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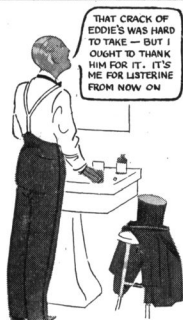
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15¢



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Volume XCIV

MAY, 1934

No. 5

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

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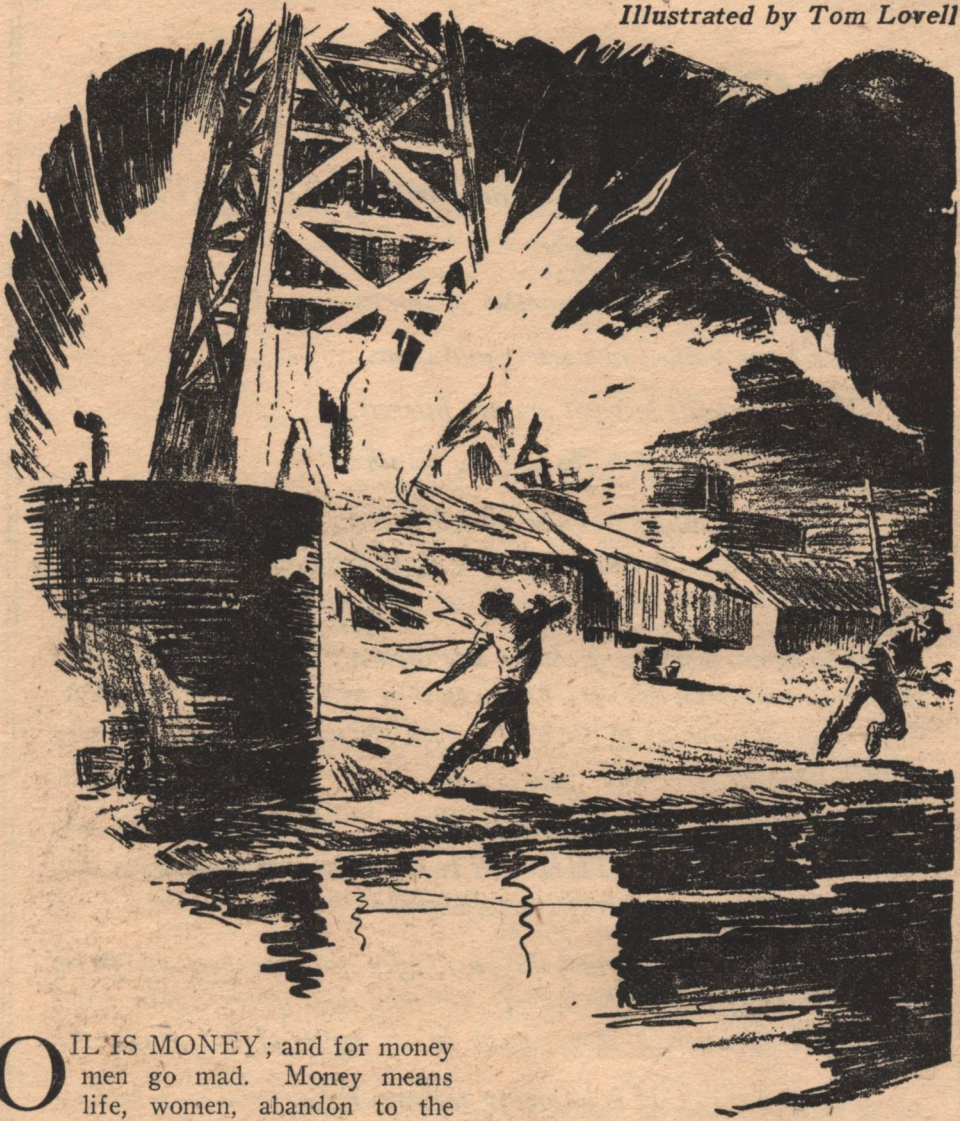
TOP-NOTCH is becoming the proving ground on which the first shot of each big new gun is fired. Others may offer the later records of these guns. But the first bull's-eye will have long since been scored on our pages when they do.

We are not discarding our favorite writers, but we are offering the open door of opportunity to any one who cares to knock.

And we offer to you who read—as well as to those who write—Good Hunting!

—The Editor

Illustrated by Tom Lovell



OIL IS MONEY; and for money men go mad. Money means life, women, abandon to the fever heat of the oil booms. It is a sometime vicious cycle that even tried friendships cannot survive. Sometimes, though, a testing circle, proving the rooting of friendship to be deeper by far than any of the roaring gushers in the Blister Creek oil fields of Texas; surer burning than the hot flames of life as lived in the boom town of Hell.

Such friendship was that of "Silent Tom" Ballew for Don Ian. They had punched cattle together for the XL,

the Matador, Burk Burnett's 6666 spread in Carson County, and for the old JA out of Plainview. The old JA, now being cut up and parceled out to the land hungry; where once Colonel Charles Goodnight had an experimental crop of kaffir corn hastily plowed under. He feared that others, seeing the fine stand, would get ideas and try turning the range to crops and wire fences.

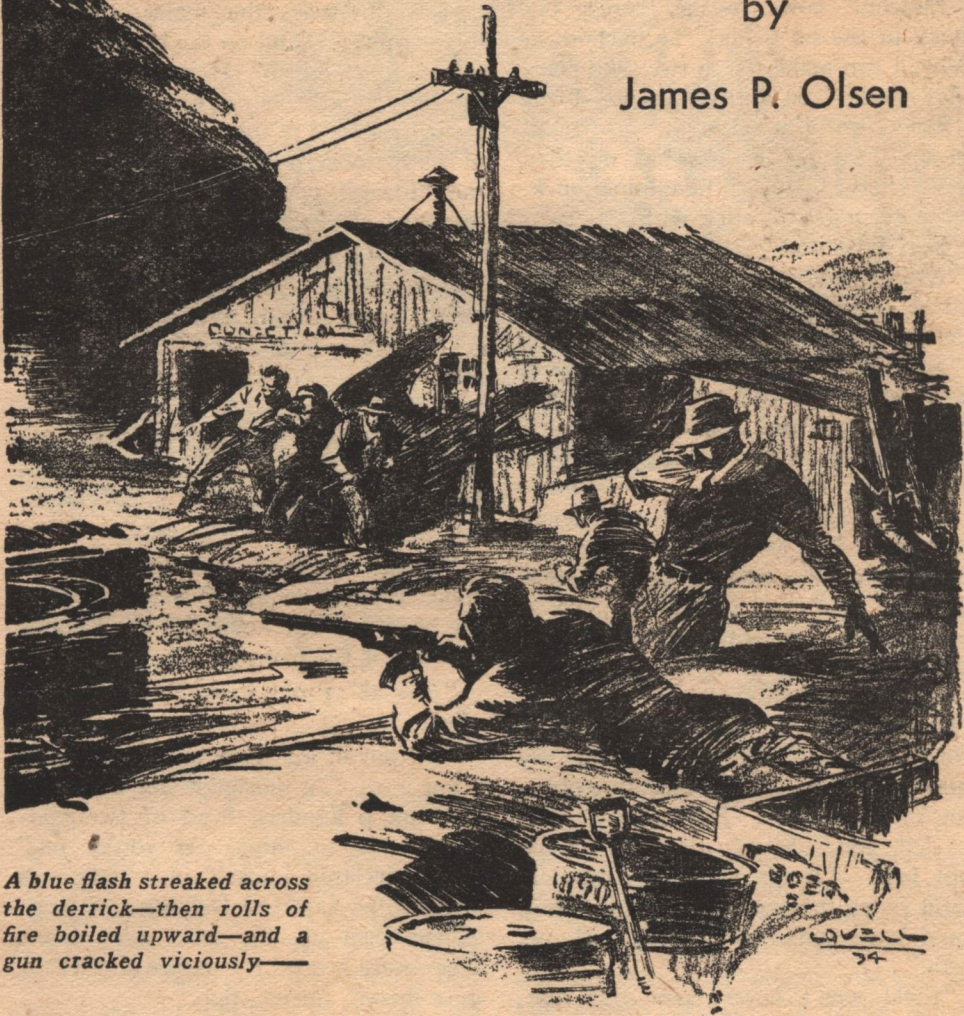
Easy-going, level-headed, taciturn

Red Rhapsody

A Roaring Action Novelette of the Oil Fields

by

James P. Olsen



A blue flash streaked across the derrick—then rolls of fire boiled upward—and a gun cracked viciously—

Silent Ballew was the working half of the partnership, when he and the dark, wild half-cocked Don Ian took a place of their own on the flats across Vigilante Creek. Short grass, mesquite, sage, brakes, and sweeping plains. Silent loved it. Don Ian cared not much for

it, so it was Silent who, in the ensuing three years made the place thrive and grow.

Three years—and then tall derricks sprouted ten miles to the south of their place. Carbon black plants sent their midnight pall into the sky; casing-head

plants and refineries sprang up; men made millions overnight. Squatting like an ugly horned toad as it lies atop a hill of red ants was the boom town of Hell.

The Blister Creek field spread this way and that. It was when he believed it would never reach them that Don Ian blew up.

"Punchin' cows, when there's big money in the oil fields!" he exclaimed. "Why, I can make ten to twenty dollars a day workin' on a casin' crew. I got a chance, an' I'm takin' it. Dust an' dirt an' heat an' cold—what do they get you here? Me, I'll take mine quick. Never get married, stick with this two-bit beef business!"

"Eve Evans ain't the kind to be snaked 'round oil-field towns, Don," Silent seriously offered.

"So that's it, huh?" Don growled. "You figger I'll fool around until she gets tired teachin' school, goes back East, or marries you! An' I thought you was my friend!"

A white band showed about Silent's lean lips. His voice was husky and broken when he said: "Don, if anybody else said thet, I'd kill him. You know better. I stepped clear out, not wantin' to be messin' up the case when it was you also wanted her."

Don showed a flash of contrition. "Sorry, Silent," he said. "But my notion still goes. I'm leavin' this place. You've saved some. Buy out my half."

"Tell you," Silent offered. "Keep your half. I'll run it. Why, the field might swing this way. Even if it didn't, you'd have somethin' to fall back on, sorta."

"Field won't never come this way. I'm through with this. I'd hate to sell my half to somebody else. You buyin'?"

Silent bought the half of their brand—the half that Don Ian had in no ways earned. As Don Ian rode away, Silent told him: "Any time you wanta come back, come on."

"Reckon I'll be so well dinero-ed, I'll never want to see this dump ag'in," Don called back. So lightly, then, did he take the friendship of Silent Tom Ballew.

Four months, during which time Don Ian went to work on a casing crew and married Eve Evans, and a well was brought in by an independent operator, halfway between the main pool and Silent's place. And on the heels of this, came old "Hellish" Helmers and old Forgie Lang. They'd drilled together from Bradford to the Gulf, kept a sack of scrap tobacco in the toothache box, ran "tower" opposite each other, and scrapped all the time.

"We've got our own string of tools, a little money. You've got a place that might have grease under her, might not," Forgie told Silent. "We got a little money, too, thanks to my savin' ways."

"Hadn't been for me," Hellish thundered wrathfully, "that widdier woman in Wichita Falls would've hung you on the wrenches for all you got."

"Yeah? Suppose you ain't dyin' to stake location on Ma Wheeler, as runs the main boardin' house for the Phillips Petroleum Company?"

"Jilis ol' sump hawg!" Hellish replied.

"I'll put in my place an' what money I got left. C'n mortgage her some, an' I've got a hundred head of two-year-olds ready to ship. So you're on." Silent declared himself in. Thus was formed the Lucky 3 Drilling Company. A rig went up, the tools went down. They were headed for grease and riches, or a duster, buster, flop.

HELLISH crawled off the driller's stool and drew a bucket of hot water out of the boiler line. Forgie was pulling on his oilers, ready to take over his tower from noon to midnight. Learning all he could, Silent was hanging

about the rig in his spare time. He was on hand now.

"Try makin' a few feet of hole this trip, an' keep your sitter off'n the lazy bench," Hellish spluttered from his water bucket.

"I can make more hole in twelve hours than you make in two days, you rope-chokin' old fool!" Forgeie howled. "Don't sit on the bench an' let my tool dresser do my drillin'."

"I suppose it wasn't you that lost that string——"

"Who's that?"

Forgeie's tool dresser, "Roothog" Wall, jerked his head toward the man who'd stopped his car at the casing racks and now came up the rig walk to the derrick floor. He was a big bird with a hooked nose and dark, beady eyes.

Hellish's toolie, "Oklahoma Red," was some shakes as a gambling man. He said: "Huh! That's Gus Mannix. He hangs around Duke Gershaw's Hot Spot layout in Hell. Gambles a lot and doesn't lose."

"Hell is right," Forgeie grunted.

Mannix came on the floor. He gave the brim of his hat a flip. "Came when I figured I'd catch all of you," he said. "I got some business to talk over with you."

"We ain't monte players; we don't drink on the job. You ain't got no business with us," Hellish sourly retorted.

"Naw? You better listen, and then change your mind. It looks like there might be a field down this way, so we're lining the boys up. This is a tough country, mates. Anything can happen. You wouldn't want nothing to happen to you or your well. Sure you wouldn't. And for just a lousy five hundred a month, the Oil Field Protective Association sees that nothing does happen. You get me?"

"Well I'll be—hammerin' hell! I read about them things happenin' back

East, but I never thought anybody'd have guts enough to try it in the oil fields!" Hellish exploded. "The big companies——"

"They don't need protection. They're out. This is just a nice, protective arrangement for you little guys. We ain't stalling. Come in on it, or slide over. If you ain't got the money, just assign us a share of your lease. Come on," he snapped his fingers, "and give me your answer."

"Fella, who's back of this?"

It was Silent who spoke. His smoky eyes were fixed on the swart face of Mannix. He leaned slightly toward him.

"Questions you ain't getting answers to," Mannix grunted. "Man behind it is big. Just plenty big. That's all you got to know. Well, come on. Get in before you reap grief. Your answer?"

Silent wasted no words. He just leaned a bit more, his right fist came booming up and Gus Mannix fell backward. There was pain, surprise, vicious anger stamped upon his face as he rolled over. He was tugging at something in his coat pocket.

Silent stooped. His eyes were cold, cloudy; his face was hard and merciless. They got a picture of the other side of him then, and it wasn't a pleasant picture by any means. His sinewy hands gripped Mannix's wrist, twisted. The gun dropped to the rig floor. Silent rolled the spitting, struggling Mannix over, then yanked him to his feet with his arm twisted upward to the small of his back.

"This is our answer!" Silent ground out.

He kicked with all the strength in his right leg. Mannix roared painfully, then spreadeagled into the water and slime of mud of the slush pit. He struggled through it, circled the rig to his car, then yelled: "You got as much chance of living as you have of getting

away with this!" His starter ground. He went swiftly away.

"Bad. Damned bad!" Oklahoma Red declared. "There ain't no doubt that Duke Gershaw is behind this. Duke Gershaw is the law in Hell. His bunch are scum and killers. Cowboy, if you got a gun, start packin' it."

"I've got one. An' I will," Silent replied.

An air of foreboding settled around them all. Oil means trouble. And all of them knew that trouble lay just at hand.

II.

CARS raced through the night. A pillar of red, sentinel of disaster, fingered high into the darkness, died, leaped upward again. It told a story to those who raced to the scene: A well was afire; a well that had already got into the big gas formation above the oil sand. Bouncing along in the little tool car they used, Silent was one of those who rushed toward the location.

A mile, and the country became light as day. The roar of the fire, a gigantic blowtorch springing out of the earth itself, and then, as Silent drew near, the heat of the fire pressing down like a stifling, choking blanket over one's head.

Headlights were swung this way and that as cars came on. Silent leaped out of his car and went swiftly to the little group standing strickenly aside from the gathering crowd. He recognized Handy, owner of the well, and went up to him.

"Four men—in there!" Handy sobbed wildly, pointing toward the melting, twisted heap that had been the steel derrick. "I hired the Pan-Han casing crew to run my six-inch casing. I don't know what happened, and neither do the men who were lucky enough to get out of there—but I'd bet my last cent that Oil Field Protective layout is under it!"

Silent caught his breath. That hissing, hell-hot fire spot—and somewhere in that mess the cremated bodies of four men. And Don Ian worked on the Pan-Han casing crew.

"Who got out?" Silent croaked.

Some one named the more fortunate, and added: "Don Ian wasn't on this well with us, Ballew. He got sick this afternoon."

"Sick?" some one else spoke up, a tinge of deeper meaning to the words. "He's been sick a lot, and never laid off. I saw him at the Hot Spot this evening—and you say you think—somebody around there is back of this!"

Silent's lips framed a comeback to this, but he held the words. Married to Eve, Don Ian had no business hanging around the Hot Spot. It was not for Silent to battle over what men thought.

"I refused to pay a cent to them," Handy was saying.

"Same here," said Luckner, who was drilling a wildcat well a half mile still nearer the Lucky 3's location.

There were others of the independent group carrying the drilling play this way, in this party. They looked to Silent.

Luckner said: "I heard what happened when that Mannix came after you fellows. That decided me—and I ain't backing down now!"

Silent turned to Handy, jerking his head toward Handy's field office a couple of hundred yards distant. "We can't do no good here right now," he said. "Let's make medicine."

They followed him as he led the way. Worried, anger boiling within them, they grouped in the little office.

"You still refusin' to pay off?" Silent asked.

"I *can't*!" Luckner answered desperately. "I've got so deep in debt on my well, it'll take a gusher to pull me out as it is."

Booth, of the Swastika Company,

Crane, the rest looked at each other a moment. "I'm playing my hand," Booth finally said. The others nodded.

"I feel the same," Handly snarled. "But we can't have anything else happen—like that out there. Happens I got backing. I'll have that fire shot out by to-morrow night, and start building a new derrick. I can't stand another lick, though. And those men——" He shuddered.

"We've put up flood lights all around our rig," Silent said. "We're all packin' guns. Thing to do is stick together, be ready. An', meantime, I'm goin' to see what I can see. You savvy?"

"If anybody can stop it, you might," Crane said. "Any expenses, I think, should be shared by us all. We'll be our own protective association. They're turning our part of the field red, eh? We'll show them red of a different kind!"

"It won't be easy," Booth mumbled.

"Nope, she won't be easy," Silent agreed. "But it might be easier if we sorta carry the play to them. I'll let you know, for I aim to have a powwow with Duke Gershaw to-night."

"Man, that'll be suicide!" Luckner protested.

"Mebbe so," Silent gravely responded. "But don't be so certain it'll be suicide for me!"

"I think," Handly muttered when Silent had gone, "I'd rather be on the side he's on. It's going to be hell all around; but less, I think, on us than on a lot of others. Ballew—did you see the look on his face?"

A HALF MILE out of Hell—and not so far from being hell at that—clustered the box-car, two-room houses of a group of field workers. Silent stopped his car before one that sat off to itself. The place was noisy. Gas engines barked, refinery compressors boomed throatily all around. Silent knocked on the door.

Eve Ian was glad to see him. More glad than she would have admitted. Often she had wondered why Silent Ballew had stopped seeing her.

"Silent!" she exclaimed, stepping back so he could come in.

His swift glance told him things—a lot of things. If Don Ian was making money, it wasn't being spent on Eve, or this place. He noticed, with a twinge, the almost threadbare dress she wore was one he'd seen her in before she married Don Ian. The furniture of the two-room, gas-lit place was a pick-up of pieces that Eve's deft hands could not make look any too good.

"What's wrong?" Silent demanded, not looking at the girl.

"Wrong?" She essayed a light laugh.

"Yeh—wrong," he said, fumbling for a match. "You're not yourse'f, Eve. Those dark circles around your eyes, an' the frown-wrinkles comin' on your face—what is it?" He looked squarely at her.

"Silent!" she burst out. "Silent, you're the best friend Don ever had. It's Don I'm worried about."

"I thought so," Silent nodded. "What's wrong with Don?"

"He—oh, I shouldn't say it, but he's not doing right! He's drinking too much, Silent. He spends so much of his time in town; he isn't working much any more, either. You might——"

"I'll see him. Don's all right, Eve. He's just full of life, an' a little wild. Shucks, don't worry none."

He arose. "Maybe I can find him in town," he said. The sight of her, worried, shabby, in such surroundings squeezed his heart.

Eve followed him to the door. "Please come back," she invited. "I—it gets lonesome here, and you and Don should see more of each other."

"I'll drop around lots oftener," he promised. He meant that. Not because he wanted to see Eve. That part of it hurt him. But because he felt he

should keep closer check on Don. After all, Don was his old partner, and his friend.

"Well," he grunted as he started on down the rutted, sandy road between rows of glittering lights on the derricks, "I guess I gotta go to Hell, an' that's a helluva note!"

For that matter, Hell, Texas, was a hell of a note. Silent disliked its smells and its noise and the people that hung on there. He parked his car and went swinging off down the street, his puncher's boots and big hat setting him as one apart from most of the half-drunken mob through which he pressed.

The one neon sign in the town gleamed redly over the door of a long, low building on an alleylike side street. "Hot Spot!" Silent snapped, reading the sign. "Wonder why Don wants to hang out in a dive like this?"

He pressed in through the crowd, edged about a bit of dance floor, and stopped at a long counter to one side. Some one tugged at his sleeve. He looked down, then shook his head. The girl was insistent. She took one of his hands.

"Quit horsin' around—get me?" Silent admonished calmly.

"T'hell with that!" the girl snapped, her heavily painted face and lips screwed into a hard grimace. "You're the guy they call Silent Ballew, ain'tcha? Friend of Don Ian, too, huh?"

"S'pose I said yes?" Silent countered.

"Then I'd say to you, cowboy, to come with me! I'm Don Ian's sweetie; and right now, unless some one butts in, Don Ian's going to get the works. He's swacked to the gills to-night, then tried to play over his head in a game he don't know nothing about. Come on."

She grabbed Silent's right hand again and dragged him out by a side door into the dark. "I'll hold your hand," she said as she hurried along, "so we can make time."

Silent jerked her to him, held her

with a viselike grip on her left shoulder and dragged out his gun with his right.

"You ain't holdin' my right hand, sister," he snarled. "That's an old stunt, an' I don't copper by one hell of a lot!"

The girl wrenched suddenly away from him. Scream after shrill scream ripped from her throat. She ran off in the darkness between dark blots that were shacks. A door opened suddenly just ahead. A gun roared and a savage lance of flame knifed the night.

III.

THE MAN intent upon emptying the contents of his gun into Silent Ballew made two very bad mistakes: He missed his first two shots at the dimly seen form; he neglected to turn off the light behind him.

Face bleak, pinched, Silent thumbed back the hammer of his old .45. Its rolling bass drowned out the sharper cracks of the other's weapon. The man in the doorway cried out, straightened, fell kicking back into the shack, then flopped frantically about on the floor. Silent ran forward, cast a swift glance about the dirty one room of the place, then stepped inside.

Mannix writhed to a sitting position, clutching his left arm with his right hand. Silent's lips pulled to one side. "An' I thought I'd at least shot a lung out!" he grunted disgustedly.

He spun on one high heel, went out and made his way back to the Hot Spot. At his "Where's Gershaw?" a bartender started to make a wise reply, got a second look at the cowman's face, then indicated a small door in the back. Silent shoved through the sweaty mob, gave the door a kick and walked in.

The girl who'd tried to lead him into the trap was there. She was sitting across the table from Duke Gershaw. There were two others in the bare little room—a tough, chunky heel known as

"Chi" Shorty; a two-hundred-pounder with puffy brows and a tin ear, "Tank" Raum.

By his dress, soft silk shirt, tailored riding pants, and Park Avenue riding boots, Silent picked out Gershaw. Picked him, too, by his air of arrogance and command. Gershaw's face was flat and red, his mouth loose and sensual. Yet there was a cunning, dangerous something about him that marked him as a man to be feared.

"You're Gershaw, uh?" Silent drawled, never moving his lips.

"And you're the cow wrestler Mannix aims to kill," Gershaw grunted, rolling a cigar to the corner of his mouth. "Gertie, here, was just telling me."

"You didn't have nothin' to do with it, eh?" Silent grinned mirthlessly.

"Why, no. It was his personal business. That one bit, I mean. I can't be bothered about your socking him. That's his job. Anyhow," he went on pointedly, "what would you do if I had been back of it?"

"I left him in his shack, yellin' like he was kilt because he had one measly li'l slug in one arm," Silent informed Gershaw. "I'd likely leave you with a bullet in your dirty heart!"

Gershaw stiffened, leaned forward. "Get this, you cow-brained bull-whacker!" he barked. "You ain't fooling with kids or cow nurses now. It'll be you that gets the slugs. You can't get by without protection."

"I got p'tection," Silent assured him grimly. "I got so much, thet some of it goes to Don Ian. I wanta know what he's got to do with you. An' I'm warnin' you—lay off!"

"Well"—Gershaw was nonplused. Didn't this cow-chaser savvy who Duke Gershaw was? Was he senseless as all this?

"Four men died to-night. You caused it," Silent droned. "We can't prove it. But next time, Gershaw, I'm comin' after you. We ain't payin'—

none of us down there in that part of the field. We ain't payin', unless hot lead is the kind of pay you expect. Now——"

"Take 'im, boys!" Gershaw snapped. Tank Raum and Chi Shorty moved. They moved quickly, but too slowly for all of that. Gershaw was looking into the tunnel bore of Silent's gun. The red fled his face and his cigar fell from his open mouth.

"Take 'im, coyotes," Silent jeered. "Move at me, an' I put pills in this thing's stummick. Come on. Please make a move!"

Tank and Chi backed against the wall. His gun still on the panting, sweating Gershaw, Silent backed to the door, kicked it open, backed out, kicked it shut after him, then ducked out the side door.

Cursing, slamming about the back room, Gershaw suddenly yelled at Tank. "Get Ian here," he bawled. "They ain't going to pay, eh? The hell they ain't! This Ballew buzzard's the one that's holdin' them off down there. Ian is going to take him out of the play."

GOOD LUCK comes on the heels of bad. It was indeed great news that Crane, to the southeast but a mile from Silent's place, had in his first well. Four thousand barrels, high gravity, flowing as if it never intended stopping!

"Well, No. 1 Ballew, Lucky 3 Drillin' Comp'ny, is goin' to be some bigger," Hellish commented when he got the news. He gave her more screw, and the bit, far below, sent up a *tum-bump-a-tump* on some hard formation.

"Unh-huh!" Silent mumbled, strolling out of the derrick.

Hellish gave him an odd look. Silent didn't seem to give him a tumble! Silent wasn't thinking about a well right then. He watched a wreck of a little roadster rattle up beyond the casing racks, then went out, right hand outstretched, to greet Don Ian.

"Hello!" Don hailed him. "Heard the new play was comin' this way. Thought I'd congratulate you. Likely"—bitterly—"you'll be a millionaire."

"I begged you to hold on," Silent reminded, divining the cause of part of Don's bitterness.

"Eve says she invited you over for dinner to-day."

"Yeah!" Silent nodded. "I wanted to talk to you. You wasn't there."

"Are you sure it was me you wanted to talk to?" Don snarled, his red, blood-shot eyes focused hard on Silent.

"You're drinkin', Don. Else you wouldn't say that."

"Yeah, I'm drinkin'," Don muttered. "We'll have one."

He reached inside the old car, got a fruit jar full of white corn liquor and unscrewed the cap. He leaned toward Silent as the latter took a small drink, almost as though he wanted to jump him while he was unguarded. Don Ian was nervous, shaky. He slopped whisky over his face as he turned the jar up and drank heavily.

"Pretty heavy, Don," Silent commented. "Ain't you hittin' the whole thing off pretty strong?"

"What if I am?" Don demanded, swaying, his speech thickening. Married life! Mustn't drink, mustn't go have a dance with some of the girls around Gershaw's. Life's just one damn must an' ought not after 'nother'n!"

"I hear you just missed bein' in that fire," Silent said. He watched Don narrowly.

"Me? Huh, hear ag'in. This Oil Fiel' Puh-tective sss-so-aw, you know, told Blackie to pay his dues for his casin' crew. He wouldn't, an' then goes out on a well where they ain't paid, either. I wasn't fool enough to go out that night, that's all."

Silent's voice was harsh. "Don, you didn't know somethin' was up, did you? Man, say you didn't!"

"I did not," Don growled. "Anyhow, I don't know what you're talkin' about—here, have 'nother shot. No? Well, more for me."

"You ain't hooked up with Gershaw, Don?"

Ian lowered the jar. He rocked back and forth, foolishly wagging his head. "Like to know, huh?" he jeered. "Mebbe 's your bus'ness, eh?"

"I'm your friend, that's all."

"Looks like it, way you hurried to buy me out so you could hog all the money. Aw, I didn't mean that. Come on, get in. We'll go have dinner an' talk over old times."

He crawled into the car, slumping into the seat. "'S damn funny, can't shee plain. You drive."

Silent hesitated. He hated to take Don home in the condition he was in. It would be embarrassing to Eve and to himself. Still, Eve would be expecting them; would have dinner ready. Maybe Don would sober up. Silent got in and drove off.

DON didn't sober up much. He clutched his jar and reeled into his shack. Eve, gay in a made-over dress for the gala occasion, bit her lips and fought back tears. She gave Silent a pleading look. He nodded soberly.

"Dinner's all ready," Eve said. "We'll eat now."

"Here"—Silent helped Don into a chair—"let me sit that jar——"

"Hell with you!" Don raged, clutching the jar. "Got my ranch, tryin' to get my wife, an' now you want my jug. Got the ranch, an' you can have my wife——"

Eyes very big, face twitching, Silent grabbed Don and shook him. "You're drunk, Don!" he cried. "Don't talk like thet."

Don drew a heavy breath and sagged, dropping his jar to the floor. The corn juice had got him. "'S funny—hee-hee!" he half whispered. "Jus' 'member

RED RHAPSODY



They moved quickly—but too slowly for the speed of Silent's gun!

why I—why I wentta see you. I was s'posed to kill you, an' plant time bomb in your well. F'got. Joke—y' see—"

Silent picked him up, carried him into the second room and laid him on the bed. When he came back into the other room, Eve was just coming in from outside. She held an oil-well shooter's clock bomb in her hands; a bomb filled with dynamite.

"He," she breathed weakly, "was sent to kill *you*! I found this in his car! You, his friend. Oh—" She broke into wild sobbing.

"He was out on his feet; didn't know," Silent fiercely insisted. "He didn't do it, Eve. Wouldn't have, either."

"That's right," she grasped this offered hope, it seemed.

They looked into each other's eyes. Each knew the other lied.

IV.

TIGHT STRANDS of a new barbed-wire fence shone in the sun. It was going to be no easy job getting into No. 1 Ballew. Too, every man was sticking on the well, sleeping in the dog house to one side of the derrick when not on tower. That pleased Forge who, secretly, was getting worried about Hellish and Ma Wheeler, over at Phillips' boarding house.

It was nearing noon, and Forge, waiting to take over, took his ease on a lazy bench. Roothog was hoorawing Oklahoma Red about the care he was taking of the old .30-30 rifle he was industriously cleaning, and Hellish, jaws working his cud of scrap in rhythm to the rise and fall of the walking beam, was big-holing her for all it was worth. They were through the first gas, the well was logging with big producers in the main field and they were feverish, anxious.

A battered roadster stopped alongside the fence. Eve stayed in the car

while Don Ian got out, yelled and got Oklahoma to come out. "Silent?" Oklahoma said. "Why, I heard him say he had some steers to shove onto different range, or somethin'."

The car went on to the weather-beaten little ranch house a half mile away. Silent was in off the range, just putting a wire-cut steer into the corral. He slipped the bars into place and came to meet them.

"Howdy, Eve! Feelin' better, Don?"

Don Ian kept his gaze on the ground. "I don't know what to say," he mumbled. "I was plenty drunk, Silent. You know"—he went on fiercely—"I wouldn't do a thing like that. I—I don't know what to say."

"Forget it," Silent advised. "Jest don't mix up with them no more."

"You see, Gershaw first paid me to sort of talk it that the casin' crews ought to pay off. Sort of a missionary, I reckon. I—"

"Never mind thet. Thing is, jest cut loose from him. Gershaw an' his bunch ain't goin' to go any too far along. Fact is, Bill Riack, thet dep'ty sheriff in Hell, has told us he'd back us if we really got us proof; or if we figgered we could carry out a real fight. He's scared of Gershaw; but he's also scared of us."

"Don's going back on a casing crew," Eve said. "We're going to be happy now."

Silent could see that she tried desperately to believe this; could also see that something was lacking in her smile, her forced attitude of happiness. She was a game one, and loyal. Sticking to Don Ian like this— Oh, hell! Don was worth it.

"Well," Don broke a rather awkward silence. "I gotta be goin'." He turned, then looked back. "Oh, say," he added casually, "how's the Crane well doin' now?"

"Holdin' up. Even increasin' the flow some," Silent replied.

"He goin' to drill another one?"

"Pretty soon, he says. Right now, he's usin' his men to help guard Luckner's well."

As the car drove off, Eve waving back at Silent, the man stood in the center of the hard-baked ranch yard and stared off at the sky line. Lines of weariness, sadness, seamed his tanned face.

