded.

"Not at all," he retorted coldly. "I was just being polite. Go ahead and marry him. He'll be a fine influence on Peter."

It was at that instant that Holly's quick attention was captured by something Tim did not see at all. She reached over and swung the wheel out of his grasp. The boat swerved to the left. She steered it through a watercourse so narrow, so overhung with leafy boughs, that Tim was startled, thinking she must run it aground.

"A rookery!" she exclaimed, her anger completely forgotten. "If only the plume-hunters haven't discovered it!"

Tim stared at her in astonishment. For this one moment she was again the excited girl who had hunted birds along the banks of the Charles.

"Look!" she cried, pointing.

A trailing branch moved aside and he could now see the small island ahead. Against the dull background of the mangroves were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of brilliant white egrets. Flying in low circles above the trees, roosting in the foliage and wading stiff-legged in the shallows, they had taken possession of that island and had made it their own.

"You'll scare them away!" Tim protested as Holly switched off the engine and steered straight toward the shore.

She shook her glossy head. "They won't leave their young at nesting time," she said.

Stopping to think, Tim knew that. It was the reason the gorgeous white egret was almost extinct. A wise government had forbidden the use of aigrettes, but actresses in Europe and in South America wore them and East Indian potentates bought them by the thousands. It was a dirty business, that of killing an entire family of birds just to tear a handful of feathers from the mother's head and shoulders. And the worst of it was that the valuable plumes grew only at mating time, when it was so easy to kill the mother birds because they would not abandon their chicks.

Timothy watched the birds with eyes that were not at all like those of a detective. He was afraid of missing even the tiniest detail of this fabulous sight. Tomorrow, and next week, and all the rest of his days he would want to remember this in all its loveliness, because he would never see it again. Oddly, he found himself envying those who lived down here where they could see these things in the course of their normal lives. While he was breathing the vitiated air of police headquarters they, even the humblest of them, would be savoring God's good clean air and watching things like this! He knew a sudden aching nostalgia—not for the plush lawns and the deep-shaded streets of the quiet city he called home—but for the wild colors of the sunsets over the Gulf and the smell of the growing things and the —the—well, everything that he would not have when he took the train north from Everglades City.

THE bow of the motorboat grounded in shallow water. Looking up at the nearest tree, Tim could see the nests, great, loose bundles of twigs and branches. In each sat a white bird, its exquisite aigrettes spread and clearly visible in all their perfect tracery. The herons rose from their young, flapped anxiously about, then returned fearfully to their nests. Soft breast feathers floated down like giant snowflakes. All his life Tim had wanted to see a heron rookery. Now he was seeing one, and nothing he had read had ever described the breathtaking beauty of it.

A sudden alien sound crashed into Tim's thoughts. From the other side of the island came the unmistakable slam of a heavy gun. The herons rose in a feathery cloud, then settled protectively over their nests.

"Plume hunters!" Holly said dully. "I knew they could not miss this. They've probably been watching it for days!"

"Wait here!" Tim said crisply.

He dropped into the shallow water and floundered ashore. A hot quick anger flared up in him. Each report of the gun killed something that was bright and beautiful, leaving the world just a bit more drab and colorless. If he could not take that beauty

north with him, he might at least contribute, humbly, to its permanence here.

"Tim!" Holly cried. "They'll—"

The words died in her throat as Tim's powerful figure dived into the thicket. Holly grabbed up her gun and dropped overside after him.

BEFORE the plunging man was a wall of living vegetation, palmetto scrub, mangrove and buttonwood, all tied together with cruelly thorned creepers to form an almost impenetrable tangle. But Tim's hard young body smashed through, heedless of the thorns which jabbed at his hands, face and shoulders. Something sleek and black slithered out from under his foot. A bird cried out and fell at his feet, a lifeless bundle of white feathers. A score of dead egrets lay half-hidden in the vegetation. Over his head flew hundreds of birds, crying raucously.

"Stop!" Holly called. "Let me go first! They won't shoot me!"

But Tim burst through the other edge of the thicket and came to a stop at the water's edge. There, scarcely a dozen yards offshore, two men sat comfortably in the cockpit of a drifting motor skiff.

"Looks to me," Tim said, "like that's your boy friend."

Holly was standing beside him. Her glance flicked him like a whiplash. Her gun lifted.

"Joe!" she cried over the narrow strip of water. "If you shoot one more bird I'll give you both barrels!"

There was a cold, uncomfortable silence. Marco Joe's jade green eyes were as cold as those of the moccasin which had slipped from under Tim's feet. But his voice was still mild.

"Jest happen us be passin', Holly," he said, "and us seed the nestin' here. Us be needin' five-six honderd dollars and here it be waitin' on us."

"You told me," Holly said, outraged, "that you never went pluming. Was that just to make up to me?"

But Joe's eyes had swivelled to Tim. His mouth was twitching violently at the left corner. Tim's raging nerves steadied. He knew it was coming. He unbuttoned his coat.

"You're too close to me, Holly," he said. "Move away."

Instead, she pressed closer to him. He could feel her shoulder pressed hard against his left arm.

"I done tole yuh, stranger," Joe said, "to be traipsin' away from here. Holly, fair offen him or you be liken to be hurted bad. Fair off!" His voice rose to a squall. His gun leaped up. Behind the sights, his eyes were those of a killer. "Yuh know what happened to yuh man, Holly? Fair off!"

The shotgun was pointed directly at Tim's chest. The slugs would spread, fanwise. Tim's hand darted inside his coat. Joe's finger was squeezing the trigger. Tim threw his entire weight to the left, slamming into Holly's slight figure with the full weight of his rangy body. The whole world exploded. A searing agony ripped through his left shoulder. Falling, he saw a puff of incandescence drift away from Joe's gun. He felt his own automatic kick back against the palm of his hand. Pitching headlong into darkness, he knew a dull regret that there hadn't been time to tell Holly all the things that were in his mind.

THE room was dim, and gratefully cool. Tim opened his eyes and looked up at the ceiling, piecing things together and trying to remember. A soft breeze blew into the room from some window, bringing with it the lush, heady scent of growing things. It was queer, Tim thought dully, how grateful he was that it was that kind of a scent, instead of the acrid tang of warm asphalt

and burned gasoline fumes. The feeling was in him that he had somehow made a mess of life when everything might have been so simple.

"Reckon you be feeling porely," said a remembered voice from beside his bed.

With a tremendous effort, Tim moved his head.

Old Gallon Sims was sitting there like a benevolent Santa Claus, wrapped in an invisible aura of whiskey fumes.

"I'm all right," Tim said. "Did I kill Marco Joe?"

"Deader'n buzzard vittles," said the old man without regret. "An' I be dog if Holly didn't run that other varmint clean out into the Gulf. Purely mad, she wuz."

"Help me get dressed," said Tim, trying to rise. "I've got to catch the first train out of Everglades City or Naples." He fell back as pain lanced through his body. He decided to wait five more minutes. "Listen, Mr. Sims, I owe you—and everybody else who lives down here—an apology. I called this a God forsaken place. Well, it isn't, at all. It—it—well, it sort of gets under your skin after you've been here a little while. It's the first time I've ever been in the real wilderness and—and—well, if I ever make a little jack pot, I might come down and buy me an island and—"

"Sho! A feller has only to set down on one and it's his'n. Git that-ere shoulder o' yourn all fixed up an'—"

"I've got to be getting the train," said Tim drearily.

"Ain't you goin' to say good-bye to Holly and her young 'un? They'll be here purty soon."

"No use. She doesn't like me. She did once, but she doesn't any more."

A sly look came into the old man's eyes. He reached under Tim's bed, produced his wicker jug and drank thirstily.

"Tell you somethin'," he said in a strangled voice. "She took on fitten' to kill when she thought you wuz hurted bad. Said you like to bruk her heart, you reminded her of so many things. Said she wuz purely mean to you years ago and had she to do it over again, she'd marry you quicker'n a rattler can shake its tail. Said she loved you and—"

Tim tried to grin. "You're a fine old feller, Mr. Sims, but you can lie to beat anyone I ever saw."

THE sound of an approaching motor boat came through the open window. Gallon Sims rose in some haste and departed, closing the door behind him. He walked through the store, stepping swiftly lest his wife find some chore for him. He emerged upon the sunny porch just as Holly made her boat fast to a bollard. Young Peter looked up and smiled.

"Howdy, Mr. Sims," he said.

"Howdy, young 'un. Holly, I got something you should orta know." Holly whitened beneath her tan. She raced up the ladder to the porch. "Listen, gal, it mout be a good idee if you wuz to go in the young feller's room and purtend like you wuz kind of fond on him. Peers like to me he's in a thin way and it mout holp some if he thought you—you loved him, sort of. He wuz taken on fitten to kill afore he wakened up and the way he went on, he's purely fond on you."

Holly spun on her heel and started for the house. There were bright flames in her dark eyes and her slim hands were fussing with her black hair.

"Jest a minute, gal," the old man called. "Seems like to me he's dead set on quittin' that-ere job of hisn in the North. Iffen it should be he wanted to stay down here, studyin' birds and all, it mout be I could fix it. He's a most mild appearin' young man, but it peers like he could chase a lot of varmints outen the islands wuz he a mind to. They ain't been a game warden here for longer'n seems reasonable, and it might be I could get him appointed. And I got a pretty good pull with the Audubon Society, who could use a good healthy young-un that ain't afeard to crack down on the plumers, and—"

But his words died away as he discovered that he was talking only to little Peter. Holly had raced into the house.

Mr. Mordecai Maxx Was Always Apologizing for His Curiosity, But That Wasn't at All Necessary

MR. MAXX MEETS MURDER

By ROBERT ARTHUR

MR. MORDECAI MAXX paused thoughtfully for a moment before the entrance to the Hotcha Club, then gave the bell beside the wicketed door a decisive punch. A slide opened, the doorman inspected him, and then swung open the door. Mr. Maxx stepped in without hesitation. He was known here and there were no questions asked. He simply trotted with short, quick steps down the plush-lined hall, checked his hat and his favorite gold-headed cane with a marcelled young lady, and permitted himself to be shown to a table.

Even if he had not been known, Mr. Maxx would probably have obtained entrance with scarcely more difficulty. There was a disarming air of friendliness about the little man; an innocent amiability of character that made it hard for the world to refuse him admittance. Slight in stature, almost bird-like in his appearance and movements, Mr. Maxx stared out at the world with bright blue eyes hidden behind gold-rimmed glasses. His stare was one of eager interestedness that took in everything, however slight. His whole attitude was so amusingly naïve that few rebuffed him when he asked questions—and he was an inveterate question asker. It was, he would sigh, his greatest vice.

There was no air of mystery about Mr. Maxx, no indefinable suggestion that he might not be quite what he seemed. Yet it would have been difficult for any one of the many personages of note he knew in various parts of the world to tell you precisely what he was. The Governor General of British Guiana knew him as an expert in tropical fevers. A certain captain in the French Foreign Legion had reason to bless a slight knowledge of surgery, to which Mr. Maxx would own. The mayor of San Francisco might be induced to tell you, with puzzled admiration in his voice, that Mr. Maxx was a wizard at handling the mysterious Orientals. They would all have been right.

Mr. Maxx made no claims for himself. He went his way, observing what he saw and keeping his thoughts to himself. Occa-

sionally he had in hand some commission, which he carried out with unobstrusive efficiency. Occasionally financial embarrassments constrained him to accept employment of a remunerative nature. When such an event came about, he accepted it smilingly, and, cheerfully robin-like in manner, went about his business.

It must be admitted that just now—one in the morning of a June day-to-be—Mr. Maxx was on a payroll. Upon the books of the Guardwell Insurance Company he was listed as a special investigator. His job consisted in doing whatever might need to be done to prevent loss to the company.

HIS appearance in the Hotcha Club came, therefore, under the heading of business. For the Hotcha Club is one of the less savory of Harlem's nightclubs—a fact of which Mr. Maxx was well aware. Crooks important and unimportant gathered there at this time of night, and there was never any telling what an observant man might see or hear that would prove of later assistance to him.

The Hotcha Club was well filled. It never suffered for patronage, such as it was. Mr. Maxx gave his order to the waiter who hovered above him like a menacing shadow. Something in his voice convinced the waiter that he really wanted what he asked for—waffles and milk—and he moved dazedly away, leaving Mr. Maxx to observe, comfortably undisturbed.

After a few minutes of watching the crowd dancing, eating and drinking, Mr. Maxx was forced to admit to himself a certain disappointment. There was no one of underworld prominence present; no one at all who would ever figure prominently in the front pages of the newspapers, unless he or she chanced to exit from this world in some manner particularly gory or unusual.

The waiter brought him his order, and Mr. Maxx was about to eat when a patron he had not before noticed paused beside his table. Mr. Maxx looked up and brightened; here was one lone king among all the deuces of crime—Twister Trent.

The Twister was immaculate in evening dress, tails and white tie. He was tall and dark, as suavely immaculate as a fashion plate. About him there was an air of danger—a lurking something that made Mr. Maxx think of a sleeping black jaguar.

As Mr. Maxx had recognized him, so the Twister had recognized the little man.

"Hello, Maxx," the Twister said in friendly fashion. "Looking them over?"

Mr. Maxx waved a hand at a chair.

"Good evening, Mr. Trent," he beamed. "Do sit down."