"Don," he said aloud to himself, "I reckon it's no use. You've took somethin' from Eve you can't never give back. An' you're livin' a lie! Maybe I been wrong. Maybe you ain't what I thought. But, God help me, I don't think you come to be forgiven. An' God help you if you're in that bunch I think'll try for that well to-night."

GUARDING Luckner's well? Well, some men were. But here, where a battery of flow and storage tanks loomed dark in the moonless night, men waited grimly the attack they believed would come. Ahead of them, dark, rumbling as the oil flowed through the lines, stood Crane's No. 1 Kitchen. The watchers cuddled guns and lay flat on their bellies behind the tank dikes. On the far side of the well, other men also lay in the dark and waited.

A check valve on a flow line click-clacked monotonously. Save this and the low rumble of the well, there were no sounds. Near the tanks, a generator had been hooked up to high-pressure gas instead of steam, ready to flood that scene with light.

Silent, a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach, crouched alone at one end of the tanks. Suppose Don came? Suppose he shot him? Could he let drop a hammer that would send a bullet into his friend? Friend? Silent Ballew did not know. He wiped sweat from his brow and cursed under his breath.

And then, without warning, without preliminary sound, a vicious, hellish

clatter of gunfire broke the stillness of the night. Sub-machine gun! They hadn't thought of that. The gun swept back and forth, back and forth, knocking earth from the top of the tank dike, swept the cleared space about the well. Bullets clanged on the derrick and rang against pipes. And under cover of this lethal barrage, men were running forward in the dark; heading for the well.

Duke Gershaw was showing his teeth.

The scream and whine of the gas-driven generator rose and spun shrill notes into the battering of shots. A man rose full length, croaked miserably, pawed at his chest and fell over the dike. From the derrick, gun flashes stabbed the dark.

Silent waited until that crazy, murderous sub-gun swung the other way again, then came up. A slobbering of fire to his left spotted the gunner. Silent's thumb arched above his gun hammer. The dribble of fire swung back his way as the gunner turned on him.

Then, suddenly, the tommy gun ceased to make murder talk. The shrill of the dynamo settled to an even hum, and suddenly the well, the tanks, the surrounding country, flooded with glaring light. Not held back by the scything of the machine gun, men were coming over the tank dike. The man with the gun was crawling, trying to reach the gun where he'd flung it in hurt convulsion when Silent's shots smashed into him.

Once more the old .45 boomed her message. The crawling man collapsed. The lights showed another man flat on his face a few yards from the well. His left arm was bandaged. Gus Mannix would not help Gershaw work his rackets any more.

Two bent, running figures swerved around the derrick. Something flashed, flamed, went sailing up on the derrick floor. Something went "*whump*" as

leaking gas around the casing head sent a blue flash across the derrick, then licking rolls of fire started boiling upward into the derrick. It flashed far out, enveloping the running men. One of them spun around, beating blindly at his flaming clothes. He screamed hideously, pitifully, and started a blind, mad run that carried him, a living, flaming torch, directly toward the oil tanks.

"Stop him!"

A dozen voices boomed the warning. Guns cracked. A last wild scream, and the poor wretch was out of his misery. All eyes had been upon this one—all eyes, save those of Silent Ballew. The second of this pair had veered, rushing madly out of the lighted area. He beat out half a dozen smoldering places on his clothing as he ran.

Silent's gun lined on his back. His thumb pulled his gun hammer back. The fleeing man ran stiffly, awkwardly, the running of a man who has spent many years in the saddle.

"Eve!" Silent groaned.

His gun did not crash forth the shot he was certain to have targeted. It was of Eve Ian he thought in that moment. All the friendship he'd ever felt for Don Ian had gone. He'd stuck up for Don; he'd been a fool for Don. He'd stepped out when Don was going with Eve—and now he knew what a mistake that move had been.

How would Eve feel if Don Ian were killed, held up as a skunk in the pay of Duke Gershaw? Yes, and how would she feel toward the man who'd killed Don Ian?

So the man who ran as though he'd spent years in the saddle got away.

Crane came running up. "They got the well, but we busted the back of his outfit!" he snarled. "It's worth it, Ballew. It sure is."

"We might've busted his outfit some, but we ain't done yet!" Silent ground out. "Crane, round up ever' man you

can. Send down an' get Oklahoma, Hellish, an' Forgie. Have'm leave Roothawg to watch the well. Leave a man on ever' location, an' bring the rest to Hell. I'll meet you there, an' I'll have proof that'll make Riack deputize us as his helpers, anyhow. Get a-goin'."

Flames of the burning well mounted high into the sky—a totem of fire, signaling the hell that was to come to Hell that night.

V.

EVE'S voice, shaky, pitiful, called out, "Who's there?" when Silent hammered on the door.

"I'm glad you've come!" she sobbed hysterically as she let him in. "Oh, Silent, I'm glad you've come."

He gave one shaking shoulder a brief pat and went on into the other room. Face and hands smeared with grease, eyebrows and lashes burned off, Don Ian writhed and rolled. He looked at Silent, rolled over and sat up.

"Look at me!" he screeched. "Look at me. All because you lied, you——"

He grabbed a bottle of whisky and let the contents gurgle down his throat. "Burned all to hell," he raved, putting the empty bottle down.

"You whinin', sneakin' coyote, thank your wife that you're alive!" Silent thundered, his own face livid despite the tan. "I had my sights lined on you, Ian." He did not use Don Ian's first name any more. "I'd knocked you down, but I knew Eve had enough hell without havin' you killed in such a mess!"

"All lies!" Don Ian shrieked. "Like you told me when you said there wouldn't be no men on that well."

"Sneakin' spy!" Silent snarled. "Worse, you bring Eve with you when you come to pr'tend you're sorry. Ian, you ought to hurt. I'm glad you're burned. Mebbe so it'll brand some sense into you; mebbe so it'll heat you

up to bein' a man half worth the wife you got.

"Now"—Silent was terrible in the way he tongue-lashed Ian—"you whine, an' blame me, by glory, for there bein' men to guard property from the sort of hellions you've done th'owed in with!"

"Don't—please!" Eve begged, laying a hand on Silent's arm. "He's mad with pain, Silent. Let's don't make it worse. It's—oh, isn't it disgusting enough as it is?"

"Disgusting? So I'm disgusting, am I?" Ian howled. "Here I am, burned all to hell, suffering like the damned—an' you say I'm disgustin'! Me, your husband. Why, you damn'——"

Eve choked. She buried her careworn face in her roughened little hands, then turned away.

Silent grabbed Ian by the front of his shirt. "Burned or not," his voice was low, terrible, "I'll kill you by inches for your treatment of her!" His strong hands came up to Ian's throat. Through the frenzy of pain, haze of self-pity, yellowness, meanness, fear came to Ian. The smoky eyes glaring at him, the set face and twisted mouth chilled his soul.

"No!" he gibbered. "*Nonono!* Don't. I'll do anything. I'll help you any way I can. You hear. Silent, my friend, please!"

Silent stepped back and let his hands drop to his sides. "An' I called *you* a friend!"

Sickened, Eve turned to Silent. "Isn't there some way he can help?" she implored. "Some way he can partially make up for—this?"

"There is," Silent answered. "Is, an' he's goin' to. He's goin' to swear thet Gershaw is responsible for them men burnin' on Handly's well. He's goin' to swear Gershaw backed this play to-night; that he's back of this oil-field p'tection racket. We know it's Gershaw, but we need proof to make his killin' sorta legal."

He turned to Ian again and lashed out: "An' you, Ian, get another chance. I'm goin' to say you was really workin' for the independent oil men. I'm goin' to sell you back part of the ranch. An' I'm goin' to see that you play the part of a decent husband. One step, an' if it ain't right, you're answerin' to me!"

"You ain't my boss," Ian sulked.

"Fool!" Eve flamed, reaching the limit of her forbearance. "He gives you a chance you don't deserve. He gives you a fortune you threw away—a fortune he begged you to keep. And you're going to take it. You're going to do as Silent tells you."

"I don't seem to have no choice," Ian snarled. "I'll do what you say."

Instead of thanks, he glared with baleful eyes at Silent.

"Watch him," Silent told Eve when she went with him to the door. "He's goin' to buck up, even if he hates me for it. I made one mistake concernin' you, Eve Ian. I'm tryin' to set it right."

Her eyes were wet with tears. She nodded. She knew what he meant. A mistake, yes. One that could not be undone now.

IN THAT ODD, uneasy way things have of getting out when they are supposed to be secret, word got about that Duke Gershaw's Hot Spot was a good place to stay out of this morning—for early morning it was.

By one o'clock the bar and the dance floor was almost deserted. Rumors ebbed and flowed like a tide. They said a masked band of white riders had formed; they said the oil men were all around the place, ready to close in. One thing they were sure of: far down in the new extension of the Blister Creek field, a pillar of flame, rolling billows of smoke, marked the scene of death and destruction.

Gershaw, Chi Shorty, Tank Raum, "Big-hole" Bill Darmer with him, held forth in the back room.

Chi Shorty, for the twentieth time that night, shook his head. "It was sudden. I stayed with the car, like you said, Duke. I heard the guns start, so I got out an' walked up on the rise in the road so I could see.

"I saw the lights come on, saw Mannix an' Beef laid out, an' saw Tex an' Ian chuck their fire. *Whoosh!* Like that, it blows out. They shot Tex. All on fire he was. Ian got away, back to the car. I dumped him at his house. He was burned damn' bad, too."

"Listen," Gershaw snarled. "You tell that once more, and I'm going to put a slug where it'll stop your croaking."

He downed a drink, slammed the bottle back onto the table and took a nervous turn around the room.

"Whatta we goin' to do, Duke?" Tank asked.

"Do? Hell, what else is there to do, but tough it out? They ain't too tough, and they got nothing to go on. If they come here, cut loose on them."

"Suppose," Chi queried, "Riack goes an' throws in with them, like Ian said he might?"

"Long as he isn't positive he can pin me down, he don't dare!" Gershaw barked. "Damn! You act like we was whipped. We got that well, didn't we? Well, before we stop, they'll be on their knees, begging to buy protection! One thing, though. I think Ian crossed us. Any rate, we got to get him, and get that cow-punching hellion, Ballew!"

"We?" Darmer asked, a twist to his lips.

Malevolently, beady eyes sparkling, Gershaw wheeled on Darmer.

"Yeah, we!" he slashed out. "I'll take an active hand myself. We'll get something— Who's it?"

The men in the back room fell suddenly silent, quiet, guns in their hands, their faces draining of color. Following the knock on the door of the back room, came the voice of Riack, the deputy sheriff.

"We've done chased ever'body outen the front end, Duke," Riack warned, a quavery, half-afraid cast to his voice. "I've come to pinch you—an' you best come peace'ble."

Gershaw made motions with his free left hand. He eased nearer the door, his gun trained about breast-high on the right-hand panel. "Put a pinch on me, Riack?" Gershaw's voice was silky. "Stop horsing around and tell me why."

"Chargin' you with the murder o' them four men on the Handy well, Duke. With murder of one man, burnin' a well, to-night. Best be good about it. I got a dozen men backin' me up."

"Listen, Riack. You listen well," Gershaw called back. "I can prove I haven't been out of this place either night. Go on about your business before you get your tail in a crack."

"Nope, Duke," Riack's voice came back doggedly. "Don Ian is done said he'd 'pear 'ginst you, swearin' you was behin' this. So——"

The thunder of Gershaw's gun cut short the deputy's words as he fired through the door. Outside, Riack yelled with pain—a yell that plainly bespoke of a slight and painful wound only.

"You fool, Duke!" Tank howled. "We're like trapped rats!"

"Want to be lynched?" Gershaw snarled. "Once let them get us in jail, talk starts, and what'll these oil men do to us?"

That thought drove courage of desperation through them. They prepared to sell out dearly.

"Rush the door, beat them back out there!" Gershaw commanded. It was habitual they obeyed, unthinking. Darmer, gun ready, jerked open the door and spilled out into the big, barn-like room in the front. Chi Shorty and Tank rushed out after Darmer, their guns a herald of their coming. Behind them, the door slammed. Gershaw did not come out.

VI.

AS RIACK staggered away from the splintered door, Silent made a motion with one hand. Half crouched, he waited, his gun drawn and ready. On either side of him, old Hellish and Forgie fondled their own guns. In the doorway behind them were more men; still more waited in the darkness all about the place outside.

"They'll be a-comin' foggin' out," Silent warned. "Yeh—here they come!"

Gun blazing, Darmer came boiling out of the back room. Silent felt the rush of a bullet past his head, and a man back of him cried out as he whirled and collapsed. Eyes squinted, Silent kept his gaze squarely on Darmer's face; saw Darmer's mouth suddenly open, a gush of crimson rush over his lips; saw him lean far to one side, fall, then roll until he was stopped by the wall.

Silent spun about, gun raised again. He blinked, surprised by the silence that weighed the place. A bit of powder smoke eddied halfway between floor and ceiling. Hellish and Forgie were staring bug-eyed. Chi Shorty lay humped up in Moslem prayer attitude, dead as ever he could be. Tank was over against the bar, swaying, leaning backward, clutching the planks of the rough bar edge. They watched him silently.

"Uh!" Tank's strained grunt sounded awfully loud. "Uh-ahhh!" His body hit the floor with a loose, all-gone sort of a thump.

The rhythm of Hellish's jaws on his tobacco ceased. "Hustlin' hell!" he exploded. "So dam' sudden. Who'd ever thought it'd be like this?"

"Gershaw—he's still in there!" Riack squawked.

Outside, a rattle of shots sprang up. Silent leaped forward, kicked open the rear door and sprang into the room. Near the floor, a piece of the planking had been pulled back. While his men

threw their lives away in the front, Gershaw had slipped out by the back.

Men were running back and forth in the dark alley behind the place. "Don't shoot, you fool!" some one cried.

"Hold it!" Silent yelled. "You'll be shootin' each other first thing you know. Get in line, fan out. Though," he added, "I guess it ain't much use."

"He come foggin' down the alley afore we knowed it," some one volunteered. "So dark, couldn't see to shoot good."

"Here—over here," somebody else called, running a flashlight over the ground. "He's hit. Here's blood."

Like hounds in full cry, they took up the search. Man hunt! It was virus, it worked into men's souls. It seemed that all of hell turned out to track Duke Gershaw down.

Lights and gas flares in the fields dimmed with graying daylight. The red of the sun came up over the horizon of the plains. The men came straggling in by threes and fours. Duke Gershaw was still at large.

IT WAS getting daylight when Gershaw, dirty, blood soaking the shirt-tail bandage bound about his ribs, crept up to the door of Don Ian's shack. Even if they caught Duke Gershaw after this, Don Ian would not be able to testify against him. They'd have no case—and the devil with them!

He crawled along the side of the shack, raising himself up at the window. Eve Ian, sitting beside the bed on which Don lay, looked suddenly up as the window was darkened.

Another witness! Gershaw's upper lip pulled hard under his predatory nose. There'd be no other witness when he got through! He raised his gun and smashed the window, and with painful effort slid one leg through and wormed inside the room.

"Duke!" Don Ian exclaimed, sitting

up. "Duke, I'm glad you've come. You ain't got a drink, have you, Duke? I—saaay, what's the matter?"

Still Gershaw just stood beside the window, mean eyes fixed on Don Ian. To Eve, it seemed her heart would never beat again. She was rooted to the spot beside the bed, unable to move or speak. There was gross evil, murder, in Duke Gershaw's eyes.

"Duke, Duke!" Don Ian cried, reading Gershaw's purpose by the look on his face.

"There'll be no witnesses against me," Gershaw snarled.

The meaning of this struck Don Ian like a crashing thunderbolt. "You ain't takin' it out on my wife?" he groaned.

"Rat!" Gershaw snapped. "So you'd testify against me, eh? Your wife? She's going with me in that thing you call a car. If we meet anybody that thinks they want me bad enough, they'll shoot through her to get me! When I get where I'm going, she'll be fixed up to be your wife where you go."

Don Ian tensed. In that moment, something of manhood came back to him. Perhaps his stricken mind ran clear in that instant. Gershaw was slowly raising his gun.

"Eve! Run!" Don Ian cried, and flung himself straight at Gershaw. Eve screamed as Don was hurled back upon the bed by the force of the shot. She ran for the door. Don Ian, red cascading from his mouth, dragged himself up again.

"Damn you!" Gershaw roared. He fired point-blank.

No need to look to see if the job was finished now. Gershaw leaped into the other room. Eve cried out as she tried to open the door. Gershaw was upon her then. A heavy hand smashed the woman's tender mouth; cruel fingers bit deep into her arm.

He backed out, beating her with vicious, flat-hand blows that brought

blood from her nose and mouth and drove her cries back down her throat.

"You hell cat!" Gershaw raved. "Shut up! Shut up, I tell you, and get under the wheel of that car." He slapped her again. "I—uh—"

Something had stayed Gershaw's backward progress—something hard that felt like the muzzle of a gun in the small of his back. He turned his head, his face going sickly gray.

If ever man were devil, Silent Ballew was that now. His eyes were smoky pools of fire, his face a devil's mask of insensate fury. He thanked, without knowing it, the gods that had sent him back to look after Don Ian and Eve when daylight came.

The sight of Gershaw backing out of the shack, beating and torturing Eve Ian; the sound of shots inside, that had brought him hurrying from his car; the blood streaming from Eve's nose and mouth— Silent made inarticulate, animal sounds in his throat and smashed one terrible blow to Gershaw's face.

Eve dropped in a limp heap as the seemingly fear-petrified Gershaw loosed his hold on her. It was well that she did.

Gershaw went to his haunches, pawing for the gun he'd put in his coat pocket. Silent Ballew flung himself upon Gershaw, his knee in his stomach. His hands were like steel claws, and he twisted the arm away, hurled the gun from them with terrible ease.

Gershaw screamed like a maniac. He kicked and clawed and bit. Death, stark, relentless, terrible, was engulfing him. Grunting, his teeth grinding hideously, Silent Tom Ballew did this slowly, indicative of his maddening, deadly, inexorable rage.

His hands were at Gershaw's throat now. The frantic screams broke abruptly. Gershaw flailed wildly with arms and legs. He writhed, squirmed, flopped wildly. Together, they surged to their knees, their feet. Long, terrible

minutes passed. Slowly, slowly, a saner look came into the eyes of Silent Ballew. As a man awakening from a dream, he shook his head, stared at the puffing, blue face before him.

His fingers ached. With a sudden motion, he flung the still limp thing from him. A quick turn, and he went to the house. A moment later he came out, gently closing the door behind him.

VII.

LATE SUMMER merged into autumn. The grass on the range went from crisp brown to dull gray. The sage was dried, and winds bowed the mesquites in obeisance to King Winter soon to come. Black, dripping derricks thrust into the sky along Vigilante Creek. Where the drills of No. 14 and 15 Ballew were going down, steam wafted up from hissing boilers.

Where once had been beds of prickly pear, sage, mesquites, and bunch grass, now stood batteries of tanks. Gas engines beat grumpily from the engine houses of the pumping wells. A graveled street, lined on each side with tiny cottages; a huge bunk house and boarding house, warehouse and garage.

Silent Ballew ground-tied his horse. He looked up at the sign across the front of the office: "Lucky 3 Drilling Co. Ballew Lease." He shrugged, sighed, climbed the steps and dragged his spurs across the porch into the office.

Forge fell on his neck. "Silent!" he bellowed. "Silent, old Ma Wheeler done run off with the wholesale grocer from over at Spearman! An' Hellish—hot dawg, jest lookit the old fool!"

Hellish sat behind his personal desk—for which he had no use other than for storing innumerable packages of Mailpouch—and worked his jaws a mile a minute.

"Hard-hearted hell!" he finally bellowed, unable to contain himself. "There's a woman ever' time! Turns

down a meelyunair to run off with a wholesale grocer."

Forge grinned. "Silent," he said, shaking his head, "it was worth it. I give her twenty thousand dollars, an' told her this company was goin' broke. Ho-hee-hee, so shee-he runs off—har-har—with the grocer!"

"This company ain't big enough for us both!" Hellish bellowed. "Why'd you—why'd you—well I'll be damned!"

"Who'd I fight with, wasn't for you?" Forge demanded. "Who'd I have to get barrel house with, now that we got money, wasn't for you? Yeah, an' who'd keep widders off your neck, wasn't for me?"

"Ol' fool!" Hellish mumbled, trying to hide a grin. "Still, I guess you got it right this once. Silent's enough in this man's oil company in gettin' married."

"Guess we'll all be bachelors," Silent muttered. "But what I wanted to see you about: You don't need me around here much now. You know more what to do about new wells an' things, anyhow. Me, I'm goin' to move my beef back on new range, do a little ranchin'. Won't be around much this winter."

They watched him mount his horse and ride slowly away.

"I reckon it's sort of hung him on the wrench, Hellish," Forge sighed. "Why'd this Eve girl hafta go off up in Ohio to teach school? Reckon she ain't comin' back, huh?"

"You got callouses on your better feelings," Hellish avowed. "Nat'ally she wouldn't stay here after all as happened."

WINTER blew icy breath over the cow country and the oil fields. Twelve miles away, where he knew oil would never be found, Silent Ballew built himself a shack, a barn, corrals. It was in a canyon, thick with wild grapes and plums, with a clear spring creek and parks of cottonwood trees. He paid

for it and many sections of range around it, never missing the money.

Silent Ballew was wealthy now. He really didn't know exactly what his daily income amounted to. He didn't care. He stayed alone, hazed his dogies out of snowdrifts, forked hay and sat by the fire alone.

Some people said he was queer. A young ranny with gosh knew how much dinero, poking off alone to punch cows and live the winter in an out-of-the-way place.

It wasn't queer to Silent. Once, when he and Don Ian worked for the JA, he'd made up a song about "Circlin' under the stars where coyotes howl. Thinkin' about a day when I'll have money, an' a gal——"

Well, he had the money. The girl was a dream. Sometimes he thought of Don Ian—but always as he had been in those saddle days, and as the man he'd been when he hurled himself upon Gershaw so Eve might get away. In memory, Don Ian was still his friend.

At first, he'd got long letters from Eve, who was back in Ohio, teaching school. He had tried to answer, but it hurt too much. Gradually, her letters, too, ceased.

Sometimes Silent dreamed of traveling to all the places he'd heard about; of having a big home here in the canyon to return to when weary of roaming, or longing for the sweep of canyon-cut plains. But always he placed Eve Ian beside him on these trips: That also hurt, so he tried to stop dreaming of this, too.

Snow went away, bluebonnets shoved up, and meadow larks tried to split quivering throats in joyous welcome to spring. Still Silent could not forget. He rode from dawn until dark, trying to tire himself into sleep; trying to come

out of the moody, blue funk into which he seemed to have become rutted.

He rode in early this morning, a bawling orphan calf draped across the saddle before him. Out on the range, dew still sparkled like a limitless diamond field. Down here in the canyon, birds sang, the gurgle of the creek was music unequaled. A morning to gladden the darkest heart. And yet—Silent cursed!

He put the calf in the stable and strode toward the shack. He was tired of this, and he spoke aloud in the manner of one much alone. "By gosh, I'll go get her!" he swore. "I'll say, 'see here, Eve, I love you. We jest gotta put the past behind us, an' go on together.' An' if she says she won't by gosh I'll—I'll—awrk!"

"You'll do what, Silent?"

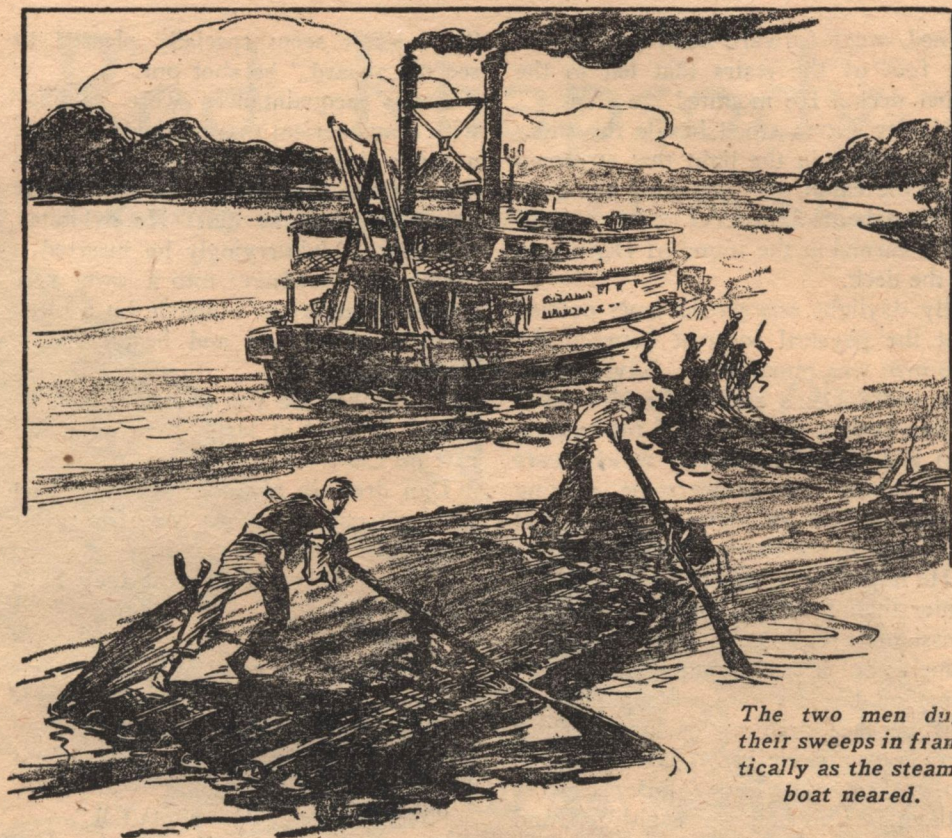
Eve! She stood, her eyes flashing impudently, happily, in the doorway of his shack. The old Eve, vivid and alive. She laughed, and only then did Silent Ballew, hearing that laugh that mocked the birds and shamed them, believe it was not a vision. His face reddened.

"You'll do what, Silent?" she repeated, and leaned toward him. "I couldn't stand it any more. I got Hellish and Forgie to bring me. They're with the car, out of sight down the canyon. So tell me what you'll do."

"This!" Silent yelled. His strong arms swept her up and he crushed her hungrily to him.

Screened by wild plum bushes, Hellish and Forgie spied upon that scene. Hellish's jaws ceased their perpetual motion. "Heav'nly hell!" he breathed.

Forgie chuckled and pounded his partner on the back.



The two men dug their sweeps in frantically as the steamboat neared.

Feud on the Bigbee

by Valentine Smith

Illustrated by Tom Lovell

IT WAS NIGHT, and the Bigbee, even on the straightaways, was lighted only dimly by the thin crescent of a new moon. But Dan Fisher was twenty-eight; he had behind him twelve years' experience in rafting logs on the river. He had, too, the cocksureness that goes with these. Equipped thus—and carrying a long, iron-shod pike pole for balancing and poling—he was riding a single pine log downstream.

The river steamer, *Lucile Wray*, tied up fifty yards away, loading white-oak

staves in the glare of her shoreward-turned searchlight, was Dan's objective. Always river boats reminded Dan naturally of steamboat pilots, and these Dan catalogued as a thoroughly vile and untrustworthy breed. He poled grimly alongside the *Wray*, made fast by wrapping the loose end of a length of wire around one of the deck cleats, the other end already tied through a ring dog driven into the log, and clambered aboard.

He strode through the boiler room,

turned, went forward until he came to the foot of the stairs that led to the upper deck. He mounted the steps.

Harley Eaves stood beside the shore rail, outlined in the light that streamed from the cabin, idly watching the gang of roustabouts below.

He turned at the sound of Dan's step on the deck.

By daylight one would have noticed that the physical contrast between the two men was remarkable. Eaves was a few years Dan's senior, he was taller by two inches, but he lacked the bulging arm and shoulder muscles which years of manning the cumbersome guiding sweeps at bow or stern of a log raft had given to the shorter man.

He might have been considered handsomer than Dan in a dark, somber, expressionless fashion. Dan really was homely; but it was a rugged and honest homeliness. His eyes were a piercing blue beneath bristling eyebrows which were a combative red. His hair, red, too, grew at will. Eaves' dark eyes were fathomless; his hair was coal-black, and he kept it combed carefully. Dan's face was coppery-red from years of exposure to sun, wind, and rain. Eaves was olive-skinned.

Dan wore knee-length laced boots which showed signs of much usage, faded khaki riding pants, and a blue-denim shirt, open at the throat and with the sleeves rolled above the elbows. He was hatless.

Eaves' shirt was white, but it was collarless and unbuttoned at the top. He wore full-length corduroy trousers. He wore, too, a vest. There was a joke about the vest; Eaves was never seen in public without it. The day might be sweltering hot, he might be dripping perspiration, but always he clung to his vest.

His gaze rested—with recognition only in it—on Dan Fisher. He spoke coldly, incisively: "What's wanted?"

Dan caught the note of unwelcome.

"You don't seem specially pleased to see me aboard," he shot out.

Eaves' acquaintances were familiar with a mannerism that marked the man, a thing that was characteristic of the deliberateness with which he went about everything that he did. He exhibited this now. Unhurryingly he inserted a thumb and forefinger into a lower vest pocket, brought out a match, bit a piece from the butt end and began slowly chewing it.

"I'd rather see you aboard a boat of mine," he said at last, "than on a log raft on the river."

Dan drew in a quick breath. "You ain't got any too much love for raftsmen, have you?" he asked.

"About the same amount they have for me, I reckon."

"Yeah?"

"All of you are a threat to river navigation—with resin-butt logs and dead-heads dropping out of your rafts and upending for boats to run into and punch holes in their hulls."

"That's the tale you pilots tell."

"It's what every steamboatman knows. Raftsmen know it, too." Eaves took another deliberate nibble at his match stick. "Still, you go ahead, not dog-goin' sinkers up properly 'longside of floaters, and pinning your stringer logs together careless——"

"Careless?" That was a challenge. Dan took a step forward. He had an intense and jealous pride in his river craft. "Me, careless?"

"I'm aiming my remarks at the tribe of you." Eaves was unhurried with the amendment. "Steamboating will be a hazard till the last raftsmen is run off the Bigbee."

"You're not mentionin', I see, anything about you pilots makin' that hazard a whole lot worse," Dan came back. "Passin' a raft full tilt downstream, washin' two-foot waves against it, sloshin' it on a sand bar or into the bank. How you expect a raft to keep from

bu'stin' up after you've hung one side of it on a bar, or smashed some binder pins by jammin' it into a big cypress in the edge of the river?"

Eaves eyed his match end, but forbore nibbling it. "How long's it been," he asked, "since you knew a thing like that to happen?"

"Day before yestiddy—to me!" Dan retorted promptly. "I been a day and two nights on the river, catchin' up logs out of a raft that was bu'sted up by a steamboat!"

"You're not intimating I did that?"

"N-no; you didn't. Not that time."

"Have I ever done it—any time?"

"Well—you haven't exactly bu'sted me up, yet. But I ain't forgot three weeks ago below Glover's bend. You hung me on a bar, and it took me and the helper six hours to get off. Why don't you slow down more when you round a bend?"

"River bends are kind of uncertain," Eaves said noncommittally. "A pilot can't ever be sure he's going to find a raftsman around one of them, you know."

"I see." It was undoubtedly his state of mind that caused Dan to misinterpret the remark. His eyes narrowed. "Maybe one of these days you'll happen to round a bend and see the *right* raftsman, maybe, also, you'll just *happen* not to see 'im till it's too late, huh?"

For a long moment Eaves regarded him in silence. "I don't see as I'm called on," he said at last coolly, "to account to anybody except the master of the *Wray* as to how I handle my job. But I'll say this much: I'm aiming to handle my work the way I think it ought to be done—without askin' any log raftsman's consent about it."

"I get you!" Dan said curtly. "I just wanted to understand how——"

"Then understand this!" Eaves broke in with startling abruptness and vehemence for him. "I'm first, last, and all the time a steamboat pilot—looking out

for my boat. But I'm not aiming to bu'st up any log rafts—if I can help it."

"Not even one o' mine, I reckon?"

Eaves favored him with a long, staring look. "Not even one of yours."

"You'll slow down when you see me on the river?"

"When I see any raft—in time—I'll slacken speed so that any well-constructed one ought to ride out the swell."

"Includin' mine?" Dan was persistent. "Even if I'm on it?"

"Even yours—with you on it."

"That's your word?"

"That's my word."

Dan turned quickly about and went down the stairway.

AT THE FOOT of the steps he stopped short, frowning. Hugh Talbot, chief clerk of the *Wray*, stood not ten feet away, checking, in a flat-bound book, the staves as the Negro roustabouts shuffled along the gangplank. He was slender, undersized—almost anæmic compared to Dan Fisher. He was coatless, but the sleeves of his shirt were down and buttoned at the wrist, and his cap was pulled low over his forehead as a protection against swarms of willow flies that had been drawn by the *Wray's* lights.

Through some sixth sense he must have been aware of Dan's presence on board, for glancing up momentarily from his work, he beckoned imperiously.

Dan obeyed the summons, but with evident reluctance. He sidled up to Hugh. "Hi, Hughey!" he greeted ingratiatingly.