"Why not?" the Twister agreed, and dropped into the chair. He ordered a beer and then gazed calculatingly at Mr. Maxx, letting his hands lie on the table before him.

"It's amateur night here tonight," he said. "Makes me feel lonely."

Mr. Maxx smiled.

"I daresay business is keeping your friends away tonight," he said gently.

A slow smile touched the Twister's face. He leaned forward, an odd light in his jet black eyes.

"You're quite a guy, Maxx," he said. "I hope we never meet—in a business way, that is."

Surprise marked Mr. Maxx's face.

"Really?" he asked. "I've been hoping we would." And he sighed.

Sipping his milk, he then studied the long, slim fingers that had brought Twister Trent his name and fame. They were, perhaps, the only fingers in the world that could honestly—or rather, dishonestly—really make an unknown safe combination roll over and play dead. Some uncanny power of their own seemed to reside in those slim, flexible fingers, a magic touch that—allied to the razor-edged brain hidden behind those black eyes—had brought grief to more than one insurance company in the past.

Mr. Maxx poured syrup over an excellent waffle. The Twister finished his beer, turned, crossed his legs, and lit a cigarette. A waiter approached, and the Twister rose.

"Sorry to break up our little chat," he said, smiling down at the little man, "but I've been expecting a call. Guess this is it. Drop in this time next week and we'll talk some more." He turned away and disappeared.

By a clock on the wall Mr. Maxx discovered it was five after one. His eyes were speculative as he reached over and acquired an object that had caught on the fringe of

the fancy table-cloth — caught there as Twister Trent rose. It was reasonable to assume that it had previously resided in the gentleman's pocket. Mr. Maxx examined the object thoroughly, then put it in his own pocket and continued to eat his waffles. His thoughts he kept to himself, but it might be mentioned that he experienced a definite emotion of surprise when the Twister reappeared, some forty-five minutes later, with a ravishing blonde on his arm.

Mr. Maxx sighed to himself, paid the bill with the expense money a grudging finance department allowed him, and went home to bed. But for several minutes before he actually fell asleep, he wondered about the object which had come from Twister Trent's pocket.

It was a length of black elastic, some six inches long, with two metal clasps on the ends—commonly used at masquerade balls, or other occasions requiring disguise, to fasten on a mask.

IT WAS a good-sized bedroom, opening on a little balcony. Sun shone through the windows, each open only a few inches, and a breeze fluttered the curtains. Bright rugs splotched the floor with color. Captain of Detectives Purdom, a heavy, redfaced man with a walrus mustache, stood in the center of the room and stared broodingly. He was not impressed by the taste or the color of the room; he was staring at the wide bed and the body of the middleaged man that lay upon it—the body of a man whose head had been crushed in.

Blood, a great, spreading stain of blood, had ruined the covers. Carelessly thrown down beside the body was the instrument of the murder, a gruesomely stained brass candlestick.

Purdom turned. There were two other men in the room—Oswald Peters, the manager of the apartment building, a stoutish, bluff and hearty man with many gold teeth and a diamond-mounted stickpin in his expensive cravat, and Ernie Williams, who had been the dead man's chauffeur-valet and general handyman.

"Nothing's been touched?" Purdom rumbled.

"Nothing," Ernie Williams answered agitatedly. He was a tall young man, sallow of complexion, and fear, deadly fear, was imprinted on his face. "I couldn't wake him when I knocked, though I pounded and pounded, so I called Mr. Peters—"

The manager nodded solemnly, taking care not to look in the direction of the bed.

"Mr. Anderson had the only key," he said, "and I understand he always locked the door from the inside before retiring. Together we broke in. The room was just as you see it now. Naturally, it was a terrible shock to both of us."

He drew a large silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow.

Captain Purdom chewed the fringe of his mustache. In the wall over the bed that held the murdered body of Benjamin Anderson, eccentric jewel collector, was the round steel face of a small safe.

"Ernie," he said heavily, "taking one thing with another, I'm afraid, very much afraid, you're gonna have a tough time explaining this."

The young man swayed on his feet, his face dead white.

"Oh, God," he whispered, "I didn't do this. I didn't."

"We'll talk about it," Purdom grunted, "as soon as I see the inside of that safe. Insurance company is sending a man up with the combination. I wonder how much was in it? Plenty, I guess."

He stared with interest at the safe. Peters, the manager, answered his question.

"Mr. Anderson collected rubies and diamonds—only the finest," he said. "He showed them to me once. He told me—" something liquid crept into Peter's voice, as though his mouth were watering at the thought, "he told me that they were worth two hundred thousand dollars!"

A quiet voice from the rear of the room corrected him.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand," Mr. Mordecai Maxx said gently.

CAPTAIN Purdom recovered himself first.

"What—?" he began.

Mr. Maxx made an apologetic gesture as he came forward into the room, a briefcase in one hand and his gold headed cane tucked under his arm.

"I'm Guardwell Insurance," he said

mildly. "The office phoned me to come here and gave me the combination—"

He stopped short as he caught sight of the pitiful body of the dead collector.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "Murder!"

"Murder," Purdom said heavily. "And probably burglary. You got the combination?"

"I have the combination," Mr. Maxx said, and there was a new note in his voice, a hard, steely pitch. "I didn't expect to meet—murder."

He stepped forward to the foot of the bed, and stared earnestly at the dead man, whose mania for owning precious stones had brought him to his death.

"This is very sad," he murmured. "We warned him several times. He always insisted his precautions were sufficient."

He reached, and found he could get at the safe from where he stood. From his pocket Mr. Maxx took a small black notebook and ruffled through the pages.

"He said his precautions were sufficient," he repeated somberly. "It seems they weren't. Now, let's see . . . eight, one, five, seven, nine . . ."

There was a slight click. Mr. Maxx tugged and the round steel door swung out.

Eagerly, Purdom and Peters craned their necks to peer in. The safe was empty.

"It was—inevitable," Mr. Maxx said almost to himself. "The jewels had to be gone."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand in rocks!" Purdom whistled. "Whew, what a job!"

"*And* murder," Mr. Maxx reminded him, with almost a brooding note in his voice. "*And* murder."

"Yeah," Purdom grunted. "I know. We've got the guy who did it, though. That's something."

"Oh, but I didn't! I didn't do it!" Ernie Williams wailed shrilly. "I *didn't! I couldn't!* He was giving me a break. I couldn't have killed him, I tell you."

Purdom jerked a thumb at the youth.

"Ernie," he said sardonically, "must have been going to one of these acting schools, to put on such a good exhibition. As a matter of fact, Ernie has already been sentenced once for pinching a necklace, at a place where he chauffeured. He was paroled out."

"An ex-convict!" Manager Peters exclaimed incredulously.

"Oh, but he *knew* I'd been in jail," Ernie cried desperately. "He gave me the job anyway. That's why I *couldn't* have done anything to him!"

"Once a crook, always a crook," Peters exclaimed sententiously. He straightened his diamond stickpin and glared at Ernie Williams ferociously. "He'll never get away with this," he said.

Mr. Mordecai Maxx rubbed the goldhead of his cane and looked doubtful.

"When I meet murder," he said slowly, "I like to be very certain of my facts. I hate to—ah—say what I think until I'm sure. You seem quite positive of this man's guilt. I suppose you have evidence?"

"Evidence?" Peters snorted. "Evidence? Why—"

"Sure I got evidence," Captain Purdom said aggressively. "Look here—"

"Maxx," Mr. Maxx supplied.

"Look here, Mr. Maxx. This room is on the fifteenth floor. There's a balcony outside those windows—the only balcony on this side of the building. Besides, those windows are protected by a burglar alarm, connected to the basement and the manager's office. That alarm didn't ring. Nobody got into this room through those windows, did they?"

Mr. Maxx gazed at the windows. Through them a magnificent panorama of the Hudson River, and the George Washington Bridge in the distance, was visible.

"No," he acknowledged, "it hardly seems likely."

"And there's only one door to this room," Peters continued. "Ernie sleeps outside it, every night. In fact he sleeps directly across it. No one could get in here without him knowing it, could they, Ernie?"

"No, the youth said miserably. "They couldn't. But they *did*. But somehow they did."

"So," Purdom said decisively, "in the first place, no one could have got into this room last night but Ernie. He could have got a key made. In the second place, no one could have opened that safe but Ernie. He had a chance to spy on the old man

and learn the combination. In the third place, Ernie is a paroled crook. In the fourth place, Ernie's wife has been sick and Ernie has been spending a lot of money lately—borrowed money. Isn't that evidence enough for you?"

Mr. Maxx sighed.

"It certainly sounds conclusive," he said. "Perhaps then I have done wrong."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Captain Purdom demanded.

"Well," Mr. Maxx said, "when the office called me and told me Benjamin Anderson had been robbed, there immediately leaped to my mind the name of the only man I thought might have done it. Of course, I was just guessing. But I called him up—using your name, a very reprehensible act, I know—and asked him to come over here. I knew he'd come, for appearance sake, even if he were guilty—which I can see now he isn't. But I guess he'll be here any time now. I'm awfully sorry."

Purdom stared at him incredulously. Manager Peters was purple with indignation.

"Who—" Purdom and Peters began together, and stopped.

"I daresay you know him, Captain," Mr. Maxx said. "He is the cleverest safe opener in the world, and a very dangerous criminal. He's the man who—"

The door opened.

"Hello, Purdom," Twister Trent said jauntily. "You wanted to see me?"

BEFORE the captain could answer, Twister Trent had taken in the room in a glance. His face went grave. He whistled softly between his teeth.

"Wheew!" he exclaimed. "This *is* something. Isn't that—" he gestured at the body on the bed "—isn't that old Anderson, the jewel collector?"

"That's Anderson," Purdom said. He gave Twister Trent a hard glance. "What do *you* know about this?"

The Twister looked surprised.

"Me? Nothing," he retorted. "How could I?"

Purdom scowled at little Mr. Maxx.

"You insurance guys," he growled, "give me a pain."

"I know," Mr. Maxx said apologetically. "I'm sorry, Captain. I'm sorry, Mr. Trent, that I—ah—took the captain's name in vain. I confess it was I who called you."

The Twister gave him a long, dark look.

"*You* got me over here?" he asked softly.

"Yes," Mr. Maxx admitted humbly. "For a moment I leaped to conclusions. I'm sorry."

The Twister hesitated, giving the little man a searching scrutiny. Then he gestured jauntily with his hand.

"Forget it, Maxx," he said. "No harm done. Since I didn't do this—"

Mr. Maxx turned to Peters, who was staring at them with a look of bewildered suspicion on his face and working his handkerchief nervously between his fingers.

"Of course, Mr. Peters," Mr. Maxx said gently, "Mr. Trent *wasn't* here last night between one and two, was he?"

"Huh? Between one and—Good Lord, no!"

PETERS started as if he had been shot, and seemed momentarily flabbergasted by the question. Then he drew himself up with stiff dignity.

"Certainly he wasn't here, Mr.—ah, Maxx. I gather he's a known criminal. He would not be allowed within the doors of this building, I can assure you."

"Oh, of course not," Mr. Maxx said hurriedly. "I only asked. Then you never saw him before, Mr. Peters?"

Mr. Peters performed as before, looking this time more angered than startled.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I told you he wouldn't even have been allowed in this building. Certainly I have never seen him before."

He glared at Twister Trent, who returned his look with a sardonically amused smile. "But I shall certainly know him if I see him again. A known criminal! Ha!"

He gazed at Mr. Maxx with red-faced suspicion.

"What," he demanded, "is the meaning of these preposterous questions?"

Mr. Maxx sighed.

"I don't know myself," he confessed. "I just have such an incurable curiosity, I guess. I'm sorry."

Purdom extracted a black twist cigar from his pocket and chewed on it.

"Well, Twister," he said, "for once I'll

believe you if you tell me you have an alibi."

The Twister looked at Mr. Maxx with a cold grimness in his eyes.

"Which I have, Captain," he said softly. "Last night from seven until one I was at the Hotcha Club. Even Maxx saw me there. My girl called me, so I left about fifteen after—"

Mr. Maxx was staring out the windows, breathing on his gold-headed cane and polishing the gold absently with his handkerchief.

"At five after," he murmured.

"At five after," the Twister continued. "I drove to my apartment—it's eight or ten blocks from here—to pick up some extra money. Then I called for my girl, waited for her to powder her nose, and we went back to the Hotcha Club. Since we got there at one forty-five—"

"One fifty," Mr. Maxx corrected him again, in the gentlest of tones.

"Ah, hell!" Purdom said disgustedly. "I know you weren't in on this job, Trent. We've got the guy who pulled it right here with us."

"We certainly have!" Peters supplemented him. "An ex-convict!" He gestured at Ernie Williams. "His guilt is as plain as daylight."

"Yeah," Captain Purdom said calmly. "But still we haven't found the loot yet. He must have tossed it out the window to an accomplice. Only thing I can figure. I've got a couple of men down there searching for evidence of any kind."

There was a respectful knock on the door.

"Guess that's them now," he added.

The door opened, and a lanky dick in plainclothes slouched in.

"Anything, Joe?" Purdom demanded.

"Not much, Captain," the detective reported. "No clues. But we found this." He held forward a small object. It's a key, Captain. It was lying in the ashes on top of an ash barrel down at the end of the alley, outside some apartment houses."

"A key?" Purdom growled. "To what?"