Hugh's only reply, at first, was a quick, penetrating glance. Then: "Been up tryin' to start somethin' with Harley Eaves?" he demanded.

Any other man than Hugh Talbot who had put that question to Dan Fisher would have received in answer a very prompt and emphatically worded invitation to go to a specific destination and mind his own business. But Hugh not

only put the question—although Dan Fisher could have broken him in two with one hand—he put it and got away with it. Moreover, he put it accusingly—put it in such a way that Dan fidgeted uneasily.

Hugh's question had come dangerously near the target. He knew Dan Fisher—knew his strength and his weakness. They had been friends since boyhood. In school, Hugh had been more keen in his studies, and because of this Dan, who was a hulking, overgrown, awkward boy, had stood in awe of him. Hugh had been quick to sense this, and had adopted toward his friend an affectionately bullying attitude, compelling him, although he had been rather slow-witted, to make passable grades in his classes. In later life, Dan had accepted this friendly bullying attitude as an integral part of their relationship.

Now he answered Hugh's question defensively. "No; I ain't been tryin' to start a fight with Eaves. I—I just wanted to talk to 'im. I was down here catchin' up logs——"

"Have a break-up?" Hugh interrupted.

"No." Dan clipped the answer shortly. "I was broke up—by a steam-boat."

"Not us?"

"N-no!" Dan's intonation conveyed the idea that he would rather have answered the question affirmatively. "Eaves ain't never bu'sted me up—yet."

"He's not goin' to." Hugh checked rapidly four turns of staves in his flat-bound book as that many roustabouts trotted past him inboard. "Get that out of your mind."

"That's what *he said*," Dan grunted. "But I got a hunch that he's just waitin' till he catches me in the right place, and then he'll wreck me. Him holdin' that old grudge against me, you know."

Hugh knew about that. Harley Eaves and Dan Fisher had loved the same girl—Essie May Hacker. Their rivalry had

been bitter. She had chosen Dan—and they had been married, now, a year. Eaves had accepted defeat as he accepted most things that came to him—in silence. But two weeks before Dan and Essie May married, he left the river. And he had not come back until three months ago. But that he nursed a grudge against Dan, Hugh doubted.

Hugh knew, too, of that ancient feud between certain pilots and certain raftsmen. It was years old—perhaps as old as the history of rafting on the Bigbee. No one could have told just when it began. Maybe a pilot in passing a raft had, unintentionally, caused it to break up. Maybe the raftsman in charge, putting the most unfavorable construction on the incident, later, out of revenge, had really dropped resin butts—logs, which, heavy at the butt end, became partly imbedded in the river with the small end semi-floating near the surface of the water—out of a raft, and one of these had punched a hole in a boat's hull. Some other pilot, learning of the happening, may have deliberately passed some other raft at too high speed and have broken it up.

However this may have been, or however little of truth there may have been in the charges which pilots and raftsmen hurled at one another, certain it is that some of them still believed the things that were said and continually nursed that ancient feud.

Hugh slapped at the willow flies which had thickened to a cloud about his face and neck. "Forget it about Harley holdin' a grudge against you," he commanded shortly. "It's your imagination." Then, changing the subject: "How's Essie May?"

"Fine!" Dan could shift moods quickly. He grinned, now. "That is as well as could be expected—in the circumstances."

"In the circumstances?"

"Yeah!" Dan chuckled self-consciously. "You see—there's we—we're

lookin' for a little raftsmanship in the family soon."

"Sure 'nough!" Hugh gave him a hurried, friendly dig in the ribs with his pencil. "Ain't that swell!"

"Ain't it!"

Checking the stave-loading for the next few minutes claimed Hugh's exclusive attention. At last, in a breathing spell, he warned again: "See here, Dan, I don't want you startin' anything with Harley, understand? Keep off him!"

"I'll let 'im alone as long as he lets me alone," Dan agreed. "If anything happens—he'll start it."

Hugh tried to be satisfied with that. Whatever faults Dan Fisher may have had, he wasn't a liar. He was impulsive, headstrong. And perhaps he was too ready to put a construction on an incident that did not belong to it. But he meant well. And he was honest. Convinced that he had wronged any one, the man never lived who was more ready to make amends. There was, though, always to be considered his temper—and his suspicions regarding pilots and Harley Eaves in particular.

He waited around, now, a few minutes longer. Then, with a "So long, Hughey! I'll be seein' you," he turned away.

SEVEN peaceful, uneventful weeks passed. Twice during that period Dan had taken rafts down the river, and somewhere between his starting point and Mobile he had been passed by the *Wray* with Harley Eaves at the wheel. Each time the boat, approaching the raft, had slowed almost to a crawl. Each time, too, Eaves, scarcely glancing toward the raft, had lifted one hand in the briefest and most perfunctory acknowledgment of Dan Fisher's existence.

There was a thing, though, that puzzled Dan. Yet he had to admit in all honesty that it might have been the

merest coincidence—on the two occasions when the *Wray* had passed him, it had been on a straightaway, in a long, broad stretch of river, clear of sand bars.

He was now on his third trip down with a raft. He had been manning the huge guiding sweep at the stern, and his Negro helper, "Shed," had been handling that at the bow, keeping away from too close to the bank and near the channel of the river.

They had a good raft; practically all of the logs were floaters, long-leaf yellow pine, that rode high in the water—a good raft, put together by a master raftsmanship. Dan, personally, had chosen the outside stringer logs for length and size. He had sawed and rived the white-oak billets for rafting pins, and with a hatchet had fashioned them to fit the two-inch auger holes which Shed had bored in each end of the stringers. He had selected, too, the short sapling lengths for binders.

It was about mid-forenoon. There was a summer sky overhead that would have sent a poet into ecstasy. In front of them, behind them, on all sides of them, the yellow Bigbee gurgled contentedly. Tiny waves, stirred by a slight breeze, lapped gently against the outside stringer logs of the raft.

All morning they had ridden a lazy river, unhurrying, since they must go with the current, passing sometimes so close to the river bank that they could hear the wind murmuring in the cypress trees.

Safely around a bend, they faced a straightaway that was nearly a mile in length. Here the river narrowed and became swifter. With the raft in the channel, the two men raised their sweeps from the water and locked them into position. For several minutes, now, on this straight stretch, there would be nothing for them to do.

They met amidships of the raft.

Something two hundred yards down-

stream caught Dan's eye. He pointed. "What's that—a clay root?" he asked.

Shed shaded his eyes with his hand. "Sho, is, Mist' Dan," he said after a moment. "'Twuzn't dere our las' trip."

Presently the object became easily recognizable—a huge tree that had grown close to the bank, becoming undermined, had fallen into the stream. It had been rolled along until, the broadly spreading roots striking an obstacle on the river bottom, it had lodged.

Dan frowned. Just across from the clay root, on the opposite side of the stream, he remembered, a sand bar shelved away out into the river.

"We better get out a little fu'ther into the channel," he observed. "We can't hardly pass between that and the bank."

He and Shed started toward their sweeps.

But before they had taken a half-dozen steps, each stopped in his tracks. Each had heard it, from upstream around the bend—a long—two shorts—a long—the booming notes of a steam-boat's whistle.

Dan turned and looked at Shed queerly. "It's the *Wray*," he said in a suddenly strained voice.

The boat rounded the bend, her speed reduced. Both men, as though they had been automaton, stood there gazing toward her, as if they were hypnotized.

She cleared the bend, still at reduced speed.

Dan fetched a sigh of relief. And just then there came to his ears the jangling of the bell in the engine room.

He whirled and faced Shed. "Did you hear that?" he gasped.

Shed nodded assent. The bell—the pilot's signal to the engineer—had called for full speed ahead.

"The dog—the dirty, low-down dog!" Dan raged. "Waited—like I thought he would—till he got me right where he wanted me."

His glance shot swiftly to the clay

root, then across the stream to where he knew that shelving sand bar lay hidden.

"Get to your sweep!" he grated to Shed. "We ain't got a chance! But we'll try!"

They scurried to their sweeps.

The *Wray* was coming full tilt. More, she seemed to be running a race or out for a record. Great columns of smoke, thickly flecked with red, belched from her twin black funnels. Her blunt nose was shoving shoreward a terrific swell. Two hundred yards above the raft she still maintained her speed. When she came opposite, she seemed to have increased it. Harley Eaves, standing behind the wheel, did not raise his hand in the customary perfunctory greeting. He did not even glance around as he passed the raft. He seemed to be contemptuously unmindful of the fact that log raftsmen existed. The *Wray* went past, her stern wheel biting great chunks out of the Bigbee, only to drop them back, forcing her forward at a speed that she perhaps had never known before.

The two men dug their sweeps frantically into the water. Feverishly they tried to force the raft against that shoreward-pushing swell. They might just as well have been using canoe paddles.

The bow of the raft crunched into the clay root—hung there. The stern, caught by a freak of the current, swung toward midstream. It struck that shelving bar—and stopped. Only one thing could happen, then—the center of the raft bowed, straining, with the full sweep of half the river's current against it. Then came the inevitable—rafting pins snapped like match sticks. The raft opened up.

Dan charged forward, raging. Shed came trotting up.

Dan dragged his light double-ended boat across the logs to the outside stringer. He threw into it an ax, several ring and chain dogs for fastening

logs together, and a coil of wire. He seized a paddle and slid the boat into the water.

"Get yours ready, Shed!" he grated.

"Yas, suh! Whare'll I find you at, Mist' Dan?"

"At Jackson. 'Tain't more'n two miles down there." Dan had shoved off, his small boat bobbing in the wash from the *Wray's* wheel. "I'm goin' to try to get together a pick-up crew."

A NEGRO wood handler in the boiler room of the *Lucile Wray*, tied up at Jackson, loading cotton, heard a noise outboard and glanced toward it. He straightened, gaping—stared, mouth wide open.

Dan Fisher was clambering aboard. His face was white. Each hair of his bristling red eyebrows seemed to be standing by itself.

He strode across the boiler room. "Where's Eaves?" he flung at the staring Negro.

For just an instant longer the wood handler gaped. Then, without a word, he pointed shoreward toward the top of the bluff.

Dan leaped from the deck and scuffled up the steep incline. Eaves stood, back toward him, under a large water oak, gazing intently, as if something of unusual interest held him, toward the town.

Coming from behind, Dan caught his arm and whirled him about. "You would bust up my raft!" he gritted. He was trembling with rage, panting from the exertion of a record-breaking trip down the river in a double-enders. "Put 'em up!"

Eaves' thumb and forefinger started toward his vest pocket—but stopped. "If you'll just wait a minute," he began evenly, "I'll——"

"Wait—hell!" Dan exploded. "Put 'em up!"

"I said, if you'll——"

"Put 'em up!"

Eaves threw off his hat.

Neither man was a finished boxer. Each knew only the technique of the Bigbee—fight the best that you can, any way that you can.

Grunting, weaving, twisting, dodging, fists swinging wildly, missing more often than they landed, they mixed it savagely, primitively.

Eaves, taller, endeavored to close in, trying to catch Dan's head under one arm—a favorite trick of river fighters—and pound his face with the other fist. But he was no match, especially in footwork, for Dan. Twelve years of leaping from one floating log to another had given Dan a sureness and nimbleness of limb which Eaves, who had led a less active life, could not hope to match.

Again he attempted to clinch, but Dan shot in a left that cut his lip. A hard right opened a gash above his eye.

But he was dogged—and just as courageous as was Dan. He kept flailing away. Once, one of his wild swings, which, if it had landed, would have turned Dan end for end, missed his chin by the thickness of one of his bristling eyebrows.

There could have been only one end to such a fight. It came quickly. Dan seemed to reach behind him and grab a thunderbolt out of thin air with his right hand. It exploded against the point of Eaves' jaw. He crumpled, then rolled over on his back and lay still.

DAN stepped away from him, stood, feet planted wide apart, his right hand, still clenched into a battering-ram fist, swinging backward and forward at his side automatically, glaring down at his fallen foe.

"There!" he exulted. "I reckon that'll learn you better'n to bu'st up my rafts, you dirty, schemin'——"

"Dan!"

Dan turned quickly—and faced Hugh

Talbot. Hugh's face was white, but not from fear. He trembled all over with rage.

"You went and did it, didn't you?" he accused hotly. "Did a thing you'll be ashamed of as long as you live!"

"'Shamed?" Dan sputtered, aghast. "'Shamed o' beatin' up a low-down, underhanded steamboat pilot that just bu'sted up my raft——"

"Yes; he did it! But why?" Hugh thrust a skinny but menacing finger beneath Dan's nose so viciously that Dan involuntarily backed off a pace. "He did it as a favor to you!"

"A favor to me?" Dan choked on the phrase. "Bus'tin' up my raft—a favor!"

"Yes! Because when we stopped at the landin', her ma ran out and said Doc Westover had gone up into Marengo, and she had been taken suddenly. We got her aboard and raced down here. Dr. Mathis met us—somebody had phoned him—and he took her to his hospital——"

"Wh-what?" Dan's eyes were popping. "Wh—who——"

"Essie May—you dumb idiot!"

"Essie May?" Dan paled. "Is she—you mean——"

"Of course!"

"Oh!" From a lilylike pallor, Dan's color deepened to brick-red. "Oh!" he repeated in a hushed, small voice.

He whirled toward town, but stopped intuitively a moment to glance down at Eaves. "I—I'm sure sorry, Hughey!" He began edging away impatiently, but the face that looked back over his shoulder at Hugh was ludicrously penitent. "Tell 'im—but I'll tell 'im, myself, when I see 'im. I can't wait now!"

He flung himself away.

Hugh watched him as he ran toward the town, headed for Dr. Mathis' little hospital. He knew that Dan Fisher already was repentant. And just as soon as he could tear himself away from Essie May, he would seek out Harley Eaves. He would not rest until he had found Harley, even if he had to chase him up and down the length of the Big-bee a dozen times, and manfully admitted his error and offered contrite apology. Yet, though he knew these things, Hugh's indignation against his too-hot-headed friend was still boiling.

He stood there glowering in the direction which Dan had taken. "It'll serve you right," he growled fervently, "if it turns out to be twin boys—and both of 'em grow up to be steamboat pilots!"

Next Month:

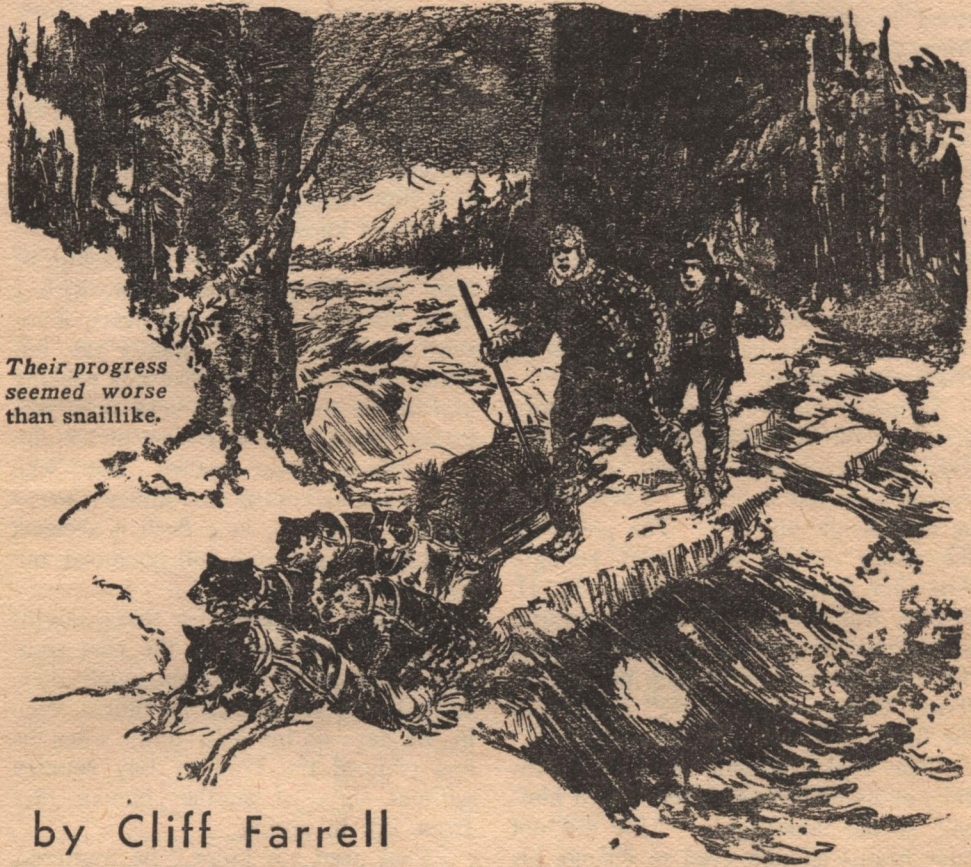
An outstanding novel of
courage and strength

THE CREED OF MATANE

By L. PAUL

—in the June TOP-NOTCH

COALS of FIRE



*Their progress
seemed worse
than snaillike.*

by Cliff Farrell

Illustrated by C. R. Thomson

ON SUNDAY Nathaniel Grabill always closed his trading post at Chivalak to business. For the remaining six days of the week he relentlessly squeezed every possible penny of profit out of his patrons, be they white, red, or mixed.

He sat now in a stiff-backed chair at the big, square table in the living quarters off the trading room, his lips compressed to a thinner, tighter line than usual as he read again, with grim deliberation, a paper before him. It was a police "dodger," one of a score of

such handbills, collected from all over the States by a clipping bureau to which the austere Alaskan trader subscribed, that had come in the monthly mail from Tanana that morning.

Nathaniel Grabill's broad-shouldered son, Paul, had the mail-carrying contract for the middle Koyukuk country. Grabill himself was postmaster at Chivalak.

"The wages of sin," the father muttered. "An accursed murderer, an' him wormin' into the friendship o' my boy."

Grabill arose, his long, bony face as

bleak as the rocky coast of Maine upon which he had been born. He was a spare, tall man, with imposing shoulders, and eyes that few men could meet without sensing an accusation. He stood in the doorway, staring sternly down the long trading room, which was noisily busy.

Grabill's eyes softened a trifle as they rested on the tall form of his son, who was helping the half-breed clerk. Then they hardened to chilled flint as they settled on an equally lithe and muscular young prospector in mukluks, moosehide breeches, and a gayly beaded reindeer windbreaker, who stood aside, reading a letter. He had a heavy shock of crisp, curly brown hair.

Nathanial Grabill, during his twenty years on the Koyukuk, had helped deliver two fugitives to justice. And now he had detected another. There could be no mistake about it. The photo on the police dodger was proof enough. And then there was the name. H. D. Frazier was the man wanted in Seattle on a charge of manslaughter. And there, in this remote trading post in interior Alaska, stood "Curly" Frazier, in the flesh.

"The fool," Grabill reflected scornfully as he turned away and seated himself at the table again. "He did not have brains enough even to change his name."

He bowed his head for an instant, as though seeking guidance in what he was about to do. But the fact was that he already had made up his mind positively. His moral duty was plain.

But he was wondering what his son would say. Aye, there was the rub! Paul Grabill and Curly Frazier had prospected together the previous summer, and were awaiting only the spring to prove out further a quartz vein they had driven into on a pup creek to the west.

They were pals, real tillicums. In fact, Nathanial Grabill had known bitter,

helpless jealousy of the curly-headed Frazier. It was not in Grabill's ascetic nature to be comradely with any one, not even his son. He had tried, but their natures always had been at the poles of understanding.

There was an affection between them, true. On the father's part it was a fierce, paternal love, though it always had been well concealed beneath his austere, unbending, puritanical surface. Just how much his son thought of him he did not know. Fathers never do.

He had watched the friendship of Paul and Curly Frazier grow, with a deep, gnawing hurt in his heart, a resentful silent protest against the immutable law of nature that was robbing him of his son. It had been only yesterday when Paul was ever underfoot, a freckled, loose-toothed lad, who watched and copied his father's every move. And now, in a flash it seemed, Paul had leaped into full manhood and was drawing away.

Paul had been gone for three months on that prospecting trip the past summer. The father had been lonely then, as he had never known loneliness, even in the days of his own youth when he had trapped the Hudson Bay country without sight of another human face from fall to spring.

"Paul need not know," he muttered, with a rap of his hard knuckles on the table. "He is young. He would not understand. Frazier has sinned. He must pay."

He looked at the calendar. Paul had been two days late, arriving with the mail from Tanana. The trails were softening and making slow travel. The outbound mail run must start in the morning.

Grabill picked up a pen, donned his glasses, and wrote a letter. He addressed it to the United States marshal at Fairbanks, and placed it in the drawer of the table. He had performed his duty. It would go out on the Tanana

mail. A criminal would be brought to justice. And perhaps his son would return to the fold again.

GRABILL had a bulky file of police circulars that had accumulated for twenty years. He placed the one concerning Curly Frazier in its proper place among them.

Then he called his son. "I will be sendin' out about a thousand ounces o' dust in the mail in the mornin', son," he said. "I am depositin' it with the company at Fairbanks against my summer's credit."

Paul grinned. "You must have had a good season, dad," he said. "That's quite a clean-up for a backwoods grocer."

"Not so good, not so good! I mind ten years ago I was sendin' out five thousand ounces. But the district is played out."

"Curly an' I will wake it up," Paul declared confidently. "The cream is off the placer, but if we make that quartz strike you'll have to hire a dozen clerks to take care of the trade. We'll hit it, too. There will be a stamp mill back there within a year."

Grabill tugged at his long chin. "What do you know of young Frazier, son?" he asked cautiously. "I do not like him. He is older than you, and I do not know his past."

Paul looked astonished. Then resentment glowed in his brown eyes. His face had none of the bleak, angular lines that marked the Grabill stock. Paul's mother had been a French-Canadian, and the swift blood of the voyageurs ran in him.

"Your liver is haywire again, dad," he said slowly. "Curly is white to his marrow. He pulls his share on the trail, and I would run the rapids with him any time. He's older, yes. About two years. He doesn't know Alaska as well as I do. He's only been in for a

year. As for his past, what does that mean up here?"

"As you grow older you will hark back to what I have said," his father countered. "I am warnin' you."

Paul wheeled on his heel and went out. The father quailed a trifle. Had he widened the breach with his son? Well, Paul soon would be coming back, begging forgiveness.

Grabill became busy in the store the remainder of the day. The river break-up was near. Prospectors were outfitting for the summer. The camp was lively with sourdoughs in from the creeks, and they were spending their clean-ups. Grabill reaped his usual profits.

Curly Frazier had left the store, and Grabill saw no more of him until evening. Then he heard a murmur of voices from the living quarters. He hurried to the door, and paused, his face stern, and masking sudden dismay.

Curly Frazier and his son were at the big table, poring over a map they had made of their prospect district. Evidently they had entered by the side door, no unusual occurrence, for Frazier had been a frequent visitor. But the table drawer was partly opened, and the letter, with its glaring official address, was in plain view in the lamplight.

"Howdy, Mr. Grabill!" young Frazier said. But he did not smile, which was unusual. He was rugged of face, and with frank, honest, gray eyes. There was a tightness about his features now that had never been there before.

"We're mapping out our plans for the summer," Paul explained.

"You should be in your bed," the father replied grimly. "You will have your task cut out to cross the Melozi before the break-up. It is nigh, any day."

"That's right, Paul," Curly Frazier said, rising. "It's going to be a tough mush for you."

"O. K.," Paul agreed. "I'll be back

on the first boat, Curly, and we'll hit for the mine."

Frazier went out. He still did not smile as he said good night. Grabill moved up, closed the drawer, and stroked his chin.

"Did you mention the gold to young Frazier?" he asked.

Paul looked up quickly. "No. I didn't think of it."

"That is well. One should not tell everything—even to his best friend."

Paul impatiently went to his little, lean-to room and turned in. The father sat there in the light of the kerosene reading lamp for a long time. He was wondering if Frazier had noted the address on that letter. And he pondered the reason for Frazier's moodiness.

Well, he had performed his duty. But it would be a shock and a disillusionment to Paul.

PAUL pulled out with the mail, which consisted of a sagging bag of gold at the bottom and a half-filled sack, an hour before dawn the next morning. Nine dogs, their tails up, whirled the twelve-foot toboggan out of Chivalak at a dead run. The lower temperatures of night had formed a crust that made fast going, but Grabill, who stood at the door of the post until long after the last faint pop of the whip had died away, knew that before noon the outfit would be slogging through mushy clinging snow like so much molasses.

It was a portage trail to Tanana. One hundred and forty miles through the bush, and midway lay the treacherous Melozi, which was generally one of the first of the lesser tributaries of the Yukon to break.

Grabill turned and looked down the shabby line of cabins to Curly Frazier's shack on the fringe of the camp. It was dark and silent. The grim old trader returned to his store, satisfied that Frazier was still sleeping. That meant that Frazier was unsuspecting.

But toward mid-afternoon of another busy and profitable day, the trader realized that he had not seen Curly Frazier about. Uneasiness sprang alive, and he left the store and strode down the slushy road to Frazier's cabin.

There was no smoke from the chimney. He opened the door and stepped in. His face tightened. Curly Frazier's belongings were gone. The bunk was bare of blankets. Worn-out clothing lay scattered on the floor as evidence of a hasty departure.

There was an adjoining shack that housed a rheumatic old sourdough, just in from a season on the creeks.

"Young Frazier pulled out before midnight, Grabill," the sourdough told him. "He hit the portage trail, luggin' a washboard pack. He's only a chechahco. I told him he would never make it on foot before the break-up. But he was stubborn."

Grabill headed back to his store. Then his legs began to shake as his mind started working. He began to run. Men who tried to halt him as he burst into the trading room, he shouldered aside. For the first time in the history of Chivalak, blasphemy was heard from Nathaniel Grabill's lips. He swore, not in the strong accents of anger, but in a mumbling, unstrung way, as though it came from a soul sick with horrible apprehension.

Within an hour Grabill mushed out of Chivalak behind six dogs. It was the best team he could collect, and he had paid triple their value for some of them without haggling. That was clinching proof that Nathaniel Grabill had suddenly lost his mind.

There was indeed a red haze of madness in his eyes. At times freezing fear displaced it, but the madness would return in greater power. "If he harms my boy," he muttered in an agony of spirit as he drove the dogs mercilessly. "If he does——" and he felt weak as a baby at the very thought of it.

There was only one interpretation to be placed on this silent, midnight flight of Frazier from Chivalak. He *had* seen that letter in the drawer. It *had* aroused his suspicion. Perhaps he had even found that police circular in the file. Frazier had examined the file often in the past, as did every visitor in the Grabill home.

Grabill was in a frenzy of fear for Paul. Frazier had killed a man in the past. He would be desperate, now that his refuge had been discovered. He would reason that Paul knew of his guilt, too. And then there was the letter in the mail bag. Frazier's only hope of quick escape from Alaska was by way of Fairbanks and the railroad. He likely would try to quiet Paul and destroy the letter.

"He may murder my boy to give himself a chance to escape," Grabill was mumbling hoarsely over and over.

His fevered eyes scanned every inch of the trail as he left Chivalak behind. The surface was still soft as butter, with the dogs already disheartened by the fierce going. Paul had crossed this section of the trail while it was still crusted, and no evidence of his passage had been left. The fear was in his father's mind that perhaps Frazier had ambushed him here.

But that was allayed after some ten miles. Dusk was approaching, but Grabill picked up the first faint trace of the mail toboggan's passage. He breathed easier, and camped to await a crust, which would more than triple his speed.

Paul had a ten-hour start, and the mail team was powerful and fast. But the father believed that by traveling all night he might overtake his son before Paul broke camp for his second day's run.

By ten o'clock the crust was hard enough, and Grabill sent his team on its way in the darkness. A disheartening discovery sent him into despair within

two miles. He came upon the ashes of a camp fire at the trail side. They were still warm. He realized then that Paul also had camped to await the better going at night.

Grabill sobbed hoarsely. If only he had not stopped, his travail would now be over. His chances of overtaking Paul by morning were gone. Paul's team could do three miles to his two, no matter how mercilessly he drove his six dogs. He was losing ground now.

Even though he mushed eighteen hours at a stretch, the soft surface of the daylight hours would slow him down so that he could hardly hope to overcome the handicap. And then, too, it had been years since he had undertaken a portage mush of any distance. Already he was feeling the torture of strained tendons.

But blind, wild fear, the helpless fear of a father for his child, sent him on through the night, oblivious of pain and exhaustion. Toward daylight the dogs began to rebel, and Grabill cursed them with half-mad savagery.

DAWN, gray as a shroud, found him near the end of his tether. Then he came to the ashes of another fire.

Paul had paused there to brew tea. But Grabill found the tracks of a second man there also. Finally he picked up a glistening red bead. That removed all doubt as to the identity of the second musher who had joined the mail toboggan. Frazier! Frazier always wore a brightly beaded jacket as an antidote to his land of stark whites and blacks.

Somewhere on the back trail during the night, Frazier had joined forces with Paul. Why? Grabill was swept by a conflicting flood of hope and doubt. Was Paul helping him to escape? That would be like Paul. But, on the other hand, was it only Frazier's way of using Paul's team to speed safely south of the Melozi before he would strike. That was it! Oh, the cunning of the man!

It had grown steadily warmer since

midnight, and the trail was softening already. A wet drop struck Grabill's leathery cheek. He looked, startled, at the leaden sky. Rain! Spring! The break-up!

And the Melozi was still twenty miles away. Grabill gave a hoarse cry. He knew what this meant. Paul and Frazier would not camp now. They would be racing for the river in the hope of crossing it before it broke. With the snow being swept off by this rain, the river surely would break before the day was ended. And any one caught on the north bank would be held up for days, perhaps a week.

Grabill swung the whip, but the dogs only crouched and whimpered. They were done for. He slashed their harness and freed them, knowing they would return to Chivalak. Then he went at a half run down the trail alone, through the increasing drizzle of rain. Within an hour it was coming down in a relentless flood, washing away the snow pack on the hillsides and transforming the trail in the low spots into muskeg into which he wallowed to his knees.

Water ran on the ice of the little creeks that he crossed. His mukluks gradually became sodden weights. His head was down, his mouth open, his lungs laboring, but he raced on, his long arms occasionally grasping sapling spruce and birch along the way to propel his numbed body ever forward.

At mid-afternoon he topped the last, low divide. The Melozi was five miles away. And a vagrant wind brought a distant, low mutter, like muted thunder. He paused, and life leaped into his staring, red-shot eyes for the first time in hours.

Nathanial Grabill's lips moved, but no sound issued. He had heard that deep roar too often in the past to be mistaken. It was the rumble of a break-up. The ice in the Melozi was going

out, going out on the teeth of a booming spring flood.

There was only one hope left now. If the ice had started before the mail toboggan reached the river, they would still be on the north bank. He might yet have time to reach Paul and stay Frazier's hand. If not, then there would be nothing for him but to wait days of heart-gnawing agony to ascertain the fate of his son. And Grabill knew that he would be mad if this suspense continued many hours longer.

He went down the winding trail among the dripping, hairy spruce, at a shambling run, mumbling to himself. A mile, two miles. The roar of the river grew in his ears. Three miles. Four miles! From a rise he sighted the Melozi.

It had left its banks, and was three quarters of a mile wide. Floes were being jammed into the tops of birch and willows in the bottoms. The main river was a riot of racing floes. No musher could cross it now.

Traces of the toboggan still remained in the slush of the trail. He stumbled down to the very edge of the water. Then he gave a hoarse cry of hope. The trail of the toboggan veered sharply to the left—downstream along the margin of the flood. That meant only one thing. They had arrived too late. The break-up had beaten them. But why had they swerved westward through the timber? To camp, no doubt. Grabill followed. Hope gave him mighty strength. This soon would be over.

However, the trail lengthened out endlessly and despairingly. After five miles Grabill suddenly guessed what had been their aim. Not far ahead the Melozi narrowed and swept through a mile-long bottle-neck canyon. It was a notorious spot for the formation of ice gorges. Grabill gave a cry of protest. This flooded lowland certainly indicated the existence of a gorge in the narrows now. The river was backing up. The

rain could not have lifted the stream to such a height in so short a time.

He began to run furiously. Then he came in sight of the canyon mouth. His fears were realized. He was on a hogback and had a clear view, across an eighth of a mile of flooded bottom land, of the rocky entrance to the narrows.

The mail toboggan, with the dogs straining at the tug rope, was creeping out onto a jagged barrier of ice that blocked the canyon mouth from shore to shore. He could see Paul's broad shoulders at the bars, and caught the glint of Frazier's beaded jacket as he swung the gee pole.

The gorge was under terrific pressure. In the first few seconds that Grabill stood transfixed, a twenty-foot section on the south shore caved, and a mill race rushed through it. The entire barrier groaned, heaved, and shifted slightly. Then a floating island of matted driftwood and ice floes were swept into the break, corking it again. The river, baffled, rose higher. Grabill saw water spurting around the mushers as they man-hauled the toboggan higher onto the trembling bridge of ice.

Grabill wheeled and began running again like a madman. It was an endless mile around that slough of backwater. The timber cut off vision of the drama ahead, and each instant he expected to hear the roar that would announce the collapse of the ice gorge.