"Well," the dick said, "I had a hunch it might fit this apartment, but it didn't. But it does fit an apartment in this building."

"Impossible!" Manager Peters blurted.

"No it ain't," the dick answered calmly. "It opens the apartment on the floor above, right over this one."

"The hell you say!"

Purdom took the key and held it up. Over his elbow Mr. Maxx peered at it too.

"A newly made duplicate," Mr. Maxx murmured. "Not an original."

"I can see that for myself," Purdom grunted. He turned to Peters, on whose ruddy countenance there was an expression of baffiement.

"And how," he asked Peters, "do you figure this?"

Peters shrugged.

"I don't," he said. "Except on the grounds of coincidence. Keys are bound to fit other locks than the ones they're made for. Someone must have thrown away or lost this one. It just happens to fit a door in this building."

"Maybe you're right," Purdom muttered. He gnawed his mustache for a moment reflectively. "What about the people who live in the apartment upstairs?" he asked suddenly.

"Why, a very respectable couple," Peters said heartily. "*Very* respectable. Been here for years. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. He owns a chain of restaurants. Occasionally they give parties—well, rather *loud* parties. But absolutely all right."

Well," Purdom said, "it's a funny coincidence."

"Coincidences are always funny," Peters beamed at him. "Otherwise they wouldn't be coincidences."

PURDOM looked blank, but Mr. Maxx nodded brightly.

"Of course," he agreed. He turned to Peters and smiled gently. "It just occurred to me to ask—were the, ah, the Johnsons giving a party last night, by any chance?"

"Well, yes," Peters shrugged. "A cocktail party. You see, last night the building gave its annual fancy dress party for the residents and their guests. The Johnsons gave a cocktail party, then they and their guests came down to the ballroom to dance."

"A fancy ball?" Purdom growled.

"Yes," Peters explained, "an annual custom."

"I suppose," Mr. Mordecai Maxx said,

gazing dreamily through the windows, "that everyone wore costumes — and, of course, masks."

"Why—yes," the manager assented. "Some did, some didn't."

"Very interesting," Mr. Maxx nodded.

"In what way?" Peters demanded truculently.

Mr. Maxx gave him a disarming smile.

"I'm sorry," he said. "My absolutely insatiable curiosity got the best of me again. I'm sorry."

He gazed around the room.

"I wonder what time it's getting to be?" he said. "I suppose I ought—why, bless my soul, the clock has stopped!"

Everyone gazed at the clock—a handsome electric bedside clock in ebony and chromium.

"What time did the Johnsons go down to the ball after their cocktails last night, did you say, Mr. Peters?" Mr. Maxx inquired courteously.

"Why—after midnight. Maybe about one," the manager said sourly. "What difference does it make?"

"Well," Mr. Maxx observed, "the clock seems to have stopped at ten minutes past one last night. I was thinking that it stopped just about the same time the Johnsons, on the floor above, left their apartment to go down to the dance."

He beamed at them with the air of a discoverer.

"That makes *two* coincidences!" he said.

Captain Purdom raised one hand to the ceiling.

"Enough is enough!" he roared. "And this is too much!"

Mr. Maxx looked abashed.

"But the clock did stop," he protested.

"All clocks have to stop sometimes," Peters, the manager, said roughly.

"But these electric clocks are guaranteed," Mr. Maxx said protestingly. "And for it to stop at the same time that—"

Purdom turned a broad back and ignored him completely.

"Twister," he said, "now that you're here, you're going to help me—help me find the jewels that Ernie here got away with and hid somehow after killing the old man. Who do you think might have been his accomplice, huh?"

The Twister shook his head dubiously. He gazed at Mr. Mordecai Maxx with a sardonic smile twisting his lips.

"I really," he said, "haven't any idea. As far as I'm concerned, those jewels are gone forever. If you have to depend on me to find them, they'll never see the light of day again."

"They'll turn up," Purdom growled. "You got friends. You keep the lines out, see, for information?"

"All right," the Twister agreed, "but I'm afraid it won't be much use." He turned toward the door. "Can I go now, since I'm not in on this—and my girl will be pretty tired waiting? I brought her along in case you should want to check up on my alibi."

"You did?" Purdom said suspiciously. "Pretty anxious to convince me, weren't you, Twister?"

The Twister smiled agreeably.

"Well," he said, "she lives in the neighborhood, so I wasn't far from here last night when I came to get her. I thought someone might have seen me near by, and I didn't want you to think I might have been working, when I was only calling for my girl."

"Yeah? Well, if she's tired waiting, have her come up. I want to see her—so I'll know her if we meet again," Purdom directed. "Just where near here does she live, huh?"

"Around the corner—third house down," the Twister said annoyedly. "But look—"

"Peters," Purdom roared, "phone down to your desk clerk to have the girl who's waiting out front in a car for Mr. Trent brought up here."

The manager hesitated, sighed, and went to the house phone in the next room.

"Very well, Captain," he agreed.

"Now, Ernie," Purdom snapped, "come clean and it'll save you the electric chair. That's a promise. Where is that ice that was in the safe?"

"I don't know," Ernie gulped. "I didn't take them. I didn't kill him." He gasped, and looked up. "Can't you believe me, Captain?" he pleaded. "Last night I woke up for a second or two. I thought I heard a muffled noise in here. But the noise wasn't repeated. I snapped a switch to turn on the light, but it didn't go on—the bulb was loose in the socket, I guess. So I didn't get

up. I went back to sleep. And that's absolutely everything that I know!"

Purdom grunted incredulously.

Mr. Maxx leaned forward with an air of eager interest.

"You say the light bulb was loose in the socket?" he asked.

"Yes," Ernie told him. "I twisted it tight this morning and it lit all right."

"Hell!" Purdom growled. "Ernie, we'll find your accomplice yet. You must have had one. And then it'll be the electric chair for both of you. We've proved nobody but you could get in this room last night. Any jury in the world is going to agree you did it, so—"

"Of course he did!" Peters, the manager, said, reëntering the room. "If I had known he was an ex-convict—" He left the sentence significantly unfinished and once again adjusted the diamond stickpin in his five dollar tie.

The dick, Joe, who had found the key, stuck his head in the door.

"Guy and a girl out here, say you sent for them, Captain," he reported.

"Send 'em in."

The beautiful blonde Mr. Maxx had seen with Twister Trent the night before—or, to be accurate, earlier that morning—entered the room, followed by a personable young man.

"This is Helen," Twister Trent told Purdom lazily.

"And Chase, my assistant," Peters said.

MR. MAXX, who had been staring intently at the beautifully polished gold knob of his cane for several reflective seconds, broke into the conversation.

"Captain," he asked, "would you mind if I asked Mr. Chase a few questions?"

"I would!" Purdom yelled. "Chase, you can go."

The young man nodded and left. Purdom leveled a stubby finger at Mr. Maxx.

"You're holding up my investigation of this case," he cried. "Scram!"

Mr. Maxx seemed taken aback.

"But, Captain," he said, "I just had an idea—"

"Scram!" Purdom repeated.

"But," Mr. Maxx protested. "The jewels. You want to find them, and the company certainly wants a quarter of a million dollars worth of gems recovered, and so I—"

"Scram!"

"You really mean it?"

"If you want the damned jewels, go find them!" Purdom, goaded beyond his endurance, yelled. "Scram!"

Mr. Maxx nodded.

"Very well," he said. "I will take you at your word."

He picked up his brief case, tucked his cane under his arm, put on his hat, and left. Purdom heaved a sigh of relief.

"Thank God," he muttered. "We're rid of him. Now I can get somewhere."

Careless of what Mr. Mordecai Maxx might have done with himself after his precipitate departure, Captain Purdom devoted himself to the job in hand, which was to get Ernie Williams to admit that he had murdered Benjamin Anderson, the eccentric jewel collector, the night before, and to tell where he had disposed of the stolen jewels. He didn't get the confession. Nor did he get any clew to the gems. Ernie maintained his innocence. Twister Trent sat and boredly looked out the window. Helen, the blonde, having backed up the Twister's story that he had called for her around twenty minutes to two that morning, and that they had been together until five, had been sent into the other room to wait with whatever patience she had. The M.E. came, made a brief examination, and the body of Benjamin Anderson was taken away, to the relief of Manager Peters, who still remained around in spite of, as he explaned, his shaken nerves.

"This case," Peters sighed, "has shaken me gravely. To think of murder—and such atrocious, heartless murder—occurring in my building."

He wiped his broad face again, and cast a menacing look at cowering Ernie Williams.

Purdom paced the room like a caged bear.

"What I want," he muttered, "is to know where that ice went."

The Twister uncrossed his knees.

"Well," he said, "as I told you, as far as I'm concerned it's gone forever. How about letting me get out of here?"

Captain Purdom made a blubbering sound

as he let a deep breath force its way through his closed lips.

"Yeah, I guess you can go," he said, reluctantly. "You and your blonde. And you, too, Peters. No need for you to have hung around this long."

"Oh, but I have been anxious to see justice done," Peters protested. "If I've been of any help, I am glad. I'll be happy to do anything else I can."

"No," Purdom growled. "Nothing now. I'll wash up things here, and take Ernie down to headquarters." He scowled at Ernie Williams. "Maybe there," he said, "you'll remember more about who your accomplice was, and where I can find him. Because, Ernie, the hot seat is just waiting to meet—"

"The murderer!" a voice finished for him. "And it very surely will. May I come in again, Captain?"

Mr. Mordecai Maxx, his brief case still in one hand, his gold-headed cane in the other, came into the room.

TWISTER TRENT started slightly at the little man's entrance, and Peters, the manager, opened his mouth as though to say something, and then abruptly shut it. For Mr. Maxx had not entered alone. Behind him came a little assemblage of men whose appearance seemed to leave the manager dumbfounded.

Immediately behind Mr. Maxx was young Chase, the assistant manager, who had brought Helen, the blonde, up earlier. Behind Chase came a man in the uniform of an elevator operator. Last of all was a sleepy looking gentleman wearing the dungarees of a garage man. The little procession halted just inside the door.

"What in hell," Purdom cried, "does this mean?"

"Yes!" Manager Peters shouted, his face gone a deep purple with indignation. "This little madman has taken part of my building staff off duty, Captain, I protest. Throw him out! I'll fire the lot of them!"

Mr. Maxx looked from one to another of the men, and in his mild eyes there was a cold and icy light.

"Captain," he said, "you sent me out to find the jewels stolen from the murdered Benjamin Anderson, in my own way. To do that I had to ask questions. These men gave me some interesting answers—very interesting. You'll want to hear them, I think."

He turned to his little band.

"Mr. Chase," he asked, "did you see this gentleman—" he indicated Captain Purdom —"or myself, or this gentleman—" he pointed to Twister Trent—"within this building last night?"

"No," Chase shook his head. "I can't say I did."

"Did you ever," Mr. Maxx asked softly, "see any of us here before?"

"Why, yes," Chase assented. "That gentleman came in once to inspect apartments."

He pointed to Twister Trent.

Manager Peters caught his breath.

"Now, really, Chase!" he began savagely.

"But he did, Mr. Peters," Chase insisted. "About two months ago. I turned him over to you and you showed him several apartments. Then he returned twice, and you talked to him each time in your private office."

"I thought you said you never saw Twister before, Peters," Captain Purdom rumbled.

"I haven't!" Peters maintained angrily. "Or if I did—did you come here looking for an apartment?" he demanded of the Twister.

"Sure," Trent told him coolly. "You wanted too much. I tried to bring you down a couple of times. Thought you didn't remember me."

"Oh, that explains it," Peters said quickly. "I've a very bad memory. *Very* bad."

"*Very* bad," Mr. Maxx echoed.

He turned to the second man in line, the elevator man.

"Did you ever see any of us who are in this room before, Mr. McGinnis?"

"Sure," the elevator man nodded. "Mr. Peters, and Mr. Chase, and Williams here. None of you others, no."

"You didn't bring any of us up to this floor, or to the sixteenth, above this one, in your elevator last night, did you?"

The elevator man shook his head.

"But," Mr. Maxx persisted quietly, "you did take the Johnsons down from the sixteenth floor to the costume ball, didn't you?"

"Sure," McGinnis agreed. "That was just about one in the morning."

"And shortly after that, did you take anyone *up* whom you remember anything about?"

"Well, yes," McGinnis said readily. "Five or ten minutes after—maybe fifteen—I took up a gent in evening dress wearing a black mask. He got off at the sixteenth."

"But, McGinnis," Peters broke in heatedly, "this is absurd. There must have been at least fifty men in evening dress and wearing black masks who travelled in your elevator last night. How can you recall one of them?"

"Sure," McGinnis said imperturbably. "But this one was different. His black mask was tied on with white string. All the others were tied on with black elastic."

"And you took him down again?" Mr. Maxx questioned blandly.

"Sure thing. About fifteen minutes after he went up. He was carrying a small package, wrapped in brown paper."

"And that's all you saw of him?" Mr. Maxx asked.

"That's all," McGinnis agreed.

Mr. Maxx turned to Captain Purdom.

"Don't you find this rather interesting, Captain?" he asked.

"It sounds crazy to me," Purdom told him.

"Oh, but wait," Mr. Maxx protested. "I'm sure you'll change your mind. Mr. Smith," he turned to the mechanic, "you were down in the basement garage last night while the fancy ball was going on?"