IT WAS still holding, however, when he came staggering to the lip of the low, rocky bluff against the foot of which one end of the ice barrier was wedged. But its minutes were numbered. It groaned and vibrated, and the crunch of floes dissolving under the pressure rose above the roar of a thousand spurting spillways that leaped from crevices in the downstream side. The gorge held back a fifteen-foot head of water, a veritable tidal wave that soon

would sweep through the canyon with the power of unleashed nature itself.

And toiling like feeble insects on this deadly path were his son and Curly Frazier with their toboggan, risking their lives in an attempt to cross the river. They had made only a third of the distance out from the north bank and did not seem to realize that the chances were a thousand to one against them.

"Come back! Come back! Leave the sled!" Grabill screeched.

But his voice did not carry ten feet in that tumult. They did not even know he was there.

He cursed Frazier, and prayed for his son. Their progress seemed worse than snaillike. They moved by inches when they needed rods. The toboggan was unwieldy, and they were passing it by hand over upflung ice blocks and crevices and lifting the dogs one by one.

Then, without warning, the gorge broke.

One moment it was still intact. The next instant the river was cascading through a fifty-foot gap that caved in the very center of the barrier. Both wings began to swing. The roar of the bursting gorge assailed the eardrums like the report of massed cannon.

Grabill gave a terrible cry of grief. He saw Frazier and his son waste precious seconds as they slashed the dogs free from the tug line. Brave fools they were, giving the dogs a chance for their lives when only a miracle could save any of them from that maelstrom into which they were drifting.

He saw them turn and leap for shore. But their segment of the gorge broke up suddenly.

Grabill's knees gave way, and he sank down to the dripping, cold rock. Dogs and men were lost to sight in the heaving turmoil of spray and uprearing ice.

Then he glimpsed a beaded jacket. Frazier was still on his feet, leaping

from reeling floe to floe. But Paul did not reappear.

Frazier was less than one hundred feet from shore, and his chances of making it were good. But he was not heading for shore. He was going downstream, with the heaving floes. Grabill watched apathetically with glazed eyes, a dull, hopeless numbness in his brain. Paul was gone. He had seen his son die before his eyes.

Then the father rose to his knees. Frazier had paused on the firmer footing of a heavy floe that was racing smoothly for the moment. He was kneeling and tugging at something. Then he dragged a form out of the water.

It was Paul. Dazed, unconscious—dead, perhaps. But Frazier had raced with the current and had pulled Paul out of the icy water.

Now Frazier was lifting him. Shouldering him.

The father could only stare and pray. Frazier leaped from floe to floe. One dipped treacherously, and Frazier went to his knees. Chocolate-hued water buried him to the waist. But by some desperate feat of strength Frazier arose again with his burden and hurled himself headlong to firmer ice. A big, dripping pan floe came porpoising up behind him, and slapped down on one he had just vacated, crunching it and itself into brash that merged with the turmoil.

Frazier was only fifty feet from the rocky north bank now. There were ledges and shelves of rock upon which cakes of ice were being piled high and dry above the water line by the crowding of the floes in the narrow channel.

Frazier, with his burden, moved by halting leaps as his path closed and opened before him.

Grabill saw him miss his leap when he was only twenty-five feet from safety. Brown water closed over both of them.

Ice clashed and heaved over the spot in the next instant.

That was the end. It was over! But no! A head appeared in a boiling swirl of ice-free water fifty feet farther down. Another head. Frazier seemed superhuman. He stroked to a floe, dragged himself upon it, and pulled his limp companion out also, an instant before the ice clashed together again.

Once more Frazier shouldered Paul. He was only a few jumps from shore and in quieter water now.

They were far down the canyon, but the father saw Frazier make the shelter of the jumbled shore ice and drag himself and Paul to safety above the water line on a rocky shelf.

Grabill turned and raced down the margin of the canyon. He reached a spot over the shelf and looked down at his son and Frazier a hundred feet below. Then he gave a cry of sobbing, broken thanks to Heaven. Paul, his son, whom he loved more than life or gold, was sitting up. He shouted hoarsely, and they looked up at him. Paul's face was chalky, and he pointed to his leg. It was broken. Small payment for delivery from such a fate, however.

GRABILL climbed down the broken, slanting descent. He was shaking in every fiber and sick to his very marrow. He wanted to kneel to Curly Frazier and ask forgiveness. Coals of fire were on his head. He had tried to send Frazier to prison, and now Frazier had given him back Paul.

There was one solace. The mail bag, weighted with a thousand ounces of gold, was gone, carrying that damning letter with it. The father's secret was safe. Not even Paul would ever know how he had tried to betray Frazier.

He reached the shelf. But Frazier was gone. Paul pointed and shouted something. Frazier was a hundred

yards downstream, picking his way over the tumbled ice blocks at the margin of the foaming, floe-laden torrent. Then Grabill gave a hoarse cry of bitter protest.

The mail bag had not been lost. The river, with malevolent irony, had given it up. It lay there on a flat ice pan that was bumping the shore, its blue stripes sharp to the eye. A portion of the smashed toboggan was on the floe, too.

Grabill stared for an instant, his face gray with misery, at this scurvy jest of fate. His secret was not safe. The letter was in the sack. The sack was locked, and he did not have a key. He knew he would never be able to rip the sack and remove the letter without being called upon for an explanation by Paul.

Then he ran as though to assist Frazier, who had retrieved the sack and was scrambling over the shore ice with it.

Frazier was exhausted, but he grinned up at Grabill. "Paul told me you had a thousand ounces of dust in the sack. Mr. Grabill," he shouted above the roar of the rapids. "It's still there. You're in luck."

Grabill reached down and took the sack. Then he seemed to slip. To save himself he released the heavy canvas container. Frazier made a futile leap

for it as it slid past him, but he missed it. Splash! It landed in the current that boiled against the rocks there, and the chocolate-hued waters closed over it.

Frazier gazed ruefully. "It's gone for good now," he said. "That's deep water there and the current will carry it Heaven knows how far before it reaches bottom. Shucks! A thousand ounces. Your season's profits, wasn't it, Mr. Grabill?"

IN CAMP that night as they dried out, Nathaniel Grabill could no longer hold back the question that had been gnawing at him. He turned to Frazier. "I did not know you was plannin' to make this mush with my son?" he queried.

Frazier looked into the fire. "I've got a twin brother who's in a jam in Seattle," he said slowly. "I got a letter from him in the last mail to Chivalak, and was going out for the summer to try to help him. I didn't tell Paul until he caught up with me on the trail, because—because, well, because I didn't think he would understand. But he did, and he gave me a lift. That was why we were so anxious to cross the river. I'm sorry we lost your gold."

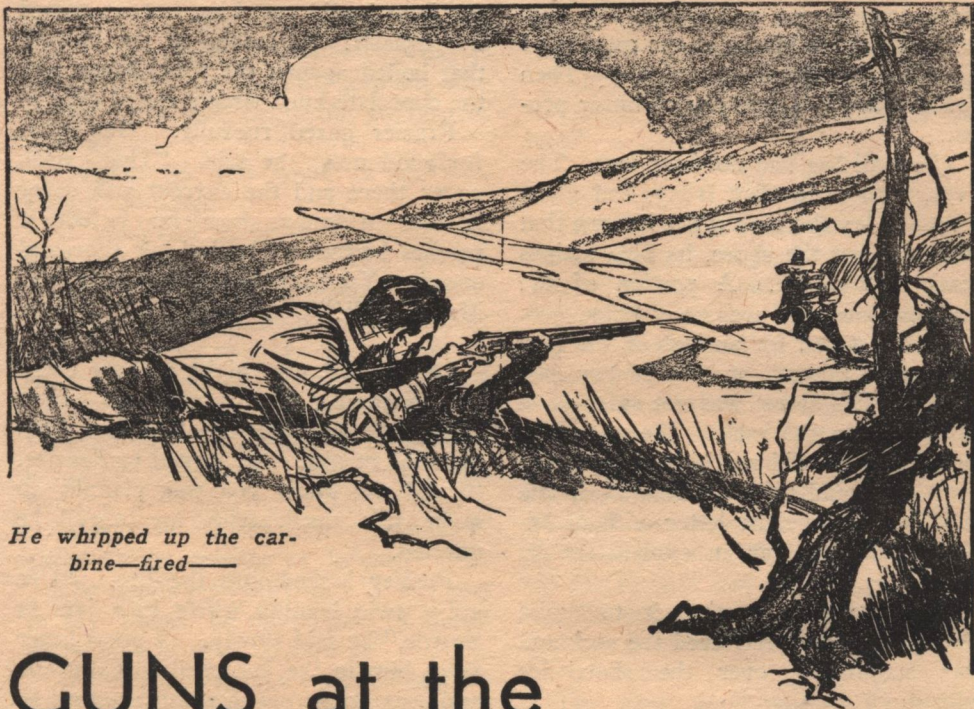
"Do not think of it," Grabill said, turning and resting a hand on the shoulder of his son. "I am well repaid."

**A story of the Pacific, and the old
whaling ships—and a wager that was
settled in blood——**

HARPOON

By JACLAND MARMUR

—in the June TOP-NOTCH



He whipped up the carbine—fired—

GUNS at the FAIRY BELLE

by H. E. O.

Whitman

Illustrated by Tom Lovell

TIM O'RORE knew machine guns. He had fought with them—and fought against them—in the Argonne, and he had heard them since. He knew their ominous clatter too well to have any doubt about the distant sound that came down-wind.

Somewhere in the rolling hills to his right some one had fired a burst from a machine gun; then another burst. And because machine guns had no business on this side of the border, Tim O'Reore stopped his small roadster and cocked a puzzled ear.

Rolling a cigarette in strong, brown fingers, O'Reore calculated while he listened. How far could a burst of machine-gun—probably sub-machine-gun fire carry, and still be heard in a

running car? And how much would its direction be distorted by canyons, short plateaus, and swells? Two short bursts he had heard, but others might have gone before. But wherever they had been, roadsters had to stay on roads. Presently Tim drove on.

Now, however, he watched closely as well as listened. The road he followed was a pair of tracks that twisted up hill and down vale, though it had been well traveled since the summer rains. Just what he was looking for he could not have told, but there was no suspicious sign. Relaxing a little, he increased his speed.

The roadster was rounding one last sharp hill before dropping into a shady canyon when O'Reore's quick eye caught

a glimpse of motion. On the farther slope a galloping horseman had appeared against the sky. Tim slapped on his brakes, but the rider was gone before he could distinguish more than a slim figure in shirt and overalls, astride a nondescript bay.

Tim ran a hand through his dark hair. The horseman had come from the general direction of the shots and was heading in the general direction of Tim's own destination. O'Rore was glad of that, as he stepped on the accelerator.

In the canyon the road was rougher, following the course of a seasonal stream under gnarled sycamore and live oak. O'Rore jockeyed his way about narrow turns without slackening pace, and in ten minutes he was at his trail's end. The canyon widened into a broad flat and its walls receded into the flanks of rocky hills, on the side of one of which were clustered the rude buildings of the Fairy Belle Mine.

Tim drove across the little meadow, left his roadster beside a shed which sheltered a truck and touring car, cast a speculative eye on a bunch of horses grazing up the creek, and climbed a roadway to the comparatively flat shelf on which the camp was built.

A group of frame cabins and a larger cookhouse on one side appeared deserted, but on the other a clank of tools on metal came from an iron-roofed machine shop. Beyond the shop was the galvanized-iron structure of an old mill which had cast a mound of tailings down the slope. Beyond the mill a black-mouthed tunnel tilted into the hillside, and some distance farther, and higher, reared the headframe of a mine shaft with a dilapidated hoist house beside another dump.

O'Rore, as was his way, surveyed the camp minutely. The machine shop half obscured a jumbled pile of broken packing cases. He suspected the men work-

ing there had observed him all along. He strode in casually.

A brawny mechanic and two Mexican helpers looked up from their pipe threading and nodded briefly.

O'Rore said "Howdy" and glanced incuriously about a litter of rusted metallic junk. "I'm looking for the boss."

"I'm foreman," said the mechanic. "Darson's manager. He's out in the hills somewhere."

"I'll wait a while," said O'Rore. "Working many men?"

"A few. Until we can get machinery in and the place cleaned up."

O'Rore thought of the packing cases and rolled a cigarette. The man went back to work, the Mexicans giving him furtive glances. Tim smoked meditatively until the foreman spoke:

"There's Darson's sister coming in. Maybe she knows where he is."

"Thanks," said O'Rore.

A slim figure in shirt and overalls had unsaddled a horse at the shed in the flat and was climbing a footpath to a neater cabin that stood alone two hundred yards from the living quarters of the camp.

Tim, staring once, walked over and met her at the steps. "Miss Darson? I'm looking for your brother."

HAT IN HAND, Tim would have liked to stare more than he did. The slim round figure in shirt and overalls was far and away the prettiest girl he ever expected to see in a bit of mining camp.

The wide blue eyes that met his were vaguely troubled. "Why," she said quickly, "I thought he'd be back now." She glanced over the seemingly deserted camp, and O'Rore admired the contour of her chin and the warmth of her red lips.

"He's L. R. Darson, isn't he?" he inquired.

"Why, no, that's I," said the girl.

"I'm Lucy R. Darson," and stared at him.

"You mean you're the appointed legal agent of the company?" Tim took a folded paper from his pocket reluctantly. "I hate to do it, Miss Darson, but then I guess I'll have to give you this. I'm from the sheriff's office."

The girl took the paper, and O'Rore was aware she had turned pale.

"Don't be bothered, miss." He grinned in his friendly fashion. "Only a suit for back taxes."

The girl sighed. "Taxes? Oh! But of course we can't pay them. It's taken so much already. Though Larry says that in a few weeks——"

Tim laughed. "Bless you, Miss Darson, I'm not collecting. I just serve the legal papers." Inwardly he wondered: "In a few weeks——" when there was no more sign of taking ore out than of putting machinery in? That could not be what she had meant.

The girl rewarded him with a smile. Few women, or men, failed to return the unassuming grin that so transformed Tim O'Rore's square, impassive face. "Of course," she said; "I'm not a very good legal agent, am I? Then it doesn't matter that Larry isn't here?" If she had been disappointed at her brother's absence, she was certainly relieved.

"No, ma'am. Except that I'd like to meet him. In a country like this," Tim explained, "you get to know 'most every one. You folks haven't been here long, have you?"

"Only two months. We put some money in the mine, years ago, that we can't afford to lose, and now that gold and silver are so much higher we hope to make it pay."

"I guess quite a few mines will open up," agreed O'Rore. For all her simplicity he sensed a restrained concern. "You ride much, Miss Darson?"

"Every day. There's so little else to do, and Larry needs me. Why?"

"I don't know," said O'Rore. "Only, there's a mule trail over those mountains up-creek into Mexico. Liquor smugglers used to use it before we had repeal. Used to have some gun fights around here. If I were you, I wouldn't ride too far." He added deliberately: "I heard shooting, off to the south, when I drove in to-day."

His gray eyes met her blue ones, held them magnetically. He had been right; she had been frightened. But she answered bravely: "Why, so did I! I was riding. Quail hunters, don't you think? Larry brings in enough for dinner almost every day."

"Maybe," said Tim cryptically. "The way some hunters are, I suppose they'll be using machine guns next." He smiled his most friendly smile. "I'll tell you, Miss Darson. If that tax suit worries you, suppose I look up the records and see where you stand? You wouldn't mind, would you, if we tried to show some western hospitality?"

The girl's eyes smiled, too. "Why, that would be friendly, Mr.——"

"I'm Tim O'Rore," said Tim. "Then I will."

Considering everything, he preferred not to outstay his welcome. He flourished his hat and went away.

IN CITIES there are process servers; in sparsely settled Western counties, deputy sheriffs take care of everything. Tim O'Rore drove across the flat and down the canyon with a feeling that he had scratched the surface of something he disliked to contemplate.

Atop the hill leading from the canyon he passed a car, a roadster as small and older than his own. A blond young man was driving, and Tim had an impression of a somewhat-weak, somewhat-handsome face unnaturally white. Or did he imagine that because the car's other occupant was swart and stocky? He had not time to look again.

Back on the county road, Tim increased his speed until he came to the State highway, where a border-patrol station guarded the junction of two roads near Mexico. A uniformed patrolman came out, recognized him, and paused to chat.

"Where now, O'Rore?"

"Back country," said Tim. "Serving tax-suit summons on all the old would-be mines. You fellows heard anything about the Fairy Belle?"

"No. Didn't run across Jack Benham up that way, did you?"

"No," said O'Rore. Benham and he had often worked together. "Why?"

"He took a week's leave to go prospecting, so he said. But I've a hunch he's onto something. The chief's been asking about him on the phone."

"Yeh?" said O'Rore dryly. "They used to send you birds out in pairs. But I'll be going back to-morrow. I'll inquire around."

He was as good as his word. He had no particular reason to waste time in a section that held only a few small cattle ranches, a few old nonproductive mines, but he had not been able to get out of his head the thought of those machine-gun bursts, and of Lucy Darson's pale, gallant face. Except for the dismal clank of metal, the little camp at the Fairy Belle still appeared deserted when he approached it once more.

Again O'Rore had that sensation of being observed by unseen eyes. Lucy Darson's cow pony grazed near the shed; the truck was gone. Tim climbed the path to the detached cabin. Lucy stepped out to meet him.

"You came soon, Mr. O'Rore. Larry's coming from the camp now."

A blond young man in breeches and laced boots had rounded the long cook-house and started toward them. With him was a swarthy, stocky man who wore a leather vest over his overalls, although the day was warm—a Mexican who walked with a cowman's peculiar

gait. The two talked rapidly; then the Mexican fell back, and Darson came on alone.

Lucy Darson introduced the two men, and her brother made some commonplace remark. He was a nice-looking young chap, but his chin did not have the strength of his sister's nor his gaze her simple directness. At present, indeed, his look was oddly evasive, his smile forced. For one of the few times in his life O'Rore felt at a loss.

"Had to come this way," he explained, "and thought I'd tell you about those back taxes. You can pay them by installments if you want, if you start within six months."

Larry Darson chuckled. "Six months? We'll know long before then if we want to sink more money in the place, eh, sis? If it's no go they can have the mine."

Tim nodded. "Thought you might want to keep the title clear, so long as you're bringing in all that machinery."

Darson's jaw tightened; his quick glance was furtive.

O'Rore grinned. "Well, I'll be getting on. Got to go down creek and post a notice at the Little Nugget." He eyed the two more soberly. "That wasn't Carlos Sevilla with you, was it, Mr. Darson?"

"Who? You mean our truck driver? His name's Martinez. Why?"

"Looked sort of familiar," said O'Rore. "Though I never saw Carlos very near. He used to run liquor across the line and fought off the border patrol two, three times. Bad hombre, but maybe smuggling's over now."

Ignoring the blond young man's uneasiness, he made his excuses to the girl and started down the path. The stocky Mexican was leaning against a cabin wall, arms crossed, regarding him closely. O'Rore thought he knew why the swarthy one wore a vest that might conceal a shoulder holster.

From the shed where he had left his

car he looked back up the hill. Larry Darson and his sister were engaged in earnest conversation. Even at a distance their figures appeared tense. Darson made an impatient gesture and walked rapidly over to the man he called Martinez. O'Rore's square jaw tightened as he drove across the flat.

Instead of leaving the canyon road to wind into the hills, O'Rore followed another pair of tracks some miles farther, where he had to go through the formality of posting a notice of a sheriff's sale on the ruins of another once-prospective mine. Retracing his route, he had breasted the sharp ascent out of the canyon when he stopped. Lucy Darson, astride her bay, was waiting for him there.

"Why, Miss Darson," said Tim, "is anything wrong?"

The girl with the red-gold hair and somber blue eyes shook her head. "I was riding and saw you coming. No; I'll be honest. I rode as hard as I could to try to catch you. Mr. O'Rore, would you do me a favor?"

"There's nothing I'd like more," said Tim frankly.

Lucy colored, but she met his look squarely. "Would you mind not coming to see us, for a little while? What you said about that man Sevilla upset Larry. He wants to get rid of Martinez as soon as he can find an excuse, but he's afraid Martinez may make trouble among the men if he thinks you're spying. I don't know how to say it—"

"Never mind me," said O'Rore. "See here, Miss Lucy. You're worried about something. Can't you tell me what it is? I'd like to help you."

"Me? Oh, it's not that, Mr. O'Rore." She smiled bravely. "It's only Larry. He had a breakdown in New York, you see. I thought coming out here would do him good. I'm only afraid the men take advantage of him. The work seems to go so slowly, and it's all so strange."

"Strange?" said O'Rore. "Yes; I guess it would be strange." His square face had gone blank. "All right, Miss Lucy; I won't stop in for a while. But if you get frightened any time, or think somebody's making trouble, will you ride across to the patrol station on the highway and have them send for me?"

"Of course," said Lucy. "But really, what trouble could there be? Just as soon as we get things straightened out, I hope you'll come often, Mr.—Tim."

"Will I!" said Tim.

She blushed a little as she rode away.

O'RORE, driving on, would have liked to enjoy the implication of the girl's last words, but another implication behind their meeting precluded that. If he read her aright, there was nothing personal in her desire to keep him away from the Fairy Belle. Behind her request lay fear of something, probably of something she only sensed. What it might be must concern only her brother. Even a tenderfoot could guess there was something not quite right about the Fairy Belle.

Leaving the winding hill road long before it reached the highway, O'Rore turned into another pair of wagon tracks that led, eventually, to the ramshackle cabin of old Jim Maine, who fifty years ago had homesteaded a little ranch in the shadow of the mountains that barred the way to Mexico. There old Jim ran a few cattle, prospected on occasion, and now and then had turned his hand to a little quiet smuggling before the border patrol had become too keen.

He came out as Tim drove up—a little old man with long gray hair and whiskers stained with tobacco juice. "Howdy, Tim."

"Howdy, Jim!" O'Rore got out and stretched. "Keep me overnight?"

"Sowbelly and beans," said old Jim.

"Good enough! Lend me a horse and pack to-morrow, for a day or so?"

"Reckon so. Rifle, too, if you ain't brung one."

Now what did the sly old devil mean by that? "I'd be obliged," said Tim. "Seen anything of Jack Benham lately?"

"Three, four days ago. Prospecting on time off, he said."

"Haven't seen any one else, have you? Like Carlos Sevilla, say?"

"How'd I know Carlos?" demanded Jim Maine. "Except he swiped my best horses once. But there's Mexican woodchoppers in the hills sometimes." He grinned and winked.

O'Rore grinned back. "You don't say?"

Tim slept very comfortably that night in a blanket under the cottonwoods by old Jim's spring. Before sunrise he was riding the hills on one of old Jim's wiry ponies, a carbine holstered against the leather. He had the country well mapped in his mind, for a dozen miles by winding road might be but three cross-country. He had an idea where he might find the sign he wanted, but Jack Benham might have found it first. That would be bad.

All that day he quartered the hill country as methodically as a surveyor. That night he camped far up the creek above the Fairy Belle, which meant toward Mexico. For reasons of his own, he built a larger fire than was required for the meager supplies he had borrowed from Jim Maine, but when he slept it was above the embers, on a hillside. He knew his horse would warn him if strangers came, but none did.

IT WAS NEARLY noon again before he found a clue. One of a thousand old and faded cattle trails—but some recently traveled by mounted men—edged down a gully through heavy brush, and in the gully something shining caught his eye. O'Rore, dismounting, picked up a handful of empty cartridges—sub-machine gun, as he had

thought. A few paces farther, two other shells rewarded his search. They were regulation .45s.

He was cantering along just under the brow of a second swell when his horse raised his head to sniff. Tim checked him and made out another figure on a cow pony coming over the next hill. Calculating their directions neatly, he was able to come face to face with Lucy Darson so suddenly she went white.

"Mr. Tim!" she asked, quieting her mount.

"Looking for something, Miss Lucy?" O'Rore asked, although it hurt.

"Oh!" said the girl. "Of course not! But what are you doing here?"

"Have to get up the mountain to look for stolen cows," he lied easily. He kept his steady gaze on her while he rolled a cigarette. He could tell she was quivering, but her boyish head was high. "Miss Lucy, I wish you'd tell me what's worrying you. I want to help. You aren't trying to find the place you heard that shooting the other day, are you?"

Lucy Darson's hand went to her throat despite her gallant laugh. "Why, of course not. Why?"

"Well," O'Rore said deliberately, "I was afraid you might think it meant something it didn't. Because if you're afraid Larry is mixed up in something shady, probably something he got into without meaning it, and can't stop now, you——"

The girl's horse shied; when she had calmed him her body seemed tired and limp. "You know?" she whispered, with stricken eyes.

"No more than you do," said Tim. "But we can guess, can't we? There's no new machinery at the mine, but a lot of packing cases. There's always somebody in Mexico anxious to buy guns, and somebody in New York willing to sell 'em if they can figure out a way to cross the line. And a kid like Larry

wouldn't figure on Sevilla's kind, would he?"

Lucy was very pale. "Then——" she began.

Tim essayed a grin, keeping a wary eye on their horses' ears and nostrils. "Don't feel badly about it, Miss Lucy. Probably your brother just went in for a lark."

"No," said Lucy Darson somberly. "It was money; we need it, you see. Father took title to the Fairy Belle years ago, thinking a little would save what he'd lost. And Larry had been seeing a lot of two strangers before he took the notion to come out and work the mine. Then when the trucks kept bringing boxes in, and nothing seemed to get started, and I heard trucks in the night, and saw strange horses up the stream and——"

Somewhere in the uplands a horse nickered faintly. O'Rore interrupted quickly. "Never mind, Miss Lucy. I'll know all about it in a day or two, and with luck I'll find a way to get it straightened out. Now if you want to help, get back to the Fairy Belle as soon as you can, and don't go riding again until you see me. Will you do that?"

"Can you? Will you?" breathed the girl. "Of course! Good-by."

In a flash she was gone, but in her look, and willing comprehension, had been something that stirred Tim O'Rore more than the thought of the task ahead. He watched her out of sight, sat and listened for some time, trotted coolly along the crest of a hill for some time more, coolly set a course toward that nickering he had heard.

O'RORE knew very well what he was doing, and what he still had to do to get the business settled swiftly, but the fact that it was a foolhardy way to do it did not disturb him in the least. Larry Darson and his New York promoters must have been very ignorant of the border to attempt what they were trying

to do. But the man Martinez, whether Carlos Sevilla or another, must be relying on boldness and ruthlessness and haste to carry the affair off in spite of anything. Tim O'Rore relied on boldness, too, and ruthlessness if needs be.

Actually, Tim relied most on his knowledge of machine guns, not the kind he had fought with in France, but the very sub-variety they had in county jails and city gangs. He loosened the carbine in its scabbard as he rode along, the six-gun on his hip swinging free. And always he watched his pony's ears and nostrils. He was not surprised, entering another shallow arroyo, to have a hoarse voice hail him from a thicket down its shadow.

The hail was intended to make him stop, sit still a moment. O'Rore, instead, spurred his mount into the nearest clump of brush, which was none too near. Somewhere down the gully he heard the sharp rattle of machine-gun action; there was a faint whining in the air about his ears, a faint patter in the dry-brown grass. He managed to make a threshing effect as he leaped from the saddle, carbine in one hand, and sprawled full length. Jim Maine's cow pony aided the effect by plunging violently.

The clatter of shots ceased as suddenly as it had begun, but in the arroyo nothing stirred. Strange, thought O'Rore, that his men did not dash for him at once, if they were so eager that they had opened fire too soon. He did not mind, however; he would back a carbine against any sub-machine gun using pistol ammunition. Then he detected a movement in the manzanita on the gully's side. He glanced once, and fired. A dark figure plunged headlong down into the arroyo's bed and lay still.

The sub-machine gun resumed its ominous rapping. Pistol ammunition or not, its spreading spray was not exactly comfortable. Tim waited until he had

made sure, then fired once more. The *rat-tat-tat* stopped abruptly. After he had waited a reasonable interval, O'Rore made his way carefully down the gully. The man he had shot on the hillside was stone-dead; in the thicket another Mexican glared balefully as he tried to draw a pistol.

O'Rore, with a contemptuous motion, disarmed his recent foe and calmly squatted to roll a cigarette. He felt neither pride at his marksmanship nor compunction at what he had had to do. This was only a beginning. Farther down, where the arroyo widened into a tiny valley, he could make out two horses and a pack mule tethered. He was reasonably sure these two men were all Sevilla, or whoever he was, kept posted in the hills to watch for suspicious wayfarers such as himself, or Benham. And this second of the two soon would be dead.

"Sorry, hombre," O'Rore said at length. "Anything you'd like to have me do?"

The little brown man only glared.

Tim shrugged, lapsed into border Spanish: "I'll set up some candles in the church, and all that. Where's Sevilla?"

The wounded man said "No comprendo."

O'Rore grimaced, but he unhooked a water can from his belt, took a flask from his pocket, and helped the poor devil to drink. "Look here," he said. "You're going west. I know all about the guns. I know all about Carlos Sevilla. I know all about the border patrolman you ambushed the other day. If you want the priest to say prayers for you, talk fast. Where's Sevilla now? Where's the patrolman?"

After a while the Mexican began to talk. Not because he meant to, but because he must. It was not very pleasant, listening to a poor peon die, but Tim O'Rore had work to do. Of course! There was a little forest-service lookout cabin on the mountain, deserted except

in the spring and early summer until the rains began. That was where they kept Jack Benham, wounded, until they could get one more consignment of guns across the line.

Half an hour later Tim O'Rore spread his saddle blankets over two inert figures, wrote a dry note to old Jim Maine, fastened it securely on his saddle, and gave Jim's cow pony his freedom with a slap. The horse would find his way home in the night, and old Jim would bring out a party.

Face blank and somber, O'Rore examined the sub-machine gun Sevilla's men had used. It was worthless except at close range, but Tim put it under an arm, swung his carbine on his back, before he set off afoot. He knew the old trail over the mountain too well to risk a horse that might give him away, and he needed the knowledge he had gained too much to go without precautions.

Lucy Darson, he calculated, had arrived home long since, in safety. But Larry Darson's fate might hinge on what he, Tim O'Rore, could do that night.

DUSK follows sundown quickly in the uplands. The mountains had faded into a dim purple mask before O'Rore reached the stiffest part of the ascent. But the trail here was distinct; more than once smugglers and the border patrol had tangled on its meanderings. No doubt repeal had relaxed vigilance, but there had never been a time when some one in Mexico had not felt the revolutionary urge. Tim climbed slowly, steadily, and regretfully caressed his guns.

What he had told Lucy Darson had been largely guesswork. And still not all guesswork, for a border man could tell. It had only been too obvious to be true, though a man like Carlos Sevilla might bank on that. If Jack Benham was really alive, up here, and had not connected Larry Darson now——

Tim went on climbing. The canyon's scrub oaks and sycamores gave way to juniper and walnuts and poor, scattered pine. The pine grew larger, the trail became more indistinct, where many side paths had confused the border guard. Tim O'Reore took the sub-machine gun in his two hands, in readiness to spray any one who might attempt to stop him. Evidently Carlos Sevilla, or whoever he might be, relied upon his boldness, his ruthlessness and haste, to save the day.

All that happened was that Tim had to shrink into the timber once to let a horseman pass up the mountain unchallenged. He was rather glad of that. When he reached the deserted forest-service lookout cabin all was darkness in the hill cleft it occupied. He slipped into its little clearing as furtively as an Indian brave. The passing flicker of a flashlight warned him. Two men were talking there in the dark shelter of the cabin walls.

"*Si*," one guttural voice was saying. "This deputy you speak of, he guess too much. If he return to-day, Pablo and Juan will bring him here. Dead or alive, you comprehend. What is there to do, my friend, when officers will nose about?"

"I tell you," returned Larry Darson's hoarse voice, "I won't have it. Smathers told me there'd be no violence, when he got me to come out here to work with you. I don't mind gun running, but I'll be damned if I stand for this!"

"No?" said the guttural voice that had turned silky. "And what do you not stand for, Mr. Larry? Do you suppose we border men can cross the line except by fighting your patrolmen when we must? Did you think you could break one law and not them all? You know our terms. One more load of the guns and we are through. And then we take your patrolman, and your sheriff, and they never more return. Then only are you free, *no es verdad?*"

Larry Darson, in his weakness, sput-

tered. What could he say? He was in the thing, only to discover he was a puppet.

But Tim O'Reore did not sputter. He stepped calmly out, with a flashlight in one hand and only his six-gun in the other. "Did you say 'free,' Carlos?" he inquired. "Put up your hands."

He knew that Carlos Sevilla was quick as lightning; that Carlos had a man or two within his call. He depended upon it, in fact. Sevilla, who had counted on the patrol's relaxation to make his boldness good, whirled and fired before he thought. Tim fired as many times himself, while Larry Darson fell on his face. But Carlos had fallen with more reason; he did not move when a light flared in the cabin door and two men came dashing out. O'Reore, regretfully, felled them where they stood.

THEN O'Reore waited. There was no other sound, no other light, for miles around. Carlos Sevilla, he suspected, had depended on the horses in the flat above the Fairy Belle, the men here and down below, to take his last consignment of contraband arms into Mexico.

Larry Darson got to his feet ashamedly. "O'Reore?" he muttered.

"Who do you suppose?" growled Tim. "And thank your stars I heard enough to know you're in this against your will. And that you have a sister, do you hear?"

Darson made a feeble sound which O'Reore cut short.

"Forget it. How many men did Sevilla have on the trail?"

"Four or five, I think. I don't know. They unpacked the guns at the mine, made them into mule packs, and picked them up on the flat. But I swear——"

"I know," said Tim. "You only let them use the mine, and your friends in New York only shipped the stuff, labeled machinery, and it was up to Carlos to get them through. And you had no idea they'd be killing officers——"

"Damn it, don't!" Larry Darson pleaded. "If I'd known they were going to ambush that man, do you suppose——"

"Never mind," O'Rore cut in, without concealing his contempt. "He's all right, is he? Does he know you're in this, ever seen you with this gang?"

"No," said Larry. "They did all this behind my back. But when Lucy told me she'd met you to-day, and what you knew, I thought I'd try to head them off. I knew then they'd kill you both. Martinez was too cocky. I guess he knew——"

"Knew you couldn't do a thing," said Tim. "But you can now. You listen, boy. I'm fixing this because your sister is a better man than you. You ride down that trail and just tell those fellows at the mine Sevilla's dead. They'll vamose. Then you get the border patrol. Tell 'em you suspected Martinez and helped me trail him here. It was so dumb—or bold—to try to get away with it so openly, like that, nobody may suspect you. Now you wait here till I see Jack, and when I give the word you beat it. Get me?"

Darson, without a word, moved to get a horse.

O'Rore stalked to the cabin door, opened it cautiously. "Benham?" he called.

JACK BENHAM, O'Rore could see, was all right, still on his toes although he lay in bed. The unshaven patrolman reclined against a bunk in the fitful light of an oil lamp, but he had succeeded in reaching a neglected gun belt left by his guard and was ready to talk with lead if they returned.

"Tim O'Rore!" he cried. "You got 'em."

"Reckon so," said Tim. "Like old times, eh, Jack? How you fixed?"

Benham made a disgusted gesture. He had rude bandages on a leg, an arm, a

shoulder. "Damn machine-gun contraption got me, but not so bad. Lucky, maybe; I figured I was gone. But you get me on a horse, and I can go."

"No need," said Tim. "Young Darson's out there waiting to ride down for help. He got suspicious of the guy he called Martinez and tipped me off. We trailed him up here. But who'd have thought Sevilla would try to pull anything so raw?"

"Darson did, did he?" said Jack Benham. His face was straight, but one eyelid drooped. "All right, old-timer. Send him off. He's got a sister, too, hasn't he?"

"Just what in hell do you mean by that?" Tim inquired calmly.

Benham grinned. "Nothing. Only there's been a big reward for Carlos Sevilla, dead or alive, ever since he got our boys in that scrap three years ago. We'll split it three ways and make Larry give us an interest in the mine. I studied geology once, and——"

Their bland glances met a moment. O'Rore nodded. "O. K. I'll start him down, and then we'll hole in till morning, just in case Carlos had more men."

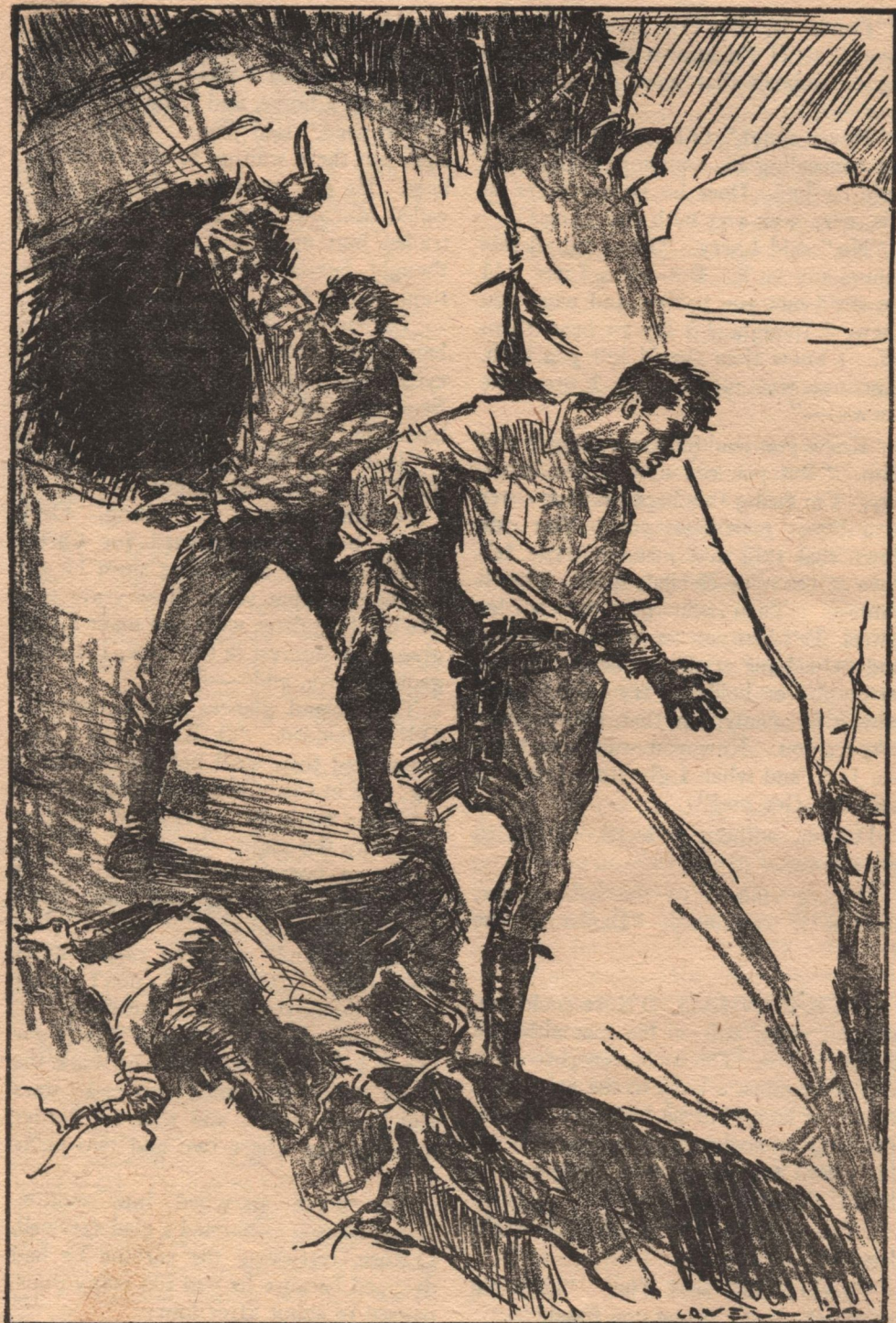
Calm, methodical, O'Rore stepped back into the night. "Larry?" A dim figure on horseback moved up. "It's all right. Get going now, and don't forget what I told you."

"You mean?" said the rider's muffled voice. "O'Rore, I don't know how to thank you. But I swear——"

"Never mind," said Tim. "We're going to help you find a way to work the Fairy Belle. But thank your lucky stars you have a sister, and that we border men can see where two and two make four."

The horse stretched into motion, Larry Darson exclaimed a glad farewell. O'Rore, retrieving the carbine he had dropped because he had too many guns, paused to shout after him:

"And tell Lucy I'll be by to-morrow, and then 'most every day."



There was a deadly glitter in the man's eyes—he swept the knife high, poised—

Lost River

Illustrated by
Tom Lovell

by LESLIE

McFARLANE

Mystery

*A crime adventure in the north country
that will keep your pulse jumping!*

CORPORAL DILLON of the Mounted sent his canoe skimming across the smooth surface of the water. It was just after sunrise and Ghost Lake was living up to its name, clouded by spectral banks of mist that were slowly being rent to shreds by the slanting beams of September sun. Here and there, through the breaking fog, loomed the pinnacle of a pine tree on the shore, the shadowy bulk of a tiny island, the dark mass of a rocky cliff rising from the lake.

Dillon, a bronzed young fellow in his early twenties, had discarded his coat although there was a frosty tang in the air. The healthy exercise of paddling sent a pleasant glow through his body. As the sun climbed higher, the leaden hue of the water changed to sparkling gold, the fog melted swiftly. He could see the clean, bright-green ramparts of evergreen that rose from the eastern shore a mile away, the gaunt mass of Lost River Mountain over to the west.

"Somewhere near the head of Lost River, he said," muttered Dillon, scanning the shore line.

There was still a gray haze over by the rocks. But above the surface of the lake he saw a crippled hulk, one wing extending sharply into the air, the other crumpled beneath. It was the wreckage of a plane, and it was what Corporal Dillon had come to investigate.

Ulric Demarais, a trapper up at the

Rapids, had told Dillon about the plane. Demarais had come upon the wrecked machine a week before.

"Must be a private outfit," Dillon said, when the trapper told him about it. "No machines were missing when I left Moose Station. All the forestry ships were accounted for, and none of the prospecting syndicates reported a lost machine. I'll go in to Ghost Lake and take a look."

A few brisk strokes of the paddle sent his canoe alongside the wreck. It was a trim little cabin plane, and it lay in shallow water. One pontoon was twisted and smashed, but the other pontoon was missing.

"Ripped clean off!" said Dillon, puzzled. "But what was he doing in shallow water, to smash the pontoons like that? And if he cracked up in deep water, why didn't the machine sink?"

The lake was very clear, and he could see the sandy bottom. But although he paddled around, peering into the transparent water he did not see the other pontoon. Another fact struck him as peculiar—there were no numbers painted on the underside of the wings or on the body of the machine itself.

Dillon tied his canoe to a strut and got up on the good wing, made his way into the cabin. Everything was in good shape, but he found not a scrap of evidence that might identify the plane or its former occupants. The crash, he

judged, had not been serious to either pilot or passengers. A deadhead floating in the water near by offered a probable explanation.

"Gas tank empty. He had to make a landing and smacked up against that deadhead when he was coming in to shore. The pontoon was ripped, the machine canted over, and the wing buckled."

Dillon jotted down various data in his notebook, the registration number, make, model, and other information. Demarais had found the wreck a week ago. The occupants, then, must have struck out into the bush toward civilization.

"Just too bad for them," he muttered, scrambling out onto the wing again, "if they tried to follow Lost River."

A few hundred yards away, over on the rocky side of the lake, he could see the river, flowing smoothly between limestone banks rising to slopes covered with blueberry bushes. Beyond a bend in the stream he could see the great grim bulk of Lost River Mountain. And then Dillon blinked.

Clear against the morning sky was a column of white smoke.

Corporal Dillon got into his canoe again and cast off. He swung the bow of the craft directly toward the river. The smoke was from a camp fire near the base of the mountain. Demarais, who had camped on Ghost Lake for a day after he found the wreck, had been positive that none of the occupants of the machine were in the vicinity.

The river was swift and narrow but without rapids. Sparkling and clear there in the morning sunlight it was an innocent-looking stream, but Corporal Dillon knew all about its sinister danger. Lost River had been explored by no living man. There were those who had attempted to explore it, for there is always some one to accept any challenge the Northland can offer, but those foolhardy souls had vanished forever, and

not even their bones had been found for decent burial. Their only tombstone was the great mountain itself.

The greater part of Lost River was invisible to human eyes. It did not skirt the mountain. Instead, by some strange freak of nature, it plunged directly beneath it in a wild subterranean course that was estimated at two miles in length, with a drop of five hundred feet, its outlet somewhere beneath the surface of Moon Lake in the low country on the other side of the range.

As the canoe swung around a bend, Dillon caught sight of the great black mouth of the cave into which Lost River vanished on its sinister course. High above him loomed the craggy slopes of the mountain. On the right-hand bank he saw a small tent, caught the flickering blaze of a fire. And down in the cave mouth he saw two men.

DILLON brought his craft inshore and drew it up on the bank just below the camp. Then he strode down toward the strangers. They had not yet seen him, for they were absorbed in some occupation just below the arch of the tunnel.

Dillon was puzzled. The pair were armed with ropes and a powerful electric lantern. They would cast the ropes far out into the rushing stream, then drag them inshore as if hauling in a net. A canoe, tied to a bush overhanging the river, rocked and swung in the current. The hollow roar of the river as it vanished into the darkness filled the air with a sullen booming.

One of the men, turning, caught sight of Dillon making his way down the bank. Instantly he dropped his rope, spoke sharply to his companion, and his hand flew to his hip. Dillon stopped short, flipped open his holster and waited, his hand on the butt of his gun. The two regarded each other watchfully for a moment. Then the other man's hands dropped to his sides, and he came

out of the shadow of the tunnel into the bright sunlight.

He was a gaunt, rawboned fellow with sharp features and a great blade of a nose. Stubborn gray hair bristled fiercely on his scalp like a crest. He wore high boots and a torn flannel shirt.

"Hello, stranger!" he said in a hoarse voice. "You gave me a start. Didn't expect callers at this hour of the day."

The other man, who came slinking out of the gloom like some furtive denizen of the mountain, looked familiar. When the sunlight shone on him, Dillon recognized the fellow. He was small and wiry, a man with a pale skin, a sharp nose, keen eyes, the cunning face of a fox.

"Wilkes Fehr!" muttered Dillon, astonished. "Now what the devil is going on here?"

Aloud he said: "My name's Dillon, from the R. C. M. P. detachment at Moose Station. Do you know anything about that wrecked plane over in the lake?" Then he nodded curtly to Fehr. "Hello, Fehr! You're a long way from home."

There was something queer about the whole business, he was telling himself, and if Fehr was mixed up in it there was bound to be something crooked, too. He knew Fehr as a slippery rogue, a gambler, bootlegger, claim jumper, jack-of-all-trades in rascality along the railway.

"Good morning, Dillon!" replied Fehr politely, as he came up. "You're just in time to lend us a hand."

The gray-haired fellow darted a sharp look at his partner, opened his mouth as if to speak and then thought better of it.

"What's it all about?" said Dillon.

Fehr gestured toward his companion. "This is Pete Jerome. He can tell you. It was his plane crashed. I just came up from the railway with him yesterday."

The gaunt man cleared his throat. "Ain't much to tell," he said. "I was usin' the plane for a prospecting trip. Had a pilot by the name of Thalberg. We ran out of gas and had to come down in the lake over there——"

"When was this?" asked Dillon.

"About two weeks ago. We got down on the water all right, but Thalberg tried to bring the machine up to shore, and we cracked up on a deadhead. Neither of us was hurt but—well, you saw the plane—it meant that we couldn't take off again even if we had gasoline."

"Where's Thalberg now?"

Wilkes Fehr pursed his lips and shrugged.

Jerome flicked his thumb toward the roaring darkness of the tunnel. "In there somewhere," he said.

"You cracked up on Ghost Lake, and now Thalberg is down in Lost River," said Dillon calmly. "How did that happen?"

Jerome scratched his head. "Well," he drawled, "it was this way: It looked as if we'd have to go out to the railway on foot, which didn't look so good, seein' we didn't know where we were and had only enough grub for a couple of days. Thalberg got to figurin' he might make the pontoon do as a sort of canoe, so we tried it out. We got it over into the river and floated downstream on it. Well, when I saw where we were headin' for, I jumped and swam ashore. I figured Thalberg would be right behind me, but when I looked back"—Jerome clucked expressively—"he was gone."

"And what are you doing now?"

"Why, draggin' for him, of course," Jerome returned.

Dillon nodded, apparently satisfied. But he wasn't. The very fact that Fehr was mixed up in this business aroused his suspicions. Jerome was lying. Dillon was convinced of that, and yet he knew that the most difficult lie to detect is the falsehood with a firm foundation

of truth. In what respect had Jerome lied? The death of Thalberg? But if the pilot had not died by accident why would these men be trying to recover the body?

"Where do you come in on this, Fehr?" he asked.

"I happened to be on a fishing trip at Moon Falls when I picked up Mr. Jerome," explained the gambler quietly. "He had gone out to the lake on foot and was trying to make his way to the railway. I got him out to the steel and fixed him up, but he insisted on coming back for his pilot's body, so I got some dragging irons and came along with him."

"Did you report the drowning?" asked Dillon, looking at Jerome.

The man's eyes shifted. "I left that to Mr. Fehr," he mumbled. "I didn't know rightly what to do——"

"I told the telegraph operator at Pine Siding, and he said he would report it," Fehr cut in.

"Where did you get the drags?"

"Pine Siding, of course," snapped Fehr. "That's where we came out. What's the idea of all the questions? Anything wrong about us dragging for the body instead of sending the police in to do it?"

Dillon shook his head. "Nothing wrong about it," he said mildly. "I'm just asking questions because I'll have to make a report. I'll give you a hand with the drags."

But now he knew definitely that the men were lying. He happened to know that there were no dragging irons at Pine Siding—never had been, in fact. A section hand had tumbled off the railway bridge at the Siding that spring, and irons had been brought from Moose Station for the recovery of the body. Dillon had been in charge of the search party, and he knew the irons had been duly returned.

The story was plausible; much of it, probably, was true. But he knew that

neither Jerome nor Fehr had told the real reason for their presence here.

"Let's get busy," said Dillon. "Just the same, I don't think you'll ever find him."

II.

THEY WENT on down into the tunnel, away from the healthy sunshine. The river was about thirty feet across from bank to bank; the ceiling was only a few feet above their heads. It was a strange, terrifying place. When they looked downstream there was nothing but the most solid, impenetrable blackness, filled with the tumult of the river. Its hollow roar was flung back from the roof and from the rocky walls in a thousand echoes. When Jerome picked up the electric lantern and switched it on, the light gleamed on wet black rocks and on ebony waters plunging furiously into oblivion.

The river, as it entered the tunnel, was not deep, and Dillon could see the bottom clearly for some distance from the bank. Midstream, however, it remained impervious to the stabbing shafts of light flung toward it.

Jerome touched Dillon's arm and shouted to make himself heard above the roar: "The pontoon wrecked on those rocks——"

The sharp beam of light revealed leaping tongues of foam where the river flung itself against white boulders that flashed like the bellies of fish. The water here was comparatively shallow.

Dillon asked himself one question: "Why, if the pontoon wrecked on the rocks, had the men been dragging the river *above* the rocks?"

Jerome appeared to sense this. He shouted: "There was a bag of samples on the pontoon. Gold! I'm hopin' we might find them."

This, if true, cleared up a great deal. Naturally, if Jerome had made a gold strike upon which he hoped to swing a deal, he would want to recover his

samples. The bag might have fallen off the pontoon before it crashed on the rocks. Fehr's presence might also be explained by the promise of active connection with a gold find. Dillon's suspicions began to subside. Why hadn't they told him about the samples in the first place instead of declaring their preposterous anxiety to find the pilot's body?

There were two sets of dragging irons, and they took turns using them, working their way down the bank from the rocks, going farther into the darkness of the tunnel. Below the rocks the river narrowed steadily and the water was much deeper. Dillon could see the mouth of the tunnel far behind, a clean-cut semicircle of white light.

The dip of the river was deafening in that confined space, for the passage narrowed with the river. The banks became more precipitous, and it was difficult to find foothold. At last the ledge came to an end and the lantern beam shone on a rock wall that rose sheer from the black water. Jerome shouted something, but Dillon could not distinguish his words, so great was the solemn, ceaseless roar of the river under the earth.

Behind them, Fehr was ceaselessly casting out the irons and drawing them toward him. Jerome swung the lantern around, and the light shone on a raging fury of water coursing into the black maw of the tunnel ahead.

"Might as well go back!" Jerome yelled in his ear.

They could go no farther. There had been no sign of the pontoon's wreckage, no sign of Thalberg's body, no sign of the bag of samples. The torrent that swept into pitchy blackness held the secret.

Slowly they retraced their steps and joined Fehr.

"Any luck?" asked Dillon.

Fehr shook his head. Dillon imagined

that the gambler felt more relieved than otherwise.

Jerome rubbed his chin ruefully. "Looks as if we're stumped," he admitted. "But I hate to give up. Those samples couldn't have been washed down by the current."

"The drags didn't cover the entire bottom," Dillon said. "We ought to cross over and work from the other side."

"Or the canoe," suggested Jerome. "Would you care to tackle it in the canoe?"

"Alone?" Fehr snapped. "Not me, thank you. I'd like to help you find the samples, all right, but I value my neck."

"We have an outboard motor. And a rope. With the motor running and a rope to steady us we can slip downstream easily enough, stern first. With the drags out we can cover all the rest of the bottom."

Fehr shrugged. "I'll feel safer holding the rope."

Jerome turned to Dillon. "Would you care to try it?" he said. "Fehr can snub the rope around a rock, in case anything should happen. You can handle the paddle. I'll toss out the drag."

Dillon had a vivid recollection of that sinister sluiceway between the rock walls, where the booming waters rushed into a darkness fraught with all sorts of terrible potentialities. He felt slightly contemptuous of Fehr's caution.

"If you're not afraid of it, I'm not" he told Jerome.

THEY WENT out into the sunlight again, blinking. Jerome went to the canoe and produced a long coil of new rope, one end of which he began to tie securely to the ring in the bow of the craft.

Fehr stood looking up at the clear morning sky. "Listen!" he said suddenly.

Dillon looked up. He heard a faint,

distant droning. It seemed to come from beyond the pine ridges away off to the east. Swiftly and steadily the sound increased in volume.

"A plane!" muttered Jerome, frowning.

The droning became louder. Off above the horizon Dillon saw a tiny black speck in the sky. He climbed up the slope a little distance.

No sooner was he out of earshot than Fehr said, in a fierce whisper: "You fool! What are you going to do if we do find it?"

Jerome glanced up at Dillon, standing on the slope and gazing toward the east: "There is only one thing to do," he said with a thin smile.

Fehr's eyes narrowed. "I suppose you're right," he whispered. Then: "This plane! Do you think it's *them*?"

"That's a chance we had to take. We'll know soon enough."

The black speck in the sky became larger, developed wings and body. The machine was flying high, came drumming about half a mile to the north. Its course did not alter. Sunlight gleaming on the whirling propeller, the plane swept on with a roar and disappeared beyond the dark flank of the mountain.

Dillon turned around and came back down the slope. "I couldn't catch the number," he said. "Forestry ship, probably."

Jerome tested the rope. "This will hold. We might as well cross over to the other bank, and Fehr can pay out the rope from there. Keep an eye on the bottom of there, too, as well as you can. The sack might have been washed up. Our drags didn't reach that far."

They got into the canoe and slipped across the swift flood of water, letting Fehr out on the other shore. Then, with the canoe swinging around so that the bow pointed upstream, Dillon started up the motor. He throttled it down to low speed and then guided the craft with his paddle, swung it past the

rocks where the pontoon had come to grief.

Jerome, up in front, swung the lantern to and fro. Its bright beam cut the waters as the canoe descended farther into the darkness of the tunnel. Fehr moved slowly down the bank, gripping the rope. As the canoe slipped deeper into the fierce grip of the current, Dillon increased the speed of the motor. At last Fehr halted and snubbed the rope around a huge, pointed boulder. Jerome cast out the drags and hauled them across the rocky bottom.

After a while Jerome waved the lantern. This was Fehr's signal to pay out more rope. Dillon probed the water with his paddle. No rocks behind. The canoe yielded to the current in sudden jerks. With the rope to steady it and the motor to buck the torrent there was no difficulty. Jerome directed the beam of light onto the water again and peered again down at the river bed below.

Again he cast out the irons, dragged them across the bottom. Again he signaled with the lantern. Again the canoe slipped back downstream. In this fitful manner it gradually approached the narrow chute, while the clamor of the river became deafening. The current tugged and tore at the canoe like a live beast, its strength tripled as the waters poured toward that narrow passage. Dillon paddled steadily, for even the motor could not make headway against that tumultuous force.

The craft seemed to be at a standstill. Then it slipped back a little. They were dangerously near the narrowest part of the tunnel now.

Dillon felt that they had gone far enough. He yelled to Jerome: "Tell him to haul on that rope!"

But the roar of the river engulfed his shout. Then, suddenly, as Dillon raised his paddle for a stroke, the canoe shot back as if it had been snatched away by a gigantic hand. It swung vi-

olently sideways, utterly out of control, shot back toward the tunnel.

Jerome's lantern swung in a gleaming arc. Dillon, throwing the motor into full speed, saw the light flashing on the rocks, on the water—and then he had a split-second glimpse of a limp length of rope dangling from the bow.

He dug his paddle furiously into the water, but it was almost wrenched from his grasp by the tremendous force of the torrent. The canoe swung, the bow crashed with jarring force against the wall. The impact pitched him to one side. Jerome was flung completely off balance. The light was blotted out. The canoe shot completely over.

They were flung headlong into the water. Men and canoe were swept contemptuously down that evil tunnel, flung like chips through the savage, roaring darkness, toward oblivion beneath the earth.

III.

DILLON was hurled headlong down the roaring chute. The water was icy cold. He tried to battle against the current, but the smothering onrush of water flung him back. The river was sweeping him toward an invisible border line dividing the absolute blackness of the stream from the eternal blackness of death.

The force of the current in that narrow space was terrific. It was beyond all comprehension, tumultuous, irresistible. It poured over his head, spun him to the surface, whirled him sideways, sucked him down, flung him dizzily ahead. He felt a smashing impact as he was hurled against one of the walls. Almost stunned, he clawed desperately for a hold, but the current swept him away and whirled him into midstream again.

Dillon swam, trying to fight his way back to the side of the tunnel, but he was as helpless as a child. He could see nothing, hear nothing, but the roar of the river. He choked and spluttered

as waves crashed over him, and he tore his way to the raging surface again. The cold water was sapping his strength, paralyzing his limbs, tightening about his body like a gigantic hand.

It was the end. He knew that. He was certain of it. Death at last. Down here in the dark. Horrible——

Crash! His headlong plunge was halted with a jarring impact that seemed to snap every bone in his body. A rock! His arm hooked over a firm ledge. Water ripped at his legs. Instinct made him grab frantically and hang on.

The torrent was trying to tear him loose from his precarious hold on the rock. Dillon tried to kick himself free, draw himself up. Couldn't be done. The ledge was slipping away from him. He flung out his other arm, slipped half-way off the ledge, painfully managed to draw himself back.

The strength was draining out of him. His fingers were numb. He felt himself slipping away again. Then a great wave smashed over him, he gasped and choked; the wave tore him loose. Dillon was whirled out into the flood again.

He battled blindly. As long as there was life in him he would fight. Something whipped sharply against his face. Dillon snatched at it and his hands found an object that slipped through his grasp like a snake. A rope! He tightened his grip, managed to get a turn around his wrist. There was a tug and a jerk ahead. He had grabbed the rope trailing the derelict canoe.

Thus alternately dragged and flung downstream, Dillon was swept through a smothering rush of water, more dead than alive, scarcely conscious that the terrific uproar was dying to a hollow booming. The current flung him wildly forward, as if glad to be rid of him, and then its hold relaxed. He had a sudden impression of space and knew that he was out of the tunnel. His limbs seemed curiously free.

Vaguely he sensed that the subterranean stream had widened into a large pool or lake. He might have been drifting in the darkness beyond the stars, it was so inky black. Dillon swam, still clinging to the rope. From the blackness ahead he heard a muffled roaring—the sullen boom of a cataract.

Dillon shouted. Perhaps Jerome was still alive. The great cavern rang with echoes, but there was no answering cry. Less than a minute had elapsed since he had been flung into that headlong journey down the tunnel, but it seemed as if he had been in the water for hours. His chilled limbs responded mechanically.

And then his hands scraped against solid rock. He reached out, groping. His knees struck bottom. Dillon crawled out on all fours and fell sprawling on the shore of the pool.

The rope yanked abruptly. The pull of the drifting canoe almost dragged him back into the water, but he got a turn of the rope around a rock and relieved the pressure. Another loop and he was eased of the burden altogether. Then Dillon tumbled over on the ledge and lay there gasping and exhausted.

After a while he was able to crawl to his feet. He searched his sodden clothes for his match case.

Dillon knew that this cavern was merely the antechamber of death. He had been granted a reprieve. That was all. The terrible tunnel had cut off all hope of regaining the upper stream. And below, he knew, there was a waterfall.

The place was a tomb.

He found the matches, in their water-tight metal cylinder, and lighted one. The tiny yellow flame revealed a rocky shore and black, lapping waters. The match burned out. He dragged the canoe out of the pool. By the light of another match he examined the craft.

It had been banged and smashed against the walls of the tunnel; the

fabric was ripped to pieces; gunwales were broken; ribs smashed; the stern was stove in. The outboard motor was a wreck, propeller blades were smashed, the tank punctured, the engine ruined.

"Not a chance in a million!" muttered Dillon.

Buried alive! Death by starvation. His healthy young body revolted against that prospect. Dillon was a fighter from the drop of the hat, and right then he told himself he would drown swimming against the torrent before he would sit quietly on shore and wait for the end.

But how, he asked himself, with all the safeguards, had the accident happened at all? He had certainly underestimated the force of the current. If motor and paddle had been unable to buck its strength then there must have been undue strain on the rope. But it had been securely tied.

A sudden suspicion flashed across his mind. Dillon ran the rope through his fingers, lighted another match, examined the free end.

The rope had not broken. The hemp was not frayed.

It had been cut.

Up to this time Dillon had never suspected that his plight had been anything but the result of an accident. Now he knew that he had been the victim of a cold-blooded attempt at murder. Fehr, safe on the shore, had deliberately slashed the rope.

THE SHOCK of this discovery made him forget his own plight for the moment. The whole story of the dead pilot and the bag of samples must have been a blind. But why, then, had Jerome and Fehr been dragging the stream? And why, if his presence had endangered some crooked scheme they had in common, had Fehr sent his partner to almost certain death with Dillon?

Above the hollow roar that filled the cavern he heard a sound. It was a faint,

echoing shout. A human voice! It sent him scrambling to his feet in one convulsive leap. Dillon yelled, ran along the shore in the darkness, stumbled over a rock and fell headlong. He realized the danger then and knew that if he was not careful he would tumble into the pool. He hastily found another match and lighted it.

The moment the little flame broke the darkness he heard the shout again. The voice came from the direction of the water.

Jerome!

The man was alive, then, after all. Dillon had given him up for lost. He held the match high, shouting. The cavern rolled clamorously with echoes.

A moment later Dillon heard a great splashing in the water.

"This way! This way!" he shouted. The match went out. He could hear Jerome gasping as he swam. Dillon lighted another match. It blazed up, and the lean, dripping face of Jerome rose into the aura of light, uncanny as a ghost from the void.

Dillon reached out and grabbed him. Jerome crawled up on the rocks and fell prone. He was exhausted. He lay there for a long time without speaking, his breath coming in hoarse, labored gasps. After a while he began to mutter:

"Caught a rock at the side of the tunnel—hung on there—it seemed like hours—couldn't keep my hold any longer—let go——"

He panted as if the exertion of those few words had been too much for him.

"Reached the shore at the other side—too weak to shout—then I saw your light—couldn't believe it at first——"

Eventually, as strength flowed back into his veins he began to rasp out the most fiendish curses against Fehr.

Dillon had not told him about the slashed rope, but Jerome seemed to take it for granted that there had been treachery. Dillon had never heard one

man curse another with such bitter violence. The foulest terms were not enough. All Jerome's relief at having reached the shore, all his bewilderment of terror and defeat, were loosed in that gasping storm of invective.

"I knew he couldn't be trusted!" he groaned. "I knew it from the beginning. Him with his smooth ways and his shifty eyes." He blasted Fehr with a curse that would have done credit to a mule driver. "He found the sack, damn him. That's what happened. There's no doubt of that now. Found it and watched for a chance to do us in."

"Do you think he tried to kill us just for the sake of a bag of samples?" demanded Dillon, astonished.

"Why not?" shouted Jerome. "There was a fortune in that sack!"

"A fortune! Why the samples alone couldn't have been worth very much."

Jerome's tone altered. "Not the samples. But he'll have the claims for himself now."

"You told him where they were?"

Jerome hesitated. "Yes," he said at last.

"You were a fool to trust him," returned Dillon. He was wondering what sort of prospector was this—a man who would confide the secret of a gold find to the worst rascal in the Northland.

Dillon lighted another of his precious matches and went up among the rocks in search of driftwood. He found a few dry sticks that had been cast up at high water, cut shavings with his knife, and in a few minutes a tiny fire was blazing. By its light he found more wood.

"I found the canoe," he told Jerome.

"Smashed, I suppose."

"A wreck."

"Then," said the other, "we are done for."

"We're not dead yet."

Dillon flung more wood on the fire

and as the flames crackled high the cavern was illuminated by a ruddy glow. They were grateful for the warmth because the place was damp and cold; Jerome's teeth had been chattering. The black waters of the pool flung back ruby glints of light.

And then, as Dillon went farther down the shore in search of more wood, he tripped over an object near the water. He stumbled. His outstretched hands encountered leather.

Puzzled, he investigated. It was a boot. A man's high boot. And when he groped farther in the gloom a shudder of indescribable horror passed through his body as he touched a stiff, clammy hand, felt the rigid body of a dead man.

His cry of alarm brought Jerome stumbling to the scene. Dillon dragged the body over toward the light. The glow of the fire revealed a pallid, bloated face. The corpse was that of a young man clad in a leather jacket, with helmet and goggles on his head.

"It's Thalberg!" screamed Jerome, starting back.

This great cavern beneath the mountain was the tomb of the missing pilot. His body had been cast up on this hidden shore by the current. He might have remained there until the end of time, unseen by any human being.

Then, as Dillon stared down at the bloated dead face, terrifying in its calm, the light of the fire revealed something of startling significance. It was so appalling that it eclipsed even the treachery of Fehr.

In the center of Thalberg's forehead was a round black hole—the sort of hole a bullet would make.

The gloom shielded Jerome's face. But Dillon knew that he, too, saw that damning bullet hole.

The story had been a lie. Thalberg had not been the victim of an accidental drowning in Lost River. He had been shot, murdered, and his body committed

to a rushing torrent that plunged into the bowels of the earth. Now he had literally risen from the grave to confront his murderer—in the presence of Corporal Dillon of the Mounted.

IV.

DILLON was wise enough to make no remark about the bullet hole. He sensed that Jerome was watching him narrowly.

"Nothing we can do for the poor devil now," muttered Jerome. "I guess we'll be with him before long."

"He didn't die of starvation, anyway," said Dillon dryly.

"What do you mean?"

"Probably didn't live twenty seconds. He smashed his head on a rock. That's plain enough."

"What'll we do with him? Shove him back into the water?"

"No. We'll have to bring his body out with us—if we ever get out ourselves."

Jerome uttered a harsh laugh. "That's likely."

"We haven't had time to look around yet," said Dillon. "This is limestone, you know. We aren't very deep under the mountain yet. There might be a way out."

Casually he moved away from the body. In no circumstances must Jerome guess his suspicions, his certain knowledge, in fact, of what that bullet hole meant.

Dillon picked up a burning brand from the fire and began to explore the shore. He went far down the edge of the pool, down to where a rocky wall impeded his progress. Black water lapped at the base of the cliff that rose sheer to the dark roof above. Ahead lay illimitable darkness filled with the roar of the distant cataract. He turned and went back, went on up past the fire back toward the mouth of the tunnel.

The flickering light revealed a narrow path of silt and pebbles. It was, he saw instantly, the bed of a dry stream. Dillon followed it up toward an opening in the cavern wall. The stream in flow had once emptied into the underground pool.

He called Jerome over and showed him what he had found, but Jerome pessimistically refused to attach any importance to the discovery.

"There's been a creek, all right," he admitted. "But it probably came from some underground spring."

"Why did the spring dry up?" said Dillon. "This is the fall of the year. And it has been a dry summer. In the spring, when the snow is melting, I'll bet there are dozens of little streams up on the mountain. Maybe this was one of them."

"How could it run through solid rock?"

"This is limestone," Dillon reminded him. "It's soft. Chances are this mountain is honeycombed with passages."

He wedged his way through the narrow opening in the wall as he followed that significant path of silt. The blazing brand revealed the roof, which sloped suddenly downward as he emerged into a smaller cave. And here the silt terminated at the bottom of a slanting sheet of rock, not two feet in width, worn smooth by the waters of years. At the top of this was an aperture so small that it would have been a tight squeeze for a boy, much too small to admit a grown man.

"Hell!" snarled Jerome, for he had begun to hope.

Dillon raised the light and studied the tiny opening. Perhaps the dead stream had its origin in an underground spring after all. Even if they enlarged the aperture it might only reveal the narrowest of passages, perhaps winding hundreds of feet high up into the

mountain. It was, however, the only chance.

Jerome took a knife from his belt. "Let's at it!" he exclaimed harshly.

They worked for hours, taking turns in that narrow space as they hacked at the crumbling rock with their knives, with their bare hands, with sticks of driftwood used as crowbars. The task seemed utterly hopeless. At first the limestone was broken loose only by the most laborious efforts, bit by bit, but afterward substantial chunks of it came free. Much of the time they toiled in total darkness for the burning brand became a charred ember and had to be thrown aside.

Every once in a while Jerome rasped out curses against Fehr, who was to blame for their plight, promising that if he ever escaped alive he would track the scoundrel down and tear his heart out.

"If we do get out," said Dillon, "we'll have to keep our eyes peeled. His ammunition is dry. Mine isn't."

He wasn't so sure, however, that they were going to get out. Weary hours of work had enlarged the opening in the rock, but there was every possibility that the passage beyond would be so narrow that further progress could not be made.

"I think I can try it now," said Dillon, at last.

His hands were raw and bleeding, his knife blade had snapped, but they had managed to break down the sides of the aperture sufficiently to admit a human body.

"Go to it, then," said Jerome. "But you'll probably find we have another ten years' tunneling ahead of us."

He hoisted Dillon up the face of the rock. Dillon wedged his way through the opening. It was a tight fit, but he managed to struggle through and found himself on a flat bed of hard sand and gravel. He was in complete darkness.

"The light!" he called.

JEROME had gone back to the fire for a blazing stick, and he passed it through the opening. In that confined space the smoke set Dillon's eyes smarting. He made a brief survey of the narrow tunnel that lay before him.

"It's going to be a close squeeze," he called back to Jerome, "but I think I can make it."

Dillon noticed that the smoke from the stick swirled away from him, on up the tunnel.

He burrowed his way forward, struggling on up a steep, narrow slope. There was an abrupt turn. He groped, feeling his way—for he had been obliged to discard the burning stick—hailed himself around the bend in the tunnel, and then found—

A faint, grayish diffusion of light.

It was just enough to reveal the stream bed dimly before him. But Dillon shouted with excitement. "Daylight!" he yelled. "Come on, Jerome!"

He heard a scuffling and scrambling in the tunnel behind him as he wriggled on through the silt. The passage sloped sharply upward again, widened out so that he made easier progress. The light became stronger. He smelt fresh clean air. He was able to go forward on hands and knees now; at last, at the end of the stream bed, he found himself at the bottom of a long, uneven channel in the rock, a slanting shaft that culminated in a glimpse of distant sky.

The most incredible feeling of relief possessed him. He crouched in the narrow space, panting from his efforts, and gazed thankfully at that little patch of the sky he had never expected to see again. The subterranean chimney was but a few degrees from the perpendicular and about thirty feet in length. Through it had come coursing the spring freshets formed by the melting of snow on the mountain, down through the honeycombed limestone to the caves and the river below.

Jerome came crawling down the

passage. His hard, fierce face was covered with dirt and grime, he still gripped his knife.

"How does it look?" he gasped. "Can we make it? It isn't too narrow?"

"It's steep," said Dillon. "But I think we can get out."

"We've *got* to get out!" Jerome snarled.

Dillon hoisted himself into the shaft. The steepness of the chimney was the great difficulty. There were few natural footholds. The sand, earth, and limestone kept crumbling away. Jerome cursed continually as clouds of dust showered down on his head.

Foot by foot, Dillon fought his way upward, his heels and elbows digging into the sides of the channel. The irregular patch of blue sky in the distance beckoned him. Time and again he slipped back, losing hard-won ground, and just managed to brace himself, almost exhausted. Jerome growled that he was being smothered. He got the worst of it in the way of dislodged fragments of earth and rock.

Dillon forged his way up the steep incline. There was one bad moment when the passage became so narrow that it seemed the way was hopelessly blocked, but he managed to scoop hard sand and silt out of the stream bed, forming a hollow that enlarged the opening by a few inches. He fought his way through, struggled on and at last gripped the rock at the top of the passage. He crawled slowly out into the sweet, cold air of the mountainside and lay there exhausted in the sunlight.

A few minutes later a rumble of devastating oaths prefaced the appearance of Jerome's head and shoulders. Knife between his teeth, he crawled out of the rock shaft and sprawled panting beside Dillon.

"Now!" he gasped hoarsely. "Now for that rat Fehr!"

They were disreputable-looking objects. Their clothes were wet, torn,

plastered with mud and dirt; their faces were black with grime.

"I know how you feel about it," said Dillon, "but there can be nothing like that."

"What do you mean? Let the skunk go?" demanded Jerome angrily.

"I belong to the Mounted."

Jerome digested this reminder. "True enough," he muttered in an altered tone. "You can't stand for any rough stuff. Not even after he came within an ace of bumpin' you off."

Weeds and bushes grew high about them on the mountainside. From where they lay they could see neither Lost River nor Ghost Lake, but the sullen roar of the stream reached their ears in the sultry stillness of the autumn afternoon.

Dillon crawled forward through the dry brush, hoping to catch a glimpse of the stream. Fehr, he concluded, had probably stolen his canoe and cleared out with the samples.

There was a sudden, menacing rustle behind him. The sound alone would not have made him look back. It was some instinct that warned him of danger.

Jerome was crouching not two feet away. There was a deadly glitter in the man's eyes. His arm was upraised and his hand gripped the shining knife.

V.

DILLON'S arm shot out as the blade flashed down. If he had erred by a fraction of an inch the knife would have reached his body. But his fingers closed around Jerome's wrist in a grip of steel, his rigid arm turned the thrust aside.

Jerome, his face livid, tried to wrench the knife free, but Dillon hung on like grim death. It meant his finish if Jerome wrested that knife away for a moment. And as Dillon forced the man's arm down into the weeds he re-

alized that he had given Jerome too much rope, had underestimated the man's desperation. Jerome had not been fooled. He knew Dillon had seen that bullet hole in Thalberg's forehead and recognized it for what it was.

Jerome's left arm lashed out. He smashed at Dillon's face with clenched fist, but the Mounty's grip did not relax. He hooked his free arm around Jerome's neck, twisted suddenly and forced the enemy over on his side. Jerome struggled frantically to get the knife free. They wrestled silently among the bushes.

Dillon struck coolly and savagely at the other man's face, but with the effort his grip on the wrist slackened and by a violent effort Jerome tore his arm free. The knife flashed again as Dillon flung himself out of the way. The blade ripped the sleeve of his shirt. He doubled up his knees and kicked out as Jerome drew the knife back for another blow. His boots caught the man fair in the chest. Jerome went sprawling back. Dillon sprang up and plunged at him, risking another knife thrust, but he managed to knock the arm aside, and the force of the blow sent the knife spinning off into the bushes.

They went at it then, hammer and tongs, a savage battle without rules or niceties. Feet, knees, elbows, fists—every trick of rough-and-tumble fighting was called on in that bitter struggle on the hillside. Dillon had the advantage of youth, but Jerome was a powerful man, for all his age, and was evidently no stranger to this sort of combat. He snatched up a rock as they wrestled, plunging, battered it against the side of Dillon's head.

The Mounty was dazed, but he got a deadly grip on Jerome's throat and hung on until the other man's eyes bulged, his face turned blue, his tongue protruded. By a superhuman, convulsive effort Jerome arched his back, flung Dillon over, wrenched himself free. Dillon flew at

him again, and Jerome's fist smashed into his face. He was almost drunk with punishment, but he traded blow for blow until Jerome rolled away, got to his knees and then struggled to his feet.

Dillon got up and they faced each other, swaying, eyes glaring. Dillon stumbled in. Their faces were smeared with blood; their shirts were in tatters. Dillon fainted as he came close. Jerome lashed out with his left, and Dillon dodged the blow, came up under it and drove a vicious smash to the other man's jaw. Jerome staggered back, his eyes glazed. Dillon swung his right and tore himself free as Jerome tried to grapple with him. With all his fading strength he struck again.

Jerome went back, his arms suddenly went up, and he clawed the air. Abruptly he disappeared. There was a clatter of falling rock, the thud of a body, the crashing of dry bushes as Jerome went rolling and tumbling helplessly down the slope.

They had, without knowing it, fought their way to the edge of a steep declivity, the brink of which had been hidden by undergrowth. Dillon peered over the edge. He could see Jerome clawing at weeds and rocks as he went pell-mell down the incline in a cloud of dust and gravel.

Whi-i-ing!

The unmistakable whine of a bullet sounded in his ears, almost simultaneously with the distant crack of a rifle.

Dillon was so astounded that for a moment he stood motionless and staring. The bullet had passed so close to his head that he felt the wind of it. Then, realizing that he was standing exposed on the hillside as a target for the hidden marksman, he flung himself flat among the bushes. He was not a moment too soon. A second vicious whine sounded overhead, and a second report broke the silence of the afternoon even as he burrowed for cover.

He found a thick clump of sumac

and crawled into the middle of it. His heart was pounding. He forgot all about Jerome in the sudden realization of this new danger.

"It's Fehr, of course!" he muttered.

The shots had come from the direction of Ghost Lake, not from the river-side. Somehow, he had taken it for granted that Fehr had got the sack and had decamped with it. Dillon, as he lay there in the bushes, condemned himself for his failure to clap the handcuffs on Jerome as soon as the fellow crawled out into daylight. As it was, he had very narrowly escaped a knife in the back, and now he was pitted against two enemies, each intent upon his life.

"Unless," he reflected, "they do me the favor of killing each other off."

THERE were no more shots. Cautiously Dillon raised his head and looked down the slope. At the foot of the mountain he could see nothing but low bushes and scrubby trees. Down to one side he caught a glimpse of the river; away ahead he could see the bright sheen of the lake in the sunlight, but a slanting margin of cliff hid the greater part of it from view.

Dillon took stock of his position. There was scant cover on the slope, but down on the level he could take advantage of the brush. He looked in vain for Jerome. If the fellow had been killed by the fall, his body had rolled into the thickets at the foot of the mountain, for there was no sign of him.

"Maybe Fehr thought he scored a bull's-eye when I dropped," reflected Dillon, squinting down through the sumacs again in search of the man with the rifle. But the slope and the bush seemed utterly deserted.

He crawled out of the bushes slowly and began to make his way down the hillside, taking advantage of every scrap of cover. There was one open space, a

barren outcropping of limestone, and he bolted across it to the shelter of some bush on the other side, every moment expecting to hear again that menacing whine and the sharp voice of the rifle. But nothing happened.

Dillon drew breath when he reached the comparative safety of the brush at the bottom of the slope. He drew his revolver, although he knew the bullets were water-soaked and useless. The weapon might be useful as a club if it came to a battle at close quarters.

He decided to work his way around toward the river and then follow the stream up toward Ghost Lake in the hope of finding the canoe. The bush was dry and noisy. Every step might betray his presence. It was ticklish business, knowing that at any moment he might be within a few yards of a murderer armed with a knife or a potential killer with a rifle, while he himself was armed only with a dead gun.

The roar of the river as it swept underground became louder as he approached it. He had skirted the foot of the declivity where he had last seen Jerome, but the man had disappeared. The fall, obviously, had not killed him, but there was not the sound of a footstep in the dry bush to indicate that he was still in the vicinity.

"I've got to keep my wits about me," Dillon told himself.

The trees became smaller, gave way to blueberry bushes and rocks. He emerged cautiously into the open and caught a glimpse of the swift, swollen waters of the river not ten yards away. He could see the black mouth of the cavern where the booming stream rushed into the subterranean darkness.

Almost immediately ahead, Dillon saw a thin curl of smoke from the dying embers of the camp fire Jerome and Fehr had built that morning. His eyes narrowed. He gazed at an object that lay partly hidden by the tall grass on

the edge of the camping place. He saw a shoulder, an outstretched arm; it looked like a man lying asleep in the sun—a man in a flannel shirt—high boots almost concealed by a clump of brush.

Dillon knew that the man wasn't asleep. The Mounty emerged slowly from the low poplars and crossed over toward the fire. He drew a sharp breath as he recognized the prostrate form.

The man was Fehr.

He was lying dead there in the autumn sunshine, the flies already buzzing about his body. There wasn't much left of his sleek, foxlike face. Half the side of his head had been blown off by a bullet.

Dillon was stunned. He could only stare incredulously at the corpse beside the fire. He had been firmly convinced all along that Fehr was the man who had opened fire on him when he was on the mountainside, but here was Fehr's shattered body already cold and stiff in death. He felt the body. The man had been dead for some time. Wilkes Fehr's checkered career of rascality and double-dealing had come to an end here in the wilderness. But why? And by whose hand?

The mystery that had enveloped all the events of that day assumed a darker significance. Two men had been murdered—all over a bag of ore samples!

"Samples be damned!" growled Dillon, as he looked down at the body. "There's more to it than that."

Jerome had killed Thalberg for the sake of that bag. Fehr had tried to kill Jerome and Dillon because of it, and now Fehr himself had been shot. Why hadn't Jerome and Fehr gone directly to the claims instead of going to so much risk and trouble over the recovery of the sack? The answer, so far as Dillon could see, was that there never had been any claims, never had been any samples in the sack.

But what, then, had the missing bag contained? And who had killed Fehr?

Above the roar of the river, Dillon heard a series of explosive reports, like gunfire, then a crashing clamor as if an engine had suddenly started up. The noise died down; there were more reports, and then the startling racket subsided.

He sprang up, staring in the direction of Ghost Lake, hidden by the bush.

"A plane, by George!"

Into his mind flashed the recollection of the machine that had passed overhead while they were preparing to drag the underground reaches of Lost River.

Evidently Fehr and Jerome were not the only men who had been interested in that missing sack.

VI.

THE KNOWLEDGE that there was a plane over on Ghost Lake altered the entire situation, but it only deepened the mystery as a whole. Dillon stood beside Fehr's body, frowning as he tried to piece bits of the puzzle together.

"The machine flew over here and some one spotted the wreck of the other plane. Maybe that's what they were looking for. Whatever the reason, some one landed here and found Fehr with that sack. He knocked off Fehr and took the sack. Later on he saw me on the slope and took a shot at me."

But why, he argued, if the sack was the only objective, had the killer remained on the scene?

"Engine trouble, maybe," reflected Dillon.

He searched Fehr's body, hoping to find a gun. Dillon felt as if he had blundered into some sort of killers' convention. The sack, he knew now, was the crux of the whole business, and he was quite certain Fehr and Jerome had lied to him about the contents.

"Mighty lucky for me that we didn't find it when we were dragging the river.

I'll bet their first move would have been to drill me full of holes."

Fehr's gun was gone. There was no weapon at the camp. Dillon was disappointed. The task confronting him was a little more formidable—the arrest of Fehr's murderer, the arrest of Jerome, and the solution of the mystery surrounding the sack—but it did not occur to him for a moment that it might be impossible. He was a Mounty, and this was his job.

Dillon struck out down the bank of the river, keeping close to the water so that he was hidden from the view of any one back on the higher ground. When he came to the open water of the lake he went ahead more cautiously and came to a halt in a clump of bushes on the point.

He could see the two planes—the wrecked machine he had investigated that morning, and a cabin plane close to shore about a hundred yards away. Up in the cockpit of the latter ship a man was evidently making some repairs to the mechanism. Another man stood on one of the wings. He was a stout fellow in city clothes—blue suit and soft hat.

If it had not been for the bullet that nearly cost him his life on the hillside, Dillon would have walked openly down the beach, but now he knew better. He went back up into the poplars that formed a golden screen from the shore line to the foot of the mountain and worked his way cautiously ahead. He moved as silently as an Indian.

After a while he was close enough to hear voices.

"Come on, Kelly!" growled the man on the wing. "Snap into it and get that engine going. The sooner we get out of here the better for all of us."

"I'm doin' the best I can, I tell you!" the pilot shouted angrily. "I'm not goin' to take off with a motor that's liable to go dead on me just as soon as we're

in the air. If you and Thatcher want to try it yourselves you can go ahead."

Dillon knew that he would have to be careful. Mention of the man named Thatcher indicated that there was a third member of the party. But where?

There was a big boulder among the bushes just a few yards ahead. Dillon crept toward it. Suddenly he halted.

Above the top of the boulder he caught sight of a hat. It was a crumpled, sweat-stained slouch hat. It moved slightly, and he caught a glimpse of a square-shaped head and a blocky neck beneath the brim. There was a man standing just on the other side of the boulder.

"See anything?" called out the man on the wing.

A deep voice from beyond the boulder replied: "Not yet. I got one of 'em fair and square, but there's another hanging around, sure as shootin'."

"Where did they come from, that's what I'd like to know? There's been some damned funny business going on around here. How did that guy down at the camp get hold of the sack? And what happened to Jerome and Thalberg?"

"Get that engine going, and we won't have to worry about what's been going on," growled Thatcher. "We've got the sack, and that's all that matters."

Dillon heard an emphatic bang, as if the pilot had knocked a wrench against the side of the cockpit.

"Listen! I never liked this job from the start, see? But I'm in it—up to my neck now—and I'm doing the best I can. If you think you can do any better just step up here and get to work."

"Shut up, Thatcher!" ordered the man on the wing. "Leave Kelly alone. He ain't any more anxious to be stranded here than we are."

Dillon, through the bushes, could see him sitting down on the wing, his legs dangling over the water as he lighted a

cigarette. The pilot, mollified, went back to work.

Thatcher shifted his position slightly, and Dillon got a better view of him. The man was carrying a rifle, and he was evidently posted there to watch for any one who might attempt to come down the slope toward the shore. It was just sheer luck that he had not been facing toward Dillon instead of away from him.

INCH BY INCH Dillon drew closer to the unsuspecting Thatcher. He had considered stepping out and running a bluff with his useless revolver, but he knew it would be fatal. These men were desperate. They had blood on their hands. Thatcher would call that bluff in a split second, shoot first and ask questions afterward.

Carefully picking his way, watching for dry twigs and fallen leaves that might betray his presence, he worked his way around the side of the boulder. He couldn't see Thatcher now, but he heard the man clear his throat and judged that the fellow was about four feet away. A moment later, Dillon heard a sharp tap against the side of the rock. It was followed by a rustle of paper. Then, after a little interval, came the scratch of a match.

Thatcher had relaxed his vigilance long enough to light his pipe.

Dillon was around the side of the boulder in one swift, springing stride. He saw Thatcher, pipe in mouth, match in hand, eyes wide with astonishment, staring at him as he rushed. The man was caught completely off guard. He dropped the pipe and the match, made a frantic effort to shift the rifle from beneath his arm—and then Dillon was on him.

The Mounty leaped full at him, knocking Thatcher over backward by sheer weight and impetus. Thatcher let out a yell of alarm and surprise, but he clung to the rifle grimly. They wrestled

for it as Dillon crouched astride of him, trying to wrench the weapon free. Thatcher tried to swing the barrel to smash Dillon across the face, but the Mounty dodged it, slugged his left fist into Thatcher's face, and then tore the rifle out of the man's hands.

"O. K.!" snapped Dillon as he jumped up and covered the man on the ground. "Come up slow, with your hands in the air."

"What's the idea? Who the hell are you?" spluttered Thatcher. He was an ugly-looking customer with squint eyes, a brick complexion, and a reddish stubble of unshaven beard. He got up as he was told, his eyes fixed malevolently on Dillon, his arms raised.

Dillon prodded him with the rifle barrel. "Get moving! We'll go out and talk to your boy friends. If they pull any funny stuff with their guns it will be just too bad for you."

The man on the wing of the plane had heard Thatcher's shout, and he was yelling for an explanation: "Hey, Thatcher! What's the matter? Where are you?"

"Tell him you're all right," snapped Dillon.

"I'm O. K., Gleason!" the prisoner called back, but his voice lacked conviction.

He moved out through the poplars, his arms up, Dillon close behind with the gun. When they came out into the open, Gleason took one look, scrambled hastily up onto the wing and whipped out a revolver.

"Don't shoot!" yelled Thatcher. "Put down that gun or he'll kill me."

Gleason stared uncertainly, revolver half raised, steadying himself with one hand against a strut.

"Throw that gun on shore and come in with your hands up!" ordered Dillon. "If you pull a trigger I'll riddle the whole three of you."

Gleason might not have been considering the safety of his companions, but

he had a healthy respect for the ride. He paused a moment, lowered his arm, and then tossed the revolver up onto the shore where it fell with a clatter against the rocks.

The pilot had vanished.

Dillon called out: "You, too, Kelly, or whatever your name is. Come out of that cockpit and line up."

A moment later the pilot came out onto the wing. He was a lanky young fellow with a tough, good-natured face. Gleason, the man in city clothes, was a flabby, middle-aged man with a pasty complexion. The pair came ashore, jumping down onto one of the pontoons from the wing. Gleason nearly fell into the water, trying to walk the pontoon with his hands up.

"A fine watchman you turned out to be!" he said savagely, with a withering glare of contempt for Thatcher.

He turned his fishy eyes on Dillon: "What's all this about?"

Dillon grinned at him cheerfully. "You're held for questioning. Matter of murder. My name's Dillon—Mounted Police—and you're all going to take a trip down to Moose Station with me."

BOTH Gleason and Thatcher started visibly. Dillon's clothes were badly torn and water-soaked, and there was nothing about him to indicate that he was an officer of the Mounted. It was clear that the men had not expected this.

"Glad you showed up, cop!" said Kelly, the pilot. "I'm in a sort of a jam here myself."

"You said murder?" blustered Gleason, who seemed to be the leader of the trio. "You're making a mistake, my friend. We just landed here a little while ago for engine repairs."

"Sure, I know," replied Dillon agreeably. "You'll have plenty of time to fix up a good yarn. But there's a man by the name of Wilkes Fehr lying dead in his camp a few hundred yards down

the river, and you fellows know all about it. What's more," he added deliberately, "I want that sack!"

Gleason's face turned a little pastier, and he licked his thick lips. The three men were standing side by side, Dillon facing them. He had a good chance to observe their reactions. Thatcher's eyes shifted uneasily. He said nothing.

The pilot said: "Believe it or not, it's none of my affair. I'm just hired to——"

"Shut up!" rasped Gleason. "I'll handle this. You're hired to mind your own business. What sack are you talking about?" he demanded of Dillon. "I don't know any one by the name of Fehr. Never heard of the man in my life."

"Maybe I'm hired to mind my own business," flamed the pilot hotly, "but that doesn't mean putting my head in a noose. There is a sack, all right, mister, but I didn't know they had to knock somebody off to get it."

Gleason's eyes were green with fury. "That," he said to Kelly, "will cost you plenty. Why, you damned fool, I have enough on you to hang you——"

"Sure! And that's the only reason I'm workin' for you. But if I'm to go over the hurdles it'll be for something I *did* do, not for one of your little jobs. Want the sack?" Kelly asked, turning to Dillon.

"Empty your pockets."

Kelly obeyed. He was unarmed.

"O. K. Go and get it."

Gleason and Thatcher cursed fluently as Kelly jumped up onto the pontoon, scrambled up on the wing and opened the cabin door. They blasted their pilot with invective as a double-crosser without an equal. Kelly was back out on the wing in a moment lugging a heavy canvas sack that looked like a mail bag. He brought it ashore and dumped it on the rocks at Dillon's feet.

Dillon gave the sack a tentative kick.

One thing was certain—it did not contain ore samples.

"What's in it?" he asked.

Kelly shrugged. "Search me," he said. "These babies asked me to fly them up here from Montreal to look for a lost plane. I got mixed up in a jam down on the Quebec boundary runnin' chinks across the line, and they had me in a spot where it was healthy for me to do as I was told. From all I can figure they were tied up with two guys named Jerome and Thalberg, who double-crossed them and ducked out with this sack——"

The interruption that halted Kelly's story came with the startling force of a thunderclap from a clear sky.

A rifle barked sharply, savagely, from up beyond the screen of poplars. The vicious whine of a bullet was followed by a startled cry from Kelly. He clutched his side, an expression of amazement on his face, stepped forward, and then went down sprawling.

VII.

DILLON whirled around, one thought in his mind—Jerome! Somehow the man had got his hands on a gun.

"Whack!" went the rifle again, and again came the angry buzz of lead. Thatcher, with a yell of terror, plunged at Dillon and grabbed the barrel of the gun before Dillon realized what was happening. Gleason, on the other hand, uttered a squawk of fear and began to run down the beach, stumbling over the rocks, gasping with panic.

Dillon tried to get the rifle free of Thatcher's grip. Thatcher had caught the Mounty off balance, and the struggle was short and desperate. Thatcher rushed Dillon backward as they fought. Dillon tripped over a stone and went down. He heard another rifle report from the bushes, heard a cry and a dull crash near by. His fingers were slip-

ping from the stock of the gun. Thatcher suddenly wrenched it free. The stock crashed against the side of Dillon's head. He was half dazed as he tried to get to his feet.

"*Whack!*" A heavy body tumbled over on top of Dillon. Another of those deadly bullets had found its mark. Thatcher groaned heavily and rolled over on his back as Dillon fought free of the dead weight and grabbed the rifle.

He lurched to his feet and headed toward the screen of poplars just as Jerome fired again. Something tapped him smartly on the shoulder—he had stumbled at the moment in his groggy progress or the bullet would have been deadly. He dodged, ducked, plunged into the bushes as the rifle rang out again.

He was under cover for the moment, but he crawled slowly ahead and then over to one side, knowing that Jerome had marked the spot where he left the beach. Dillon was right about that, for another bullet ripped into the weeds not three feet behind him a moment later. But that, he knew, had been a blind shot, and it marked Jerome's location as being about fifty yards away and just on the fringe of the bush.

Dillon found heavy cover in an evergreen thicket and lay still, his head close to the ground, peering below the slender trunks of the poplars. His heart was thudding against his ribs. The appalling hail of bullets that blasted the shore had come utterly without warning. It was quite obvious now that Jerome had recovered a rifle from some cache near the camp by the river and had coolly and carefully planned an outright slaughter that would rid him of his enemies and leave him in undisputed possession of the sack.

He couldn't see Jerome, but he knew that the man would not be fool enough to venture out onto the beach. Jerome knew he was still alive. Away ahead, Dillon heard the crackle of a twig, then

a faint rustle, but he could see no moving form in the bush. He resolved to stay where he was and wait the fellow out. In that dry bush the man who moved the least had the best chance.

Minutes passed. There was not a sound from the bush. Down on the beach some one was groaning. Jerome hadn't made a clean sweep of the Gleason crowd, then. Off in the distance, Dillon could hear the sullen roar of Lost River.

He found a small pebble in the ground under the thicket, and he tossed it high overhead so that it described an arc through the air and landed with a light crash about thirty feet away in the bushes up the slope. Then he waited, watching the bush between his hiding place and the spot where the pebble had landed.

Nothing happened. Perhaps Jerome was too shrewd to fall for that trick.

And then the same indefinable warning of danger that had made him turn when Jerome tried to knife him on the mountain assailed him again. Dillon hadn't heard a sound, but suddenly he knew with certainty that Jerome was somewhere near.

He turned his head slightly. Then he froze.

Fifteen feet away, between the thicket and the beach, he saw an arm, a shoulder, a rifle barrel, and beyond it the gray crest and the murderous eyes of Jerome. The man was lying there, carefully taking aim, his finger curving about the trigger.

Dillon put every ounce of energy into one spasmodic roll that carried him crashing through the undergrowth just as the rifle blazed. All in one motion he came up, his own gun swinging to his shoulder with the snap and clash of the ejector that flung the shell from Jerome's gun. The bullet had missed him; he had only the fraction of a second in which to aim and fire. He was

lying on his side, a tangle of weeds and brush between himself and the other man. He saw the rifle barrel swinging over—he fired.

There was no answering shot. Jerome's rifle wavered, and then it dropped into the grass. He saw Jerome's arm go up, as if in a mute appeal to the sky, and fall swiftly. That was all.

Dillon got up, a little shaky, and went over to the clump of brush where Jerome was lying. The man was dead.

"For a snap shot," muttered Dillon, looking down at the body, "I didn't do badly. Guess you can do almost anything when you have to."

KELLY was the only one alive of the Gleason crowd. Jerome's bullets had accounted for the two others. Dillon found a first-aid kit in the plane and patched the pilot up as well as he could, satisfied that a shattered rib wasn't going to end Kelly's career just then.

"You're lucky," he told Kelly. "We're both lucky. That fellow Jerome just didn't mean anybody to get out of here alive except himself."

"But what was it all about?" demanded Kelly. "What is in that cursed sack?"

Dillon admitted that he was curious, too. He opened it. The sack held a package in waterproof wrapping. And the wrapping held neat bundles of currency in large denominations—about sixty thousand dollars in all, Dillon estimated. He whistled softly.

"That's just what they got away with from the Continental Bank holdup in

Montreal two weeks ago," said Kelly excitedly. "Sixty thousand bucks! Gleason's gang did that job or I'll eat my shirt."

Dillon nodded. "Jerome and Thalberg cleared out with the loot and double-crossed their pals. They cracked up here, and Thalberg tried to put one over on Jerome, paddled down the river on the pontoon—with the dough. Jerome shot him—Thalberg probably never knew where the river was going to take him—and over went the pontoon with the sack. Jerome couldn't find it so he made his way out to town, hooked up with Fehr and came back to drag for it. Fehr must have been wise, for he didn't hesitate long when he found that sack on the bottom and thought he had a chance of getting it for himself. Then you fellows came along——"

"Honest," declared Kelly solemnly, "I didn't know they shot Fehr. They left me with the plane while they went down the river. I heard a shot, but I didn't know what happened. Then they came back with the sack. They had something on me, see—I was running chinks for Gleason, and we had a scrap and a guy got killed. I didn't do it, but they could have hung it on me—boy, I'm washed up with that sort of business if I ever get out of this scrape——"

Dillon grinned at him. "It isn't every day I get a chance to turn in a report like the one I'm going to write when we get back to Moose Station," he said. "I feel like celebrating. If Gleason ever had anything on you, forget it. He hasn't got anything on you any more."



A Story of Moonshine and a Tree
by H. M. Sutherland

*His knees buckled
and he slumped
down in a shape-
less heap.*



*Illustrated by
Don Hewitt*

The White Buzzard

LITTLE 'LIGE' sat hunched and motionless near the boiler of the moonshine still, his beaded, piglike eyes following each move that Tavy Murdock made. His shaggy brows were lowered to mask the murderous hate that Tavy's blabbing tongue had aroused. Tavy was forever talking, and often about things that threatened Little 'Lige Cantrell's liberty, even his neck. There was only one way to silence that clattering tongue, but 'Lige took his time and waited with that patient deliberation that had always characterized his actions.

Tavy, to all appearances, was utterly unaware of the steady scrutiny to which he was subjected. He did most of the work about the still, firing the boiler

and keeping a watchful eye upon the "thumper-keg," implicitly following the directions of the more experienced Little 'Lige. His old army tunic, weather-stained until it blended perfectly with the early autumn foliage, still carried two rusty service stripes and a wound marker on the sleeves. His ruddy face was at odd variance with the sallow, bearded Little 'Lige.

At last he straightened from his labors and faced his hunched and brooding companion.

"I say, 'Lige, I saw your white buzzard as I come down the creek this mornin'."

Little 'Lige grew instantly rigid as his right hand slipped toward his rifle. Quick anger leaped into his eyes and

his face hardened to granite.

Tavy Murdock laughed lightly. "Funny about you an' that bird, 'Lige," he chuckled. "Ever' time it shows up in the Devil's Apron country you git in trouble. I recollect that it was sailin' aroun' over your place that day Sheriff Rutherford arrested you for killin' Bart Neece. You was lucky in that case, 'Lige. I reckon I could 'a' busted your alibi if I'd 'a' been so minded to——"

"What do ye know about that—business?" interrupted Little 'Lige, his eyes narrowed to slits.

"Nothin' much," Tavy grinned, "except I know you wan't whar you said you was that mornin'." He stared at 'Lige's masked face. "Ain't no use in gittin' on your ear about it, 'Lige. I ain't talkin' none to nobody—*compree?*"

Little 'Lige relaxed and quickly changed the subject. "Whar at did ye see that buzzard?"

"Looked like 'twas circlin' over Bart Neece's clearin' over thar on the head of Whisperin' Creek, as best I could figger."

'Lige's hand closed over the grip of his rifle so tightly that the knuckles whitened.

"I'll git that damn bird yet," he rasped so vindictively that Tavy's eyes widened.

"Shore looks like that buzzard is your jinx, 'Lige," he declared with a shrug. "They tell me you used to set in jail an' cuss it as it circled over the county seat just before your trial two years ago—for shootin' Buddy Cartwright."

Little 'Lige offered no reply, turning his back upon Tavy and staring out across the Devil's Apron basin toward the blue-etched Cumberlands in the near distance. His rifle lay across his knees, and slowly he searched the cloud-flecked sky for the sinister vulture that he had sought so long to kill.

It bore a charmed life. More than once he had drawn a fine bead upon it,

but the bullet had failed to find its mark. It seemed to follow him, to keep its baleful eyes upon him, and to it he attributed the various ills that had befallen him.

'Lige brought his gaze back to Tavy Murdock who was dumping the low-wine out of the thumper-keg. So Tavy had seen him near Bart Neece's farm that day four years ago! One word from the blabbing Tavy and a new indictment would be found. Quite calmly and with even pulse Little 'Lige considered the murder that he knew he would soon do.

Of the method he would pursue he was not quite certain. There was no great hurry, because as long as he and Tavy continued moonshining, Tavy was not going to tell what he knew. The thing must be planned carefully so that not a single clue would be left for Sheriff Rutherford to pick up.

Tavy signed his own death warrant that same morning. Evidently the white buzzard circling over Bart Neece's clearing had left a deep impression upon him.

"'Lige," he said thoughtfully, "to be as smooth an article as you are, I never could figger out why you acted so damn dumb up at Neece's place that day."

"Meanin' jest what?" 'Lige's eyes were mere slits through which dangerous glints flickered.

"I mean this: If I was to decide to kill me a man I'd hide his body whar it couldn't never be found. Under the laws of this State you can't even be indicted, let alone tried, unless'n you can produce the body or somebody who will swear that he had seen the body. They've got to have a *corpus delicti* to——"

"Huh?" Little 'Lige tried to hide his interest by keeping his eyes on the ground at his feet.

"Them's the words of the law. Unless'n they can prove that a man has been killed by somebody havin' seen the

body, they can't be plumb shore that a murder's been done."

"*Corpus delictae!*" murmured 'Lige softly. "Thanks, Tavy! Thar's a idee in that."

FOR SOME TIME 'Lige sat against the roots of a stooping poplar tree close beside the boiler and stared unseeingly into the distance. He knew that sooner or later he would think of a way of hiding Tavy's body beyond any hope of discovery.

His thoughts traveled slowly as he remembered various places in which he might effectively bury the *corpus delicti*. There was that old, abandoned well on the Forsythe place. That farm was untenanted. The well could be filled with rocks and dirt until it could not be located again. He discarded that idea when he recalled the fact that old wells were the first places searchers went when a man vanished.

He thought of tying heavy weights to the body and sinking it in Indian River, but the water was usually so clear that some fish-gigger with the aid of a pine torch would be able to see it at night. He could undoubtedly change the course of the creek a few hundred yards below the still, and bury the body in the bed of the stream, later turning the current back into its old channel; but those mountain freshets often made the little branches perfect torrents, and there would always be the danger of the damning evidence being washed out into the open.

For an hour 'Lige pondered these possibilities, considering each in turn, and then discarding it.

Idly 'Lige's glance ascended the trunk of a great oak tree that stood out on the slope some seventy-five yards distant. The top of this tree had been broken out in some past storm until it was little more than a stub with a few branches spreading near the top. One of these branches was dead, and the

keen eyes of the hillman detected a small aperture through which wild bees were entering and coming out. The prospect of fresh honey erased the sinister thoughts that had been engrossing 'Lige.

"Thar's a bee tree," he announced, pointing at the top of the oak.

Tavy straightened and stared in the direction indicated. "I see 'em," he declared an instant later, reaching for an ax. "Le's cut the tree."

"An' fetch some revenuer in on top of us," warned 'Lige. "A feller can reach them limbs on that oak from the top of that hick'ry beside it. Leastwise I'm goin' to try."

He filled the pockets of his jumper with damp leaves and fastened a six-pint bucket to his belt. Then with surprising agility he climbed a scaly-bark hickory tree to its topmost branches where he found that it was not a difficult feat to cross over from the hickory into the oak some three or four feet below the dead branch in which the bees had hived. Cautiously, in order not to disturb the bees, he pulled himself upon the nearest oak branch and then by degrees inched his way upward until he was able to grasp the top of the trunk.

It was not until then he discovered that the gigantic oak was hollow, a mere shell not more than three inches thick. There was nothing in its outside appearance to indicate that its heart had been eaten away. Its bark and foliage looked perfectly healthy. With a surge 'Lige drew himself upward and a glance at the hollowed shell froze him to immobility. He had found exactly what he wanted—a perfect hiding place within that living tree.

With fingers tense as steel, he broke off a chunk of the clinging, rotted wood and dropped it into that darkened well. The sounds that came up to him told him that the tree was hollow almost, if not all the way, to the ground. It would hold a dozen bodies.

He tore away the rotted wood and

dropped it inside the tree until he had enlarged the opening sufficiently for his purpose, and then he secured a more comfortable position and calmly proceeded to ignite the damp leaves he carried and smoke the bees into insensibility. This done, he filled his bucket with honey and then descended swiftly and certainly to the ground.

At Little 'Lige's suggestion they drew the fire from under the boiler earlier than usual that afternoon and 'Lige went straight home. He had a number of things to do. Every detail of his elaborate plan had come to him as he sat atop that oak stub, but it would require an hour or two for him to perfect all arrangements. This he proceeded to do immediately.

First he measured his spare well rope of exceptionally strong window cord and found it to be approximately seventy-five feet in length. To this he spliced twenty feet of half-inch seagrass cord, and then searched his repair shed until he found a small pulley in which the window cord worked smoothly. These things he stored away until morning.

In his bedroom he stared contemplatively at his guns, debating which weapon to use. He owned an unusual arsenal—three rifles, two shotguns, and a heavy-calibered revolver, all of which were in perfect condition. After considerable thought he selected an old-fashioned percussion-cap "hog" rifle, and spent the next half hour cleaning the barrel and tube. Because of its exceptionally long barrel and small bore, the sound of its explosion could be heard only a short distance as compared with the other guns, and in addition its accuracy made it ideal for the work he had in view.

With extreme care he measured out a charger of fine-grained powder and poured it down the barrel. From the shot pouch he removed a single spherical bullet and wrapped it with a linen patch,

thrusting the bullet home with the slender ramrod. In a tiny compartment in the stock of the gun he found a supply of percussion caps, and one of these he placed upon the nipple. His preparations were complete.

Misty dawn found Little 'Lige slipping noiselessly through the woods in the direction of the still. Under his arm to protect the nipple from the dew he carried the mountain rifle, and about his body was coiled the strong, slender rope. At a point of vantage on a granite-crested spur he paused and made a quick, keen survey of the woods ahead. The hint of a smile appeared about the corners of his tight-lipped mouth when he saw a thin spiral of smoke ascending from the vicinity of the still. Tavy Murdock had already arrived.

LIKE A BOBCAT stalking its prey, Little 'Lige closed in on the little ravine in which they had set up the still. When he could detect the odor of the souring mash he crept into a thicket of young pines where the carpet of needles would make his advance soundless. Ahead of him some forty feet was a line of cliffs from the top of which he could look down directly upon Tavy, and it was toward this point that he advanced.

Wild gooseberry bushes grew in profusion along the crest, forming a perfect screen, and on his hands and knees with infinite stealth 'Lige slipped forward until by merely raising his head he was able to look down at the still. There he grew motionless save for the almost imperceptible movement of his rifle as he pushed the barrel forward.

Tavy Murdock had just finished filling the boiler with mash, and was busy mixing paste out of flour and water. As he smeared the paste about the top of the boiler, 'Lige brought his rifle to bear, but the movements of his target made the shot uncertain. 'Lige's trigger finger relaxed. There must be no uncertainty.

Picking up the funnel-shaped cap, Tavy adjusted it upon the boiler and then pressed it firmly down. For an instant he held it there for the paste to set, and in that instant Little 'Lige pivoted that briar-pointed bead until it came to a rest between Tavy's fourth and fifth rib on the left side. Then he squeezed the trigger.

At the report of the gun Tavy half straightened and his right hand clutched at his chest. He whirled about in the direction from which the shot had come, and then his knees buckled and he slumped down beside the boiler in a shapeless heap.

For five age-long minutes Little 'Lige lay as motionless as the rocks about him, his eyes fastened upon that slumped figure, seeking some movement that might betray a ruse. Also he wanted to assure himself that no man had witnessed the deed. At last, convinced that it was perfectly safe to show himself, he arose and hurried down the slope to the still.

A single, searching glance told him that Tavy Murdock was not shamming. That bullet had found his heart as 'Lige had known it would. His blabbing mouth was stopped for all time. The Bart Neece case would never be reopened.

With surprising strength for a man of his size, he caught Tavy's body in his arms and strode swiftly out to the roots of the great oak. There he deposited his still burden and swarmed up the hickory tree. To a large green branch of the oak he fastened his pulley and then threaded his rope through it until both ends touched the ground below. He had measured the height of the tree to a nicety.

Hurrying down the tree he went to work at his job with a speed that betrayed his eagerness to get it over as quickly as possible, and yet there was methodical thoroughness in the manner in which he looped and tied the rope

about the body. It required all of his strength to hoist the body to the top of the oak, but without resting he managed to accomplish it. By fastening the other end of his rope to a sapling he held the body in position until he had again climbed the tree.

It was the work of a moment to untie the ropes and let the body drop into its living sepulcher, and then to send after it the rope and pulley. With a deep breath of relief he straightened and shot a searching glance about the ravine. No eye had seen him. The thing was done. The reaction came at last, weakening his muscles until he dared not attempt the descent. For a space of perhaps two minutes he sat there breathing deeply, and then a mirthless chuckle escaped his taut lips.

A shadow flitted across the leaves beside him, and he shot a quick, startled glance upward. Not fifty feet over his head sailed that spectral buzzard in wide, lazy circles. For full thirty seconds he stared unbelievably at it, his breath escaping in gasps, and his fingers gripping the limb in front of him like bands of steel. Twice he distinctly saw that huge ominous bird turn its head to one side and look down at him. He even caught the glint of its jet eyes, and he shuddered involuntarily.

"Ye filthy, spyin' devil!" he croaked, shaking his fist at it in impotent rage. "Jest wait! Jest wait till I git my gun, blast your sneakin' soul!"

He was half screaming epithets at it as he swung out of the oak into the hickory, and twice in his haste he almost lost his footing. When within fifteen feet of the ground he loosed his holds and dropped the remaining distance, balancing himself catfooted when he struck. As he ran for his gun he caught a glimpse of that fateful vulture as it winged itself across the blue expanse above the Devil's Apron toward the sun-drenched Cumberlands.

He halted in his tracks, realizing for

the first time the cold perspiration that literally smeared him from head to foot. His frenzy of anger and fear left him suddenly, and he laughed—a mirthless, mechanical cackle that sounded strangely in his ears.

"Hell's fire!" he rasped harshly. "I've got to git a hold of myself. That buzzard jest happened to pass by—that's all!"

This effort to reassure himself was partly successful, but during the next hour as he dismantled the still and poured the remainder of the sour mash into the creek his glance was continually wandering in the direction of the mountaintops where the white buzzard had vanished. The boiler, cap, worm, and thumper-keg he carried away to a shallow cave under the cliffs and concealed them beneath a bed of dead leaves, smoothly distributed and appearing to have been blown there by the winds.

Going back to the ravine he fashioned a crude rake out of a brushy mountain laurel, and with it proceeded to efface all tracks about the site of the still. He knew that his own tracks, being unusually small, would quickly be recognized by any tracker with half the experience of Sheriff Rutherford. Tavy Murdock's boot marks were also distinctive since he wore an extremely broad last.

Out about the roots of the oak tree he made a minute examination of the ground, erasing all tracks and grinding several bits of rotted wood into the dirt. He noted with concern the fact that the bark of the scaly hickory bore evidence of his passage up and down the trunk, but there was no help for it. He started to remove these loose pieces of bark when he recalled the fact that he had seen such trees worn smooth by squirrels during the "cutting" season. With a grim smile he gave the tree no further consideration.

After a complete tour of the ravine he was satisfied that there was nothing

left behind to tell a searching party what had taken place. It was nothing more than an abandoned still site such as could be seen in a hundred other ravines along the foothills where water could be found. With a last glance over the glen he stooped and caught up his old rifle. Then he silently slipped into the thick underbrush in the direction of his cabin.

A SLATTERLY dressed woman of indeterminate age, whose natural stoicism failed to mask her anguish and suffering, stood before Sheriff Rutherford's desk. The pallor of her face was accentuated by the untidy wisps of dark hair that escaped from beneath her hat. Her hands ceaselessly wadded a soiled handkerchief, and her lips trembled slightly as she accepted the chair the sheriff thrust toward her.

"Tavy's been killed—he's gone," she began, trying vainly to choke back her hysteria. "I know he's dead—he'd 'a' come home——"

"Now just ca'm yourself, ma'am," advised Rutherford softly, his hand straying to his grizzled mustache and stroking it gently. "Le's go back to the very beginnin' an' then ye tell me all about it, Miz—Miz——"

"I'm Allaphair Murdock—Tavy Murdock's wife," she replied in a tone less tense. "I come to see if you won't help me see what happened to Tavy. He ain't been home for three days, an'—an' he ain't never done that afore. I know that somethin's happened——"

Her voice was gradually growing more shrill and incoherent, and Rutherford reached over and placed his hand on her arm.

"Now, Miz Murdock," he said softly, "ye just answer my questions. I think we can get at it better if we do that. Ye say that Tavy disappeared three days ago. Whar was he goin' or what was he doin' the last time ye saw him?"

"He left the house afore daylight an' said he was goin' to his still place."

"Moonshinin', eh? Was he workin' alone?"

"No. Him an' Little 'Lige Cantrell was makin'—runnin' off some mash 'Lige had made."

"So!" Rutherford leaned back in his chair and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. So, Little 'Lige was mixed up in it! That completely changed the complexion of her story. Anything could happen if that cold-blooded little killer was concerned in it.

Rutherford tried hard to hide his increasing interest because he feared bringing on a further attack of hysteria.

"Mebbe him an' 'Lige got scared an' are movin' their still to some better place," he suggested at last.

"I went to see 'Lige yeste'day an' he was fodderin' his corn—hadn't been stillin' for two days, he said."

"Didn't he know anything about Tavy?"

"Said Tavy didn't show up that mornin' an' that he figgered the revenueurs was closin' in an' had scared Tavy away, so he hid the still an' went home. But he lied, sheriff. I know he killed Tavy and——"

"How do ye know that?" cut in Rutherford sharply.

"Tavy told me that if anything happened to him, I'd know that Little 'Lige done it. Tavy knowed somethin' about that Bart Neece killin'."

In Rutherford's mind there was no longer any doubt that a murder had been done. He had never questioned Little 'Lige's guilt in that Neece murder although evidence had been lacking. Tavy Murdock had learned something about that. Probably could have broken down 'Lige's alibi. Anyway, Tavy would never be able to tell what he knew. Little 'Lige had seen to that.

"Is 'Lige at home now, Miz Murdock?"

"Yes. I saw him when I come past

his place this mornin'. He was tryin' to get a shot at that white buzzard——"

"Has that thing come back?" queried Rutherford, straightening in his chair.

"That's one reason why I know that Tavy's been—killed," replied the woman with a half sob. "It comes to the Devil's Apron ever' time a murder has been done. It's watchin' Little 'Lige now— an' no bullet can touch it. It knows what he's done—it knows——"

"Now, now, Miz Murdock!" he soothed. "I reckon we'll be able to locate Tavy safe an' sound. Ye mustn't worry like that. I'll be over thar in the Apron early in the mornin'. Thar's one more question I want to ask ye. Whar did Tavy an' 'Lige have their still?"

"On the head of Pine Fork of Whisperin' Creek—down in the holler below that bold freestone spring."

"I know right whar that is. All right, Miz Murdock! I'll let ye know what I find out in the next day or so."

The woman, with shoulders sagging and head bowed in dejection, moved slowly through the door.

SHORTLY after daybreak the following morning Sheriff Rutherford and Deputy Luke Buckmaster dismounted and hitched their horses to the low-hanging branches of a beech tree near the mouth of Whispering Creek. The trail up the creek was no more than a sheep path, steep and tortuous, but Rutherford, who took the lead, advanced with an ease and rapidity that was surprising in a man of his ponderous build.

At the mouth of Pine Fork they paused, and Rutherford sat down upon a boulder to rest.

"Ort to be close to the place," he murmured. "As I recollect it, that freestone spring is up thar on that first bench."

Deputy Buckmaster offered no reply as he rolled and lighted a cigarette.

"I've been hearin' a lot about that white buzzard," declared the deputy after a short pause. "Ever see it, sheriff?"

Rutherford shook his head. "I reckon it's just a freak of nature. I've seen a white owl, an' a white squirrel, though. Little 'Lige has some funny superstitions about that buzzard. He swore it flew over the jail ever' day he was thar for killin' Buddy Cartwright, but I never did see it."

"Anyhow," declared the deputy with conviction, "I wouldn't want the infernal thing flyin' around me."

"Specially if ye'd committed a murder, eh?" added Rutherford, coming to his feet.

They found the still site without any difficulty. The fresh ashes in the furnace indicated that a fire had burned there not more than three or four days earlier, and there was a heavy odor of sour, rotted mash that hung like a blanket over the ravine.

Rutherford and Buckmaster trod carefully as they examined the place, fearful of destroying tracks, but to their discomfiture they found no footprints that could possibly be identified. Neither could they discover any evidence of violence or murder, not even a stain that could have been made by blood—no signs whatever to indicate that a struggle had taken place.

"The place has been raked clean of tracks," announced Rutherford with a shrug. "That alone convinces me that Tavy was killed right here. Otherwise why would 'Lige've been so anxious to leave no tracks?"

"Wonder what he did with the boiler an' worm?" queried Buckmaster, staring speculatively about him.

"Buried 'em somewhar. Le's take a look aroun' an' see if we can't find 'em."

It was Sheriff Rutherford who uncovered the still in the shallow cavern, and he called Buckmaster to him. Together they pulled the boiler, cap, and

worm into the open, and almost instantly Buckmaster placed his finger upon a small hole in the rim of the boiler just beneath the part over which the cap fitted.

"Bullet hole!" ejaculated Rutherford. "Well, what do ye know about that?"

"Looks like Little 'Lige has done overlooked a bet," observed Buckmaster.

"Seems as though!" agreed Rutherford.

There was a smear of the mash in the bottom of the boiler which during the last two or three days had hardened into a gluelike mass. A small dark object half buried in the mash caught Rutherford's attention, and he reached for it and wiped it off with his bandanna.

"Molded bullet for a hog rifle!" he said softly. "Not much bigger than a double-ought-sized buckshot."

"That puts the deadwood on Little 'Lige," declared Buckmaster after a quick glance at the bullet. "Ain't but one mountain rifle in this country that shoots a bullet that size. Little 'Lige owns it."

"But we ain't proved that it killed a man yet," Rutherford pointed out with a wry grin. "Le's set the still up on the old furnace," he suggested after a brief pause. "I think mebbe we can figger out the line of the bullet from the hole an' the dint it made in the opposite side of the boiler here."

"No use in that," objected Buckmaster. "It come from the top of them cliffs to the right—among them wild gooseberry bushes."

"How do ye figger that out?" queried Rutherford in surprise.

"The soot's all on the opposite side of the boiler from the bullet hole but more to the right. This dint that the bullet made is below the level of the hole. That means that 'Lige was above an' to the right of the still—that is if Murdock was tendin' the boiler, which

it's ten chances to one he was doin' at the time the shot was fired."

"I reckon, son, ye've got it about right," said Rutherford, tossing the boiler back beneath the cliff and kicking the worm and cap in beside it. "I think I'll climb up thar on that cliff an' see what I can find."

"Hadn't we better get a hold of Little 'Lige?" urged Buckmaster as they moved back toward the ravine. "He's liable to skip out if he thinks we're on his trail."

"Don't see how we can do that just yet, son. We ain't got the necessary proof that a murder's been done——"

"But Murdock's missin', an' thar's the bullet! What more do you want?"

"The body of the dead man, my boy, or at least the testimony of somebody who's seen it. Ye can't indict without a *corpus delicti*." He chuckled deep in his throat. "Ye see, son, we tried that once in court. Old Sump Fuller got religion an' confessed to killin' Cal Art-rip an' burnin' his body under a pile of fence rails an' driftwood down on Pound River."

"We was all set to convict old Sump, but his lawyer brought out the law, an' we couldn't prove no *corpus delicti*. About a year later Cal Art-rip showed up, sound as a dollar. He said that he had a scrap with old Sump, an' that Sump hit him over the head with some-thing. The next thing Cal remembered was wakin' up under that pile of blazin' fence rails. He crawled out an' never stopped runnin' till he got to Indiany. No, son; before ye charge a man with murder ye've got to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that somebody was murdered. That's the Virginy law."

UPON returning to the open space about the still site they found Little 'Lige calmly sitting upon a moss-covered log with a high-powered repeating rifle resting across his knees. He was watching Rutherford and Buckmaster furtively,

and to Rutherford the killer's beady eyes and hawklike nose gave him a startling resemblance to a vulture.

"Hello, 'Lige!" greeted Rutherford cheerfully. "What brought ye down here?"

"Thought I might git a shot at that damn buzzard," replied Little 'Lige, only his lips moving. "Seen it come over this way."

"That so?" There was a hint of sarcasm in Rutherford's tone. "Kinda figgered it might be a guilty conscience."

"Meanin' what?" 'Lige's eyes narrowed to thin slits.

"Several things," replied Rutherford enigmatically. "We found your still, 'Lige, back up thar under that cliff."

"Have my name on it?" jeered 'Lige softly.

"Not exactly. Don't think thar's any doubt about who it belongs to, though. Don't matter much—all we want is the twenty-dollar bounty the State pays. We don't want ye for moonshinin', 'Lige. Nothin' like that! We just want ye for the little matter of a murder and——"

"Somebody dead?" Not the slightest flicker of surprise or fear crossed the masked countenance of the little killer.

"Tavy Murdock."

"Fust I'd heard of it."

"Mebbe 'tis the first time ye heard about it, but—ye knew about it three days ago."

"That so?" 'Lige gave a perfect imitation of the tone Rutherford had used a moment earlier.

"That's so!" snapped Rutherford, exasperated by the studied air of perfect unconcern exhibited by Little 'Lige. "Ye overlooked one little thing, 'Lige. Murderers, no matter how slick they are, allus do that. They slip up somewhere. Ye slipped up when ye failed to see the bullet that killed Tavy Murdock, layin' in the bottom of your boiler."

"Mebbe ye found the dead man, too,"

jeered Little 'Lige, remaining perfectly motionless.

Not a muscle had quivered and yet Rutherford knew that the little killer was tensed for lightning action which might erupt at any instant.

"We'll find the body, 'Lige, if it takes years." He was determined to keep 'Lige from knowing that his last shot had gone home.

"Want I should help ye, sheriff," taunted 'Lige with a mirthless grin. "Mebbe I could——"

"Look! Look!" called Deputy Buckmaster in a low, surprised tone. "There's that white buzzard."

Like a crouching panther Little 'Lige leaped to his feet and, jerking his rifle forward, he stood poised for instant action, peering intently through the foliage in the direction in which Deputy Buckmaster was pointing. Rutherford stepped backward a pace and watched Little 'Lige's contorted face.

A glance through the treetops showed Rutherford the great, dirty-white vulture sweeping in a wide circle over the ravine. It banked gracefully about and then, sharply angling its course, it swooped almost straight downward and alighted in a gigantic oak a few yards out on the slope. The top had been broken off this oak in some past storm, and the huge buzzard came to a rest upon this broken stub.

A fierce animal snarl from the throat of Little 'Lige brought the sheriff's glance back in surprise. The light of insane hate and venom flamed in his eyes, and his lips were working convulsively as he slowly raised his rifle to his shoulder. In his pitiful eagerness to kill his Nemesis his hands were trembling uncertainly, and the barrel of the gun was wavering in such a manner that accuracy was impossible.

In complete fascination Rutherford stared at the little man. His breath was escaping in sobs, and a great haunting

fear was mirrored in his eyes. He drew a deep breath, lowered his gun, and then exhaled until his abdominal muscles were entirely relaxed. Then he lifted the gun to his shoulder again, and the barrel was as steady as the purpling peaks of the Cumberlands in the near distance.

At the crack of the rifle the ungainly buzzard leaped convulsively upward a distance of perhaps a foot, and then it collapsed and dropped suddenly upon the top of the oak stub. For a few tense seconds it clung there and then vanished. To Rutherford's astonished ears came the sound of its thumping fall down into the interior of the tree. The stillness seemed to solidify.

A sobbing gasp brought Rutherford's astonished glance back to Little 'Lige, and the change in the latter was so great and incomprehensible that the sheriff blinked unbelievably. Instead of venomous hate that had inflamed his slitted eyes there was nothing but haunting fear and utter despair. His face had drained to a dead white and he breathed with difficulty. Instinctively Rutherford stepped backward a pace, wondering vaguely if Little 'Lige were not a sudden victim of insanity.

"That tree's hollow," Deputy Buckmaster was saying. "Wait here, Chief, while I go borrow an ax. I'm goin' to have that buzzard stuffed."

With a motion as swift as that of a striking copperhead, Little 'Lige pivoted his gun barrel until it covered the broad back of the deputy, and his finger touched the trigger. Rutherford with a shout lunged forward and got one hand on that barrel in time to deflect the bullet into the ground. Buckmaster whirled.

"Handcuff him to that saplin' while I hold him, son," ordered Rutherford succinctly. "I'm of the opinion that we'll find more'n a white buzzard inside that holler tree."

A CLAN IS BORN

*Dim stirrings of the mind recall a day
when men built tribes with clubs and
wooden spears and naked courage*

A Novel That Will Hold You

by J. H. ROSNY

*Illustrated by
Paul Orban*



AOUN, the tall son of the chief of the Houlams, was in the full vigor of his youth. His black hair was thick and heavy and flowed over his shoulders like the mane of a stallion. His eyes were the color of clay. He was a strange being who wished to grant mercy to the vanquished when he saw him, beaten and bleeding, waiting for the death blow to sweep him to the earth. He wore a leopard skin, trophy of a solitary hunt, and his lances were tipped with the claws of the cavern bear.

Zouah, the last survivor of a decadent race called the Wah, had the narrow form of a lizard. The Houlams called him the "Man Without Shoulders" be-

cause his arms seemed to jut from his torso. His green eyes were opaque rather than lambent, and thin blond hair grew like dead grass from his bulging forehead. His intelligence, slow and subtle, would perish with him, not to be reborn again for thousands of years.

Falling back before the more vigorous, primitive clans, the Wah had hidden in almost inaccessible caverns, in a country where the water had seeped under the hills and lost itself in the mountains. Forced out of their rocky retreats by floods, they had been massacred by the Red Dwarfs, ferocious primitives who survived by number rather than intelligence.

The clan of the Houlams had come



Aoun swung the mighty club with all his superb animal strength—and his heart was aflame with the joy of combat.

from the northwest. They had traveled for fifteen years toward the east and south. The upheaval of the earth had sent them, terrified, from their hunting grounds. The land grew more desirable and richer in prey, and so they went on and on, accustoming themselves to the life of the nomads, arrested only by a rocky mountain wall that seemed to have no issue, a world of minerals, silence, and tempests.

It was during the journey toward the south that Baoh, the chief of the Hou-lams, had found Zouah living in solitude and misery, the only survivor of his race. The Men Without Shoulders had been the allies of Baoh, when as a young man he had explored the banks of the Great River. From them he had learned the mystery of the fire in the rocks. So he took the timid youth under his protection, a companion for his own sturdy son.

The friendship between the young men deepened. There was never cause for anger or jealousy. Each found in the other the resources he himself lacked. The strength of Aoun reassured Zouah. Aoun admired the cunning of the Wah.

Zouah loved the subterranean country with a strange, cold passion handed down to him from his father and the fathers of his father. Aoun would precede him through corridors of porphyry or gneiss, lighting the way with a torch from the turpentine tree, or follow a rocky trail over the rushing torrent while Zouah waited patiently to spear a blind fish.

Their wanderings led them always toward the southeast. Caverns bordered the river, led into the very heart of the cliffs above which the summit of the inaccessible mountains formed a long, forbidding wall, merging indefinitely with the blue mists. There was between them always the unspoken wish to do what no Houlam had done—find an opening into the labyrinth of caves that

would lead them through the rocky mass into the unknown lands on the other side.

BLUE SHADOWS became black shadows. Aoun lighted another torch. They moved forward carelessly, for they knew the pattern of this maze of corridors. Suddenly Aoun stopped. The way was clogged with fallen boulders.

"The earth has trembled," Zouah said.

The light of the flame flared along the gneiss, wedded the life of the flames with the mysterious life of the minerals. Aoun hesitated before the treachery of vaults newly broken by cataclysm, moved forward slowly and cautiously toward a yawning gap that they had never seen before—a fissure in the face of the cliff. When they were near enough to see that it was wide enough for them to enter, a burst of cold, heavy air rushed out from the very heart of the mountain.

Zouah followed Aoun, urged on by that dim tenderness that made him wish to share the perils that Aoun was constantly seeking and changed his natural caution into audacity.

The pass narrowed, seemed to be without issue. Aoun struck at a jutting boulder with his hatchet. Zouah made the torch fast in a cleft and added his efforts. The gneiss cracked, and again Aoun swung the hatchet. Another breath of cold air indicated a cavern beyond the passage. They worked at enlarging the passage through the crumbling gneiss until they could walk forward erect.

The passage widened, and the air became less heavy. Aoun hastened his step now, impatiently, holding the torch high. When he saw daylight ahead, he gave the torch to Zouah and followed the pale illumination that spread along the rocky floor, led him to the mouth of a cave that was so low that he was forced to crawl through on hands and

knees. They were in a defile, cut out between walls of granite, above their heads a band of sapphire sky.

"Aoun and Zouah have crossed the mountains!" Aoun shouted joyously.

The narrow corridor, lost in the rocks below, opened up to them as they descended, twisting at sharp angles, sometimes roofed by bridges of gneiss. It was late in the afternoon when they reached the open.

"These are the lands beyond the barrier," Zouah said.

Breathlessly, they examined the black flanks of basalt, the peaks of granite, the corridors of porphyry, the gorges through which clear torrents flowed endlessly, the slopes clothed with evergreens, the pasture lands showing green in the hollows, the bleak moraine of rock and gravel marking the base of the glaciers that were lost from view in the summits.

The setting sun gilded the turrets, the peaks, and the cupolas. Mountain sheep appeared beside an abyss. A bear looked out from a cave high in the cliff. An eagle soared under a cloud bordered with amber.

"The Houlamms could not live in these mountains," Aoun said. "Farther on there must be savannas and forests where there is abundance of game and edible plants. We will not return to the clan until we have explored that country."

II.

ON THE NINTH day of the journey beech trees appeared, then oaks and chestnuts. Soon after that they reached the foothills, looked out across fertile land that stretched to the horizon beside a river, a new land that had never known the footstep of a Houlam.

As they descended, the air seemed warmer and the rocks burned their feet. Vertical walls interfered with their progress, forced them to detour.

"This land is filled with treachery," Zouah said.

"But we will never lack flesh to roast before the fire."

Aoun leaned forward eagerly, his keen eye seeking movement of animal life that showed itself and disappeared according to the height of the grass, the reeds, the flowering shrubs, the disposition of the hillocks, tree clumps, and bamboos. Herds of antelopes moved past horses and zebus grazing on the luxuriant pasturage. Peacocks, pheasants, parrakeets, swarmed at the border of the palm grove. Monkeys chattered from high branches. Hippopotamuses floated in the river like dead logs.

The men looked for shelter for the night, decided upon a height above the river sparsely grown up with bushes and grass. Backed against a wall of schist, they arranged the wood in a half circle.

Zouah lighted the fire while Aoun skinned a hare and spitted it on a sharpened stick. A wild cry resounded among the rocks that resembled the panting laugh of a great hyena. It was so strange and terrifying that both Aoun and Zouah left their tasks and moved forward to look down into the ravine from which it had seemed to come.

Aoun was the first to see the strange animal that was descending the slope. It was no higher at the shoulders than a large leopard. The pelt was reddish, spotted with black. Long, cutting teeth protruded from the heavy muzzle.

"With the club Aoun has beaten down larger beasts," the Houlam said boastfully. "We need not fear the red lion."

Another roar echoed among the rocks, strident, impatient, jerky.

"His voice is greater than his body," Zouah declared respectfully. "And his teeth are longer than the tiger's."

"Aoun could pierce his heart with a spear and not receive a wound."

The animal had disappeared, and

Aoun and Zouah crawled out on a boulder.

Below, not far from the river, a bull hippopotamus moved about, feeding, confident in his bulky young strength. The Machairodus showed himself again to the watchers above, skulking through the tall grass at a tangent to cut the river horse from the water.

"Does the red lion think he can conquer the hippopotamus?" Aoun cried skeptically.

The water animal lifted his enormous muzzle. His lower jaw dropped, and he growled warningly. Suddenly the Machairodus leaped upon the neck of his powerful prey and held there with his long, sharp claws. The hippopotamus squealed in pain and surprise and ran toward the river.

The sharp teeth cut quickly through the thick skin and found the padding of flesh. The wound grew in the neck, and the Machairodus drank the red wave with snarls of joy. The hippopotamus increased his speed. He had ceased to bellow, his energies focused in the will to reach the river. There plunging in his natal waters, he could throw off the persistent torment that clung to him, heal his wound, know again the peace of living in abundance. His massive feet beat the moist earth, and in spite of the rolling of his round belly, he advanced swiftly.

The river was near. The dank odor spoke of rescue. But the teeth sank deeper. A second wound enlarged and reached out toward the first. The hippopotamus staggered, the short legs trembled. He had almost reached the reeds when slowly he turned head over heels, overcome by dizziness. The death rattle came from the gaping mouth, and the mass of flesh collapsed.

The Machairodus roared again, and the buffaloes on the opposite bank of the river, slacking their thirst, fled.

Aoun was silent. A cold shiver moved down his spine. He realized this

was a strange land, a land of other ages, more ancient than any hunting ground ever explored by the Houlams. Here lived beasts who had lived before man. The shadow of a mysterious past seemed to cover the river and the forest with twilight.

"Aoun and Zouah need more weapons," Zouah said.

"Yes," Aoun agreed. "We must stay here and fashion clubs and propulsors and spears to defend ourselves against unknown dangers."

BEHIND the arc of the fire, Aoun took the first watch as was his custom, his senses stretched out uneasily to pick up sly movements in the shadows, phosphorescent lights and odors.

Bats flitted by on cotton wings. High up a flying fox with the span of an eagle vacillated under the stars. Jackals were the first to show themselves, shuffling furtively toward the mystery of fire. Their shadows stretched out behind them, their brilliant eyes drank up the red light of the flames. Their violent stench annoyed Aoun, rendered less noticeable the odor of other animals whose presence he wished to discern. He picked up rocks and threw them. At the first volley the jackals disappeared.

Dogs appeared, held at bay by the fire, sniffing the odor of roasted meat, a confused supplication in their clamor. They fell back when wolves emerged, and the wolves gave way to allow the passage of hyenas. The hyenas trotted about, jerking convulsively on their sloping rumps and laughing like old women.

Aoun knew that there was enough assembled animal energy to destroy fifty men. The dogs did not know their strength. The jaws of the hyenas were as powerful as those of the tiger. The wolves showed muscular necks, and the jackals with their pointed teeth could

strip a body of flesh in the time it takes a dry branch to be consumed by fire.

The fire held them back. They were crafty, but not audacious, and their own antagonisms scattered their determination. They waited vainly for one of those events that sometimes reward the watcher. Hate, by intervals, sent them against each other. A howl from the wolves, and the jackals would take refuge in the shadows.

The hyenas, the strongest and the noisiest, menaced the men the least, accustomed as they were to feeble or motionless prey. Nevertheless they lingered with the others, attracted by the strange warm light that rose from the earth.

Aoun threw large branches on the fire when he lay down to rest under the guard of his companion.

The day grew from a pale sunrise. The leaves and the grass below seemed motionless. Peace rested over the river. But Aoun led the way down the slope to a young green oak and with his hatchet cut the first branches for the weapons.

Eight days passed before they were ready. Points of flint or sharp teeth terminated the lances. Each had a spear tipped with horn and a propulsor that could throw shafts at long range. The club of knotted oak, handled by Aoun, was a protection against the large beasts.

Eager curiosity led them forward the first day of their journey. Everywhere they paused to marvel. The clan of the Houlams seemed lost forever behind the mountains.

At noon they found the heat intolerable even near the river. Animal life was hidden. A few crocodiles stretched their scaly bodies on the promontories of the islands, or a hippopotamus appeared for an instant on the surface of the yellow ripples. In the late afternoon they looked for shelter.

Three palm trees on a knoll growing near together could be notched and laced

with vines to form a triangular inclosure, the lattice, supple and solid, would hold back a tiger until the pointed stake or spear had pierced the heart or opened the belly. Leafy vines served for a roof and spiny branches closed the entrance.

The sun had gone below the ebony trees when the travelers finished their work and went inside. Through the lattice they could see the river, the hippopotamuses coming up, lifting themselves indolently on the islands, the crocodiles with their rough bodies and stupid heads giving the impression that they were half animal, half mineral.

Purple herons frolicked over the water plants. Two black storks rose from the opposite bank. A flight of yellow-headed cranes left the nearest reeds. Pheasants of emerald green, sapphire, and gold whirled after them, and a snowy flight of egrets hovered over the flowery islands.

The grass-eating animals came down to drink. Seized by panic a herd of deer fled. The horses, restless and tumultuous, caution tensing their muscles under their glossy coats, oscillated nervously, ready to stampede at the first sign of danger.

Suddenly a movement in the vegetation near the shelter attracted the gaze of Aoun.

A PYTHON unrolled its supple body—as thick as the waist of a man and many times longer. Aoun watched with disgust this unknown reptile. It seemed to move about heavily, at hazard, torpid. Neither he nor Zouah could estimate its strength, nor did they know if the fangs held poison like the snakes in western lands. It might be as strong as a tiger, as venomous as a viper.

Leisurely it approached the shelter. Aoun waited with the lance. The repulsive head nosed about the vines seeking an opening, and Aoun watched his

chance to prick the jaw with the point of flint.

The snake leaped back with a long-drawn-out hiss, twisted itself for a moment dizzily, then slowly moved toward the river. Suddenly it coiled and remained motionless. A doe, on the way to the water, hesitated, disturbed by the odor of the men. She looked around timidly. When she saw the serpent she seemed to lose the power to move, her brown eyes fixed upon the motionless ones.

The long, moist body snapped forward with the speed of a panther. A heavy blow numbed the prey. The tail of the python rolled around the struggling body that beat itself vainly against the long, icy muscles. The soft, brown muzzle opened, and the tongue hung out with the last agonized breath.

Resentment burned inside of Aoun, stayed in him like the heat of a wound. He could watch a leopard or wolf kill a doe with no emotion. In the carnivorous animals he sensed a life that resembled his own. But this long, slimy body without members, the small head and glassy eyes, filled him with deep repulsion. The victory by the river bank seemed to menace man himself.

"Aoun and Zouah must find a cavern for shelter," he said after a while.

The end of spring drew to a close, and a savage heat bent down upon the river. Feverish vapors lifted under the stars and veiled the banks long after daylight.

Aoun and Zouah moved downstream. Here and there rocks bordered the river, but the fissures were too narrow to shelter men. When the sun was high they sought the shadows. After midday they rested, became a part of the torpor that immobilized the animals, leaving only the sound of the water and the ceaseless grating of insects. When the shadows began to form islands on the ground they would start out again.

One morning a chain of rocks was

visible, high and forbidding, breaking in two gorges, descending gradually on the land side toward the tangle of the jungle, an abrupt ridge facing the river, reached by what appeared to be a wide, rock-strewn shore.

As they drew nearer they saw many overhanging cliffs that would have sheltered a clan. They examined the walls of basalt hopefully, seeking a narrow opening that might lead to a spacious cavern, a natural formation offering security when they returned at night from the hunt or exploration.

Zouah pointed out a cleft that opened high above their heads, no wider than two hands at the base, but spreading gradually to a width that would allow them to slide through. Before the crevice a fallen boulder, thrown down by some cataclysm of the past, formed a platform on its horizontal face large enough for several men to stand erect.

Zouah mounted on Aoun's shoulders, then reached down with his lance and helped his companion climb to the platform, aided by the rough, uneven side of the boulder.

The conformation of the rocky lips of the fissure allowed them to slide through sideways into a narrow passage. It was not long, and it opened, as they had hoped, into a cave. Farther into the core of the ridge, a declivity led down into obscurity.

"The cavern is large," Aoun said. "Perhaps there are other issues."

They moved down into the unknown slowly. The odor of a flesh-eating animal disturbed them, and they hesitated before a jutting rock that narrowed the corridor. After a moment, Aoun pressed on past it, and turned toward the left. A light glowed faintly below. Bats flew about with shrill cries. As they went on, the incline became less abrupt and the light, still pale, continued to grow.

It came from a gap in the wall, long

and narrow, too narrow to permit the passage of a human being.

"Aoun and Zouah are masters of the cavern!" Aoun shouted.

The roaring of an enormous beast, seeming to come from every direction, echoed under the mineral vaults. Zouah, who was nearer the crevice, looked through. He remained there, motionless, communicating his sudden terror to Aoun. After a while he fell back slowly, and Aoun, shivering with the dread of the unknown, looked through the opening.

Two phosphorescent eyes gleamed from a great head shadowed by a thick black mane. The animal resembled both the lion and the tiger, but was larger than either. The wide chest expanded like the chest of a bull. Long, sinuous, and at the same time thickset, it was the most formidable feline that Aoun had ever seen.

"The lion of the caves," he whispered, then fell back beside Zouah.

They waited motionless, listening to the disturbed breathing of the beast that was separated from them by so narrow a wall. The lion roared again, with less volume, a low grumbling as he lay down. He did not know the meaning of fear. No animal had the hardihood to attack him, unless perhaps the half-blind rhinoceros.

The mammoth, without fearing him, had no cause to seek a quarrel. The bulls who defended the herd against the tiger fled before him. The beings that he scented behind the wall of basalt reminded him of monkeys, timid, noisy creatures that he could brush aside with his paw. He knew that he ruled the caverns and the jungle.

III.

SLOWLY the two men made their way back to the high cavern.

The shelter was accessible only to man, vampire bats, and birds, but the

nearness of the feline worried them. They decided not to leave until they had found another cave.

"Aoun and Zouah will hunt when they see that the lion of the rocks is fed and asleep in his den," Aoun said.

Zouah brought provisions of roots and mushrooms, guided by the instincts of his race. Aoun hunted, and gathered wood in a pile under the platform. Zouah drew it up with leather thongs.

Seated in the red glow they ate the roasted flesh with the happy haste of young wolves, sheltered from those who watched below, disdaining the winged things that fluttered over their heads.

Game was abundant. The night animals slept before daybreak, drunk with flesh and blood. For a few days they spoke of leaving the refuge, and Aoun searched listlessly during the day for another cave.

It was Zouah who said: "Farther on there are savage beasts. Where will Aoun and Zouah find so spacious a cavern?"

Every day, when Aoun was hunting, Zouah would go down the incline and peer into the lair. After a while the lion did not notice his presence, the odor of the man was so familiar it did not even disturb him in his sleep.

"Aoun and Zouah are not the enemies of the lion of the rocks," Zouah said gently.

Startled by the voice, the animal got up slowly and snarled. Through the opening Zouah felt the hot, fetid breath on his face. For the first time the lion saw the man.

"The lion is stronger than Zouah. But Zouah is more cunning. If the lion, the Houlam, and the Wah made an alliance, as other men have made an alliance with the dog, no prey would escape them."

He spoke hopefully. Often the Men Without Shoulders lived in friendly accord with dogs who helped them in the hunt. Baoh, the father of Aoun, had

allied himself with a herd of mammoths for his own protection. The powerful chest, the head that resembled a block of granite, the fierce eyes, had long since ceased to terrify the Wah, and he knew that he himself had ceased to be prey because his odor had mixed itself so often with the emanations of the lair.

The furious heat of early summer beat down upon the land, calcinating the arid steppes, multiplying the terrifying vegetal energy of the forest, the jungle, and the damp savannas, spreading a wave of green life that devoured the banks of the river. Worms, spiders, scorpions, insects, swarmed in the wrinkles of the foliage and bark. The viscous flesh of the reptile, the mollusk, the frog, heaped itself in the coves.

Flocks of herbivorous animals arrived from the plains. In spite of the nearness of the lion of the rocks, the tiger and the yellow lion hunted near the ridge. Aoun went out, only after daylight, and returned before dusk. While Zouah dried strips of deer meat under the sun or added to his provision of roots, Aoun explored the surrounding country.

One day he went upstream, crossed the river swimming, and climbed on a high boulder. A blue forest barred the horizon. Vague, uneasy waves of restlessness and curiosity disturbed him. He remained on the boulder for many hours wondering what savannas, hunting lands, and strange animals were hidden in the forest and beyond.

When the shadow of the rocky chain reached the opposite bank of the river, and Aoun had not returned, Zouah descended from the platform with the aid of leather thongs and went in the direction of the fork of the rivers. A herd of buffaloes barred the way. He knew well their uneven disposition. The bulls became dangerous at the first fright of the herd.

He made a wide circle toward the west

and turned again toward the south when a bull rhinoceros showed himself in the high grass. Zouah thought he was hidden under the green vaults of a fig tree, but the heavy beast followed him curiously. He climbed upon a hillock, circled a small pond and went astray in the thickets.

He found himself near the rocky ridge, but on the opposite side from the platform. The ridge was more deeply cleft here. In spite of the lateness of the hour, the light flowed savagely upon the desolation of basalt. Two falcons described their flight in spirals, lifting toward a foamy cloud almost without a movement of their wing feathers.

The entrance to the den should be there in one of the yawning black cracks where even the shadows seemed made of stone.

Suddenly Zouah's hair lifted at the base of his skull. Below, upon the highest hillock, a tawny lion had appeared. Under the tree where the Wah stood, the grass was short. The lion had seen him.

ZOUAH waited, trembling, lacking the dash and assurance of Aoun. He knew that his spear could not penetrate the hard chest, and that the club he carried was too light to crack the spine or break the paws. The tree was too low to offer safety.

His roving eyes picked out a jagged wall leading toward the rocky chain, a ledge too narrow for the lion to traverse. He ran toward it, trying to locate indentations and gaps. When he turned to look behind, the lion was not in sight, hesitating perhaps, or nonchalant like his kind. Zouah hoped that he had not set out in pursuit, but he kept on toward the ledge. A nearer view showed three jutting rocks, arranged like branches, by which he could climb to safety.

Scarcely had he drawn himself onto the height when the lion appeared again.

Sighting the man, he roared and rushed toward the wall. The face, almost vertical, offered no foothold that could sustain his weight. Three times he tried to get up, then fell back on the short grass with a snarl of baffled rage.

The yellow eyes and the green eyes were fixed on each other, one in anger, the other in terror. The bright light was dying now. Zouah knew that if Aoun reached the platform and found his companion gone he would set out in search. So he decided to climb higher and descend on the other side of the ridge. He felt his way along the ledge toward the slope that led to the north.

He had not gone far when he realized that the lion had climbed up to head him off. He could not get back again to the ledge, and so he ran in the only direction that was open to him. Before him was the dark mouth of a cavern. He swerved aside, for his desperate gaze had located another ledge. The lion had anticipated his movement and bounded ahead to cut him off.

In the mouth of the cavern a dark form appeared, came into the open. The great feline did not notice the emanations of the being who for so many days had stayed beside his lair. His attention was riveted on the tawny lion.

The feline bodies clashed. The smaller beast rolled over, aware of strength greater than his own, cringed away and fled, his flank open from which red life left a trail upon the grass.

Prostrate, breathing painfully, the palms of his hands against the cooling soil, the Wah waited passively. In those few seconds of waiting he lived again his own dreamy thoughts of an alliance with the lion—thoughts formulated in the safety of the cave. Now terror engulfed him, and he waited for death.

The lion grumbled and licked a gash left by the claws of his enemy. Slowly he approached the mouth of the cavern. Zouah heard the soft step drawing

nearer, felt the breath upon the back of his neck, then the weight of a paw resting on his spine.

The claws did not tighten and tear the flesh.

Zouah murmured in a low voice: "Zouah is like a deer under the claws of the lion of the rocks——"

The weight of the paw was withdrawn. Each interval of peace lessened the chance of violence. The animal had not yet considered the man as prey, and so he might never consider him as such. Presently the lion sighed heavily and squatted on the floor of the cave. He reached out with drawn-back claws and touched the Wah as playfully as when in the lair he had touched those born the same day as himself.

The entrance to the cavern was filled with ash-violet shadows. Two stars vacillated in the pool of the heavens, and a breeze sighed over the ridge. The feline lifted himself and yawned. The ardor of the hunt glowed suddenly in his eyes. Again the moment of life and death was at hand. Zouah, trembling and fearful, might well be confused with the palpitating life in the jungle. So he got to his feet and called out in a firm voice:

"The lion of the rocks has made an alliance with Zouah!"

The lambent yellow fires turned toward the man. Again the lion breathed deeply and stretched his long, supple body. After a while he moved leisurely toward the entrance of the cavern, stood for a moment contemplating his surroundings, then descended the rocky corridor toward the jungle.

Zouah ran to the fissure and shouted: "Zouah has made an alliance with the lion of the rocks!"

He heard Aoun's footsteps, then a brand spread russet lights in the obscurity. In that light Zouah saw the Houlam's face, on which was written amazement, fear, and admiration.

IV.

EVERY DAY after that Aoun and Zouah went into the lower cavern and showed themselves at the fissure. At first the presence of the Houlam disturbed the lion, but it was not long before he accepted the two emanations as one.

Aoun said: "It is time to renew the alliance. Aoun must visit him with Zouah when he has hunted well."

The next morning they looked into the den and saw the body of an axis deer. The feline slept heavily, tired from the hunt and gorged with flesh.

"We will go to-night," Aoun said.

The platform cooled with the lengthening shadows, and the night breeze lifted, fanning the bare chests of the nomads. Zouah thought of the lion with tenderness and wished that he had found the courage to caress him. Aoun looked forward to a new conquest, and both waited eagerly for the time when the sun would redden.

Zouah descended into the lower cavern. The lion was awake, gnawing a bone. He rejoined Aoun: "Let us go now," he said.

The flocks had already been to water and were seeking cover. Aoun went ahead as was his custom to offer himself first to danger.

When they were near the cavern Zouah said: "Zouah must go first now."

Aoun was armed with club and spear, but Zouah carried no weapons.

He moved forward slowly into the shadows, speaking as he went: "Zouah and Aoun have come to renew the alliance. The time of the rains is near, and the prey will be less abundant. Then the lion of the rocks should have by his side the cunning of Zouah and the strength of Aoun."

The lion lifted his supple body with a cavernous yawn, came near the Wah and rubbed his soft jowl against the

hairless arm. Zouah passed his hand over the muscled breast. Touch renewed confidence. Again and again he stroked the animal. Motionless, the lion enjoyed the caress.

Since his birth, until the past autumn, he had lived with his kind. He had occupied a den upstream near a lake, with his female. The young were old enough to hunt. Then a cloud-burst lifted the lake in tumult. The water rose, carrying away palm groves, sweeping into the high caverns. The mother and the young were carried away and drowned. The lion clung to a tree and was washed with it upon firm ground.

The old den stayed for a season under water. The lion searched at first with vehement persistence. He called to his mate stridently when memories stirred within his thick skull. Months passed. He found the ridge of basalt and sheltered himself against the cata-racts of the sky, the only force he had learned to fear.

Loneliness dried his flanks. Often he sniffed in the corners of the cave when he brought in the prey, as if to find those who formerly tore at the meat beside him. After a while memory grew dim. He became accustomed to scent no other odor than that of himself, but his body had never resigned itself to being alone.

The silhouette of Aoun appeared in the light. He was there, ready with club and spear. The feline ceased to breathe regularly. Slowly he got to his feet, his fangs gleaming.

"Aoun is also the ally of the lion," Zouah said appeasingly.

But the lion was gathering his muscles for a leap, and Aoun had lifted his club. Zouah moved quickly, placed himself between the belligerent bodies. The moment of danger passed as quickly as it had come. Aoun was satisfied to back slowly into the light, followed by Zouah.

They completed the alliance by de-

grees. It was not long before they came to the lair one evening after sundown and followed the feline to the hunt.

THE MOON, halfway in its course, sprinkled the earth through the foliage with patches of white light. The terrifying stench of the lion awakened the herbivorous animals. They fell away from the circle of his emanations into the secret depths that opened under the branches and in the thickets. One moment the jungle teemed with life, the next it seemed deserted.

The supple form was held in check by the keen senses, the craftiness and the agility of the weak. Only the abundance of life, the necessity for a great number to swarm in every corner of the plain, the woodland, and the jungle, favored the kingly beast. In spite of the overflowing supply, daylight often found him sappy of patience and energy, entering the cave famished.

This night the lesser emanations of the men, added to the penetrating odor of the animal, widened the space from which the grass eaters fled.

The lion concealed himself at the border of the jungle and the marsh. Exotic flowers diffused their heavy perfume. The damp earth smelled of musk and decay. The men separated and hid, Aoun in a clump of bamboos, Zouah among the reeds.

An owl passed on silent wings. Enormous frogs croaked on the lily pads. Then a boar appeared, turning over the soil with his gleaming tusks.

He was a thick brute with high shoulders and tiny feet, and he moved about in a truculent manner, his noisy breathing punctuated by grunts of satisfaction when he rooted out some delicacy. He knew his strength. Confidence and courage animated the powerful body covered with gray bristles. He could cope with the leopard and put to flight wolves or dogs. He would face a lion

if a wound stung him to rage or flight seemed impossible. The consciousness that his kind had always defeated those who annoyed them lessened his vigilance.

He drew near the reeds where Zouah waited and became aware of an odor that reminded him of the rhesus or the gibbon. He grunted in mild protest and went on his heedless way toward the bamboos. Aoun leaped up abruptly and shouted his war cry. Neither the gibbon nor the rhesus possessed that loud voice. The boar backed away, not with fear but with caution.

Zouah leaped up and repeated the cry. A second cry from the bamboos and the boar quickened his retreat, which brought him within reach of the lion.

The mass that fell upon him was heavier than the buffalo. He thrust desperately upon his tusks, but his flank was open. Weakened, he staggered, and the long teeth of the feline found the jugular vein.

When the kill was in the den, carried there by the lion, Aoun tested the alliance. He came forward with his hatchet and took his share of the hunt. After that they hunted often together.

Sometimes they found themselves far from the cave. When they neared the fork of the rivers, Aoun became less interested in the hunt. His restlessness grew until one night he said to Zouah:

"It is good that we know these lands. We can return here after we have seen the country from which the river descends."

They sharpened their weapons, smoked meat, roasted roots, and left the chain of basalt when the sun barely showed itself above the trees.

Zouah looked back with regret toward the cave that had meant safety and peace, but the vagabond spirit of Aoun preceded his footsteps toward the unknown.

A FEVERISH heat enveloped the brakes. The red-headed flies tormented the travelers. The rays of the sun through the branches bit into the flesh like ants.

It was a contradictory country where the jungle opened into clearings, savannas or marshes, then thickened again with bamboos and palms. Monkeys showed their worried faces. Parrots called out in strident voices. As they penetrated deeper into the woodland they were astonished at the height of the trees.

At night the men found shelter in the hollows of aged trees, thickets bristling with spines so sharp and dense that they had but to cut out a corridor with the hatchet and barricade the entrance.

Zouah was sleeping by the fire and Aoun was on watch, when for the first time an emanation disturbed him that was like the odor of man. For a while he sat erect and stretched out his senses. Then he awoke Zouah. The Wah could distinguish only a faint effluvium, but Aoun, dilating his nostrils again, said at last, definitely:

"They are men."

The mysterious beings went away, but came back again. This time Zouah turned to Aoun.

"Aoun is right. They are men."

"They see us, and we cannot see them. We must see them also."

Aoun reached for his club. Zouah tried again to penetrate the shadows, but he could ascertain nothing, and realizing that the prowlers could attack at any moment, he gathered his weapons.

Aoun had spread out upon the circle of his surroundings the delicate network of his senses. As they advanced cautiously toward the west the scent thickened, and he believed there were no more than two men.

The bushes stirred. A light, racing step trembled upon the earth. Through the screen of vegetation a form moved so swiftly that Aoun could not decide

whether it traveled on two feet or four. He stopped short and shouted his war cry. A second running step was heard, nearer than the first. He rushed forward, followed by Zouah, trailing the decreasing emanations.

"Why did Aoun shout his war cry?" Zouah asked when he was again at his side. "Perhaps these men do not want to fight."

"All men want to fight," Aoun declared, waiting, motionless. He sniffed again. "They are far away now."

"They know the forest and we do not. We will not find them again to-night. We must wait until morning."

Aoun stretched out with his ear on the ground. Among the animal footsteps he followed with difficulty the departure of the unknown creatures traveling on two legs. It weakened, was lost completely after a pack of dogs passed.

"The Men of the Forest do not want to fight us now," he concluded. "They are only two, and they have gone to warn their kind."

Aoun slept while Zouah watched by the fire.

Stars scintillated overhead. Zouah asked himself again the question that had disturbed him for so long. What man lighted these fires every evening? They were so small, no larger than the point of a feeble firebrand. The sun and the moon were like fires built of many branches, fed constantly to keep them burning forever.

Again to-night Zouah tried to discern who it was that renewed the wood. He could not understand why they were always invisible. He turned away from the problem that had no answer and meditated upon the heat given off by the sun, stronger when it was overhead than when, toward evening, it became larger in the west.

He thought of the clouds, which were filled with flames after the departure of the sun. There was gathered in the west

more fire than all the fires the Houlams had illuminated in all of the evenings of winter. These musings disappointed and wearied Zouah. He said mechanically what he always said when he reached the barrier:

"What men light the heavens when the sun has left?"

Aoun, dreaming of the Men of the Forest, stirred slightly. It struck Zouah anew that no one among the Wah or the Houlams ever appeared to care to find out who lighted the fires. He waited until Aoun was awake, ready to take over the watch.

"What men put wood on the fires in the sky?" he asked.

Aoun wrinkled his forehead and after a moment replied: "The night lights the fires. The night makes our fire burn more brightly."

Aoun threw large branches on the blaze and forgot the question which had never interested him.

V.

IN THE MORNING they were undecided whether they should continue toward the southeast or turn back. Zouah, less adventurous than Aoun, would have been glad to return to the rocky ridge.

But Aoun said: "If we go back, cannot the Men of the Forest follow us? Are there not others of their kind in the lands we have crossed?"

These reasons seemed valid to the Wah after the Houlam had stated them with assurance. He knew well that men roamed in a wider circle than did wolves, jackals, or dogs. Because they had not encountered a clan since leaving the cave was no reason to believe that there had not been men to the right and left of them that they might meet on the return.

More far-sighted than Aoun, less eager for conflict, his courage was as great, his resignation superior. His

own people had perished. It astonished him to be among the living. All of his thoughts were centered in the alliance with the Houlam, the wish to please and make himself necessary.

"Aoun speaks wisdom," Zouah agreed.

The day passed without sign of the unknown men. They camped in a clearing where the lightning had set fire to the trees and leveled the bushes. Three boulders of schist offered a shelter that needed only to be fortified with spines.

Daylight was near when Aoun awoke to find Zouah on his feet, his ears strained toward the south.

"They have come back," he said.

Aoun pushed aside the barrier of spines and went into the clearing, moved forward slowly toward the border of vegetation. The odor receded, leaving only a faint trace of the mysterious beings. In the dim light, pursuit was impossible, so they waited near the refuge for daylight.

Among the eastern vapors an ashy glow spread. Veiled fires appeared under the clouds, then burst into lakes of amber, rivers of gold, and mountains of purple. With the appearance of the sun, Aoun decided that he wanted to learn the nature of his foes so that he might prepare for defense or attack.

As they proceeded they found paths that seemed to have been traced by the frequent passage of individuals or the less frequent route of clans. Toward midday the odor was intensified. Aoun increased his speed, holding back impatiently so as not to draw too heavily upon the strength of the Wah.

The forest began to lighten. There were fewer trees among clumps of bushes and thickets, cut into by stagnant ponds. Suddenly Aoun cried out and waited for Zouah. In the moist earth were fresh tracks, revealing large feet with five toes.

They followed the tracks for a short

distance. Then Aoun stopped short and indicated a clump of mastic trees.

"They are there," he whispered.

There was no way to determine the number of the enemy. Aoun believed there were only two, but he could not be certain. He, himself, could cope with any warrior of any clan, but Zouah was among the feeble. His club was light and he could not move about nimbly. They must fight at a distance, gaining advantage with the propulsors.

"Zouah, is he ready to fight?" Aoun asked.

"Zouah is ready. But we should try first to form an alliance."

Aoun agreed to this and went ahead because his sense of smell was the keener, and he wished to receive the first shock. They turned around the mastic trees and halted, peering into the thicket.

Aoun called out in his ringing voice: "The Men of the Forest think they are hidden, but we know their retreat. Aoun and Zouah are strong."

THE THICKET guarded the enigma. No sound was heard except the passage of the light breeze, the buzzing of the red-headed flies, and the far-away song of a bird. Aoun grew impatient.

"The Houlam has the scent of a jackal and the hearing of the wolf. The Men of the Forest are hidden in the mastic trees."

Cranes with yellow heads came down beside a pond covered with lotus blossoms. Afar could be seen the hurried passing of a herd of antelope in the light that whitened the grass.

Fear, caution, or cunning counseled silence among the concealed human beings.

Aoun fixed a dart in his propulsor. The idea of a latent, unknown peril was unsupportable. The shaft left the weapon. Three times he sent darts into the mastic trees. The fifth shaft

brought a guttural cry, the branches separated, and a hairy man appeared in view.

He stood on two legs. His back formed a convex arc. His shoulders, almost as narrow as those of the Wah, bent toward the back, and the chest jutted out like the chest of a dog. The head was flat with an enormous muzzle, and the forehead receded. Two pointed ears resembled those of a jackal. A growth of hair formed a crest on the skull. The arms seemed shorter than those of the monkeys. He held in his hand a pointed stone.

For an instant the round eyes fixed themselves on the newcomers. The loose skin on the forehead swelled with anger and fear.

Aoun stared at him for a moment, then burst into laughter. "Aoun and Zouah do not want to harm the Men of the Forest who have no weapons but pointed stones," he said gently.

The response, a rumbling growl, was barely articulate. Another growl was heard, lighter in timbre, and the second primitive, a woman, appeared. Her chest was very narrow, her stomach large, her legs knock-kneed. Her round, shifting eyes expressed aggressive fear.

"Why do not the hairy man and his woman make an alliance with the Houlam and the Wah? The forest is without end, the prey plentiful."

Curiosity spread over the heavy faces. When Zouah finished speaking they leaned forward, listening, as if hoping that he would continue making the articulate sounds that were so strange and pleasing.

Aoun threw his weapons to the ground and laughed again. The woman laughed, after him, a coughing sound that the man picked up a moment later.

Aoun and Zouah approached them slowly. They waited uneasily, ready to flee. The decisive moment came when a few paces separated them. Distrust reappeared. Eyes rolled again, and

foreheads were creased with worried wrinkles. The man lifted the pointed rock menacingly.

Aoun knocked it aside with his open hand. "