"I was," Smith agreed. "It's my duty to see to parking and getting the cars out whenever there's something big going on."

"You spent part of your time in the alley outside, didn't you, by which the garage, the rear garden, and the garden entrance to this building can be reached?"

"Sure. I could see th' guests walking up and down in th' garden. They came an' went in cars. One or two strolled up an' down th' alley for th' air."

"And did you see anyone you particularly remember?"

"Yeah," Smith said. "A fellow all dressed up. I noticed he had on a black mask tied with white string. It was noticeable because nobody else had. I didn't see him

come, but I seen him go down the alley and disappear. That was about one-thirty, I think."

"You didn't think it curious?" Mr. Maxx asked.

"Naw," Smith said. "I wasn't thinking, one way or the other. I just noticed the white string, is all. He wasn't carrying no package when I saw him, though, or I'd have seen it."

"This is a farce, a nonsensical exhibition," Peters declared. "Captain, we're all busy men here, except this little insurance nincompoop. Can't we throw him out and get on about our business like sensible men?"

"Sure," the Twister supplemented lazily. "We haven't got all morning to spend. Why don't you take this guy Williams down to jail and sweat him a bit, Purdom? You might get somewhere, that way."

"We will be through," Mr. Maxx assured them bleakly, "in almost no time. Smith," he addressed the garage mechanic, "did you chance to notice Mr. Peters at all during the course of the ball last night?"

"Well, yes," Smith answered, glancing curiously at his boss. "Once a little while before I seen the guy in the black mask tied on with white string, and then again a little while after. Both times he stepped into the garage to see if things were going smooth, which they were."

"What are you trying to get at?" Purdom demanded harshly. "I've a good mind to heave you out again—"

MR. MAXX sighed.

"Ah, Captain," he said, "the revelation will come in a moment. Don't be impatient. Merely consider, first, these facts. Last night, during the course of a fancy dress ball downstairs, Benjamin Anderson was brutally robbed and murdered. I have established a certain succession of events which are worthy of attention. At one o'clock the Johnsons, who live in the apartment directly above this one, left it and descended to the dance. At one-five Twister Trent got a phone call at the Hotcha Club. The electric clock in this room stopped at one-ten. At one-fifteen a man wearing a black mask tied on with white string ascended in the elevator to the sixteenth floor —the floor above this one. At one-thirty he

was seen leaving with a package. A minute later he was seen going down the alley in back, after which he disappeared from sight. At one-thirty-five Twister Trent called for his girl, who lives just around the corner, in an apartment into which she moved a month ago—as I have ascertained. At one-fifty Mr. Trent and his girl appear at the Hotcha Club. This morning a key opening the Johnson apartment is found in an ash barrel at the end of the alley down which the mysterious masked man disappeared.

"Now I ask you, Captain, doesn't a consideration of those facts give you a very funny feeling?"

"Nup," Purdom said, chewing his mustache, "I can't say they do."

"This sounds like a lunatic's ravings to me," Peters said hotly, wiping his brow once again, and then still again readjusting his expensive stickpin.

Twister Trent stretched himself and lounged toward the door.

"Is that all, Maxx?" he inquired, with a soft hiss in his voice. "If not, I'm afraid I can't wait to hear the rest. I've got a date that won't keep."

"You have," Mr. Maxx told him, "you certainly have—so has Mr. Peters. Captain, to put it briefly, Benjamin Anderson was robbed and murdered by Twister Trent, with the aid of Peters!"

THERE was silence in the room for an instant. Even Peters had nothing to say. Then Twister Trent spoke, lazily, pleasantly.

"Maxx," he said, "you've got a great imagination. I envy you. But remember what I told you about the—cat."

"The man is mad!" Peters gasped.

Mr. Maxx settled himself directly in front of the door and faced them squarely.

"And I'll prove it," he said sharply. "Captain Purdom, two months ago Twister Trent called at this building, to get a line on a way to rob Benjamin Anderson of his jewels. He met Peters, sized him up as a lover of luxury, greedy, and a coward at heart. All cowards are crooked—or would be if they could get away with it.

"Twister Trent worked out his scheme for robbing Benjamin Anderson and throwing the blame on an innocent man, and he approached Peters with it. When he had

convinced Peters it was safe and possible, Peters agreed to help him for a share in the loot.

"Peters knew that last night the Johnson apartment would surely be empty, the Johnsons not being people who would miss a fancy dress ball. As soon as he, on duty to supervise the affair, saw them descend, he phoned Twister Trent at the Hotcha Club. Trent left immediately, drove here—it can be done in seven minutes—parked the car around the corner, adjusted his mask, and came in the rear or garden entrance as a guest. Unfortunately for him, he found he had lost the black elastic that goes with a mask. He was forced to improvise with a bit of white string.

"He went up to the sixteenth floor. Peters had provided him with a duplicate key to the Johnson apartment. A rope was ready, possibly left in the janitor's closet in the hall. Twister got the rope, fastened it to the radiator in the Johnson apartment, and let himself down on the balcony outside the windows of this room. He came in the window and opened the safe with a speed no one else in the world could. While he was doing it, Benjamin Anderson awoke. Twister struck him with the brass candlestick—and killed him. Then he cleaned out the safe, wrapped the gems swiftly in the brown paper he carried folded in his pocket, tied them with the string from which he had broken a piece to fasten his mask on, and left, closing the windows to their former position.

"He ascended the rope again, left the Johnson apartment, put the rope back where he had got it, and descended in the elevator. He left the building by the rear entrance again, barely fifteen minutes after he had entered it, and went down the alley. On his way he tossed the incriminating key into the ash barrel to be rid of it. He got his hat and cloak from his car, called for his girl at the convenient apartment to which she had moved just so he could pull this job, and hurried back to the Hotcha Club, knowing that probably no one in the world would ever dream of accusing him of committing such a dastardly crime in such a short space of time—especially with Ernie Williams here to bear the guilt. Ernie, as an ex-convict—a fact which Peters has been at great pains to

keep pointing out all morning—didn't stand a chance. He would go to the electric chair; Trent, the clever crook, and Peters, his greedy accomplice, would go free with their loot."

Peters' face had gone from purple to white.

"Lunacy," he gasped. "Absolute lunacy!"

Twister Trent was composed.

"I told you," he said, "that Maxx had a marvelous imagination."

"Well, Mr. Maxx," Purdom asked, with a sardonic gentleness, "how about the burglar alarm on the window? It hasn't been tampered with in any way—and it rings if the window is opened. I tested it. How did the Twister get through that?"

"The bedside clock," Mr. Maxx said, "stopped at ten minutes past one. Why? Those electric clocks usually stop for only one reason—no current. Peters was seen in the basement garage just before the time when Trent, masked, arrived last night. What was he doing there? I discovered the main switch boxes and meters of the building in a little room off the garage. Peters went in there to pull the main switch to Benjamin Anderson's apartment. The burglar alarm operates on the house current. There was no current, so it didn't sound. For the same reason the clock stopped. And Ernie Williams, waking, couldn't turn on the light. Not because the bulb was loose, as he thought, but because Peters had shut off the electricity of this apartment."

Purdom's eyes, as he gazed from Twister Trent to Peters, had become little red holes.

"Go on," he said. "This is becoming interesting."

Twister Trent sighed.

"A marvelous story," he said. "I applaud you, Maxx. But of course you can never prove it. And there's a detail you've forgotten. What became of the stolen jewels?"

"You wrapped them up, addressed the package, put on stamps you had in your pocket, and mailed them in the mailbox in the lobby," Mr. Maxx said, with a softness to his voice that had taken on a sinister quality.

"Ingenious," Twister Trent murmured. "Very ingenious. But you know, Maxx, clever as this story is, you can't prove it by anything but circumstantial evidence. No

real evidence. And the circumstantial evidence against Ernie here is a whole lot stronger. If you had anything to support your story now— Of course, if I mailed them, the stolen jewels are a long ways away, and where you'll never find them. That's really too bad. Because if you had those jewels now, to prove your story—"

"I have," Mr. Maxx said. "And here they are!"

Turning his brief case upside down, he spilled out a glittering mass of liquid light that went rolling and tumbling across the rug—a quarter of a million dollars in rubies and diamonds.

THE gold ball on the end of Mr. Maxx's cane crashed down on the Twister's head, and Twister Trent collapsed unconscious on the floor before he had more than started to move his hand toward his pocket. And Captain Purdom's fist, flush to the jaw, dropped Oswald Peters beside him.

Mr. Maxx gathered up the spilled gems as Twister Trent and Peters came to, shackled hand and foot.

"Two coincidences in a murder case are two too many," Mr. Maxx said gently, addressing Purdom, but looking Twister Trent in the eye. "The key—and the stopped clock—too coincidental. And when Ernie mentioned the light failing to go on, I more or less guessed. I have, as Mr. Trent—" he bowed "—says, a good imagination."

He locked his brief case and tenderly polished the gold knob of his cane.

"By the time I had asked enough questions, I was able to piece the whole story together," he explained. "Twister Trent was letting Uncle Sam take care of the dangerous loot for him during the hours he was establishing his alibi. There was only one reasonable place where he would have it delivered. I calculated that if the package was gathered as usual this morning, went through the local branch of the post office, and was sent out by the regular carrier, it should be delivered at that place by the late morning delivery. So I just stepped around the corner to Helen's apartment house, found the mailman just coming up, and obligingly relieved him of it."

He stepped over and patted Ernie Williams on the arm.

"Guardwell will see you get another job, my boy," he said. "And as for you, Trent, and you, Peters, you two damnable cowards who would let an innocent man go to the

electric chair, when I said you had an engagement that couldn't wait, I meant it. With the hangman!"

He turned to the door, but paused.

"By the way, Captain," he said, "a clew I forgot to mention."

He took from his pocket the six inch length of elastic—used at masquerade balls, or on other occasions, to fasten on masks—which had caught in the fringe of the tablecloth when Twister Trent had left him in the Hotcha Club.

"You'll want this," Mr. Mordecai Maxx said gently. "It's not very long, but it'll come in handy to hang them with."

He nodded, and with his gold-headed cane tucked debonairly under his arm, Mr. Maxx walked out.

The Story Tellers' Circle

The Fresh Water Pearlers

RAYMOND S. SPEARS wrote us that he'd "been collecting fresh-water pearl data ever since one January years ago I floated down the St. Francis River in eastern Arkansas and saw a tall Negro making queer motions in a scow that had a fence along both sides—bannisters—and he was tonging buttonstock and pearl shells off a 'rock' or bed he had found in the eddy. I drew a pencil and notebook on him and went at

it. I'd never heard of buttonshells, baroques, seed pearls, pearls, shapes, muckets—any of those things—and I added a hundred new words to my vocabulary and 10,000 words of first hand data there and during the next three days. I was a river rat in a sixteen-foot skiff. I spent seven months on the Mississippi and adjacent waters. Back home in the Adirondacks, I began to write. I wrote a story about a pearl, and Herman Meyer, Maiden Lane pearl-buyer wrote and told me it was the first pearl story he ever read that was real pearl, and that I had the lingo right.

"Presently I was writing the annual Fresh Water Pearls article for Jewelers' Circular, and I had about twenty-five pounds of pearl books and reports and hundreds of pearl news clippings and articles. It is a beautiful subject—pearls and gems and jewels inevitably related.

"So *'The Trammel Fork Pearls'* really started a long time ago when I walked down from Utica, New York, the length of the Alleghanies into Blue Ridge and Upper Tennessee Basin country mountains.

I jumped the runs, crossed the creeks on footlogs, met the town, bottoms, Hill Billy, Court House and all those other kinds of people. I saw, but did not then grasp the significance of the shells shimmering in the shoals of green water. But knowing the people—knowing the pearls, knowing the streams, the mountains, and having been through there at intervals since, I just naturally wrote about them. Pearl lore is more fascinating than pearls to me.

"A sheller on the St. Francis told me about playing taws—marbles—with little tricks he and his brothers used to find in shells in Alabama.

" 'Yo' know, I be'n laying off to go back theh, some time—they mout of be'n good!'

"R. S. S."

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

(*Continued from page 6*)

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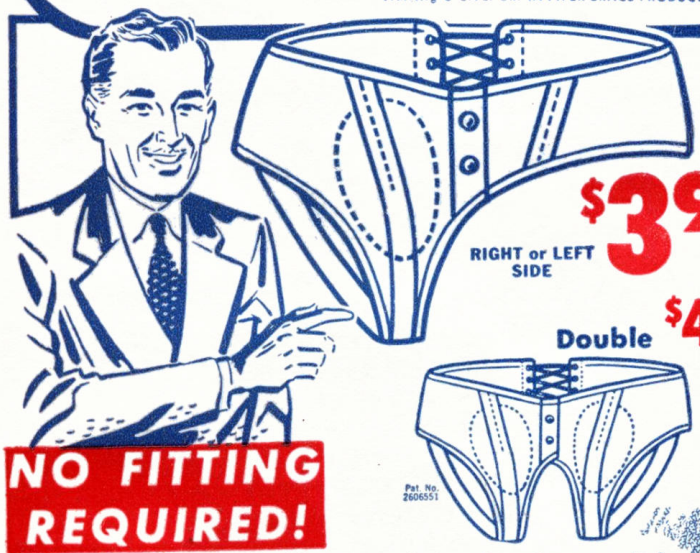

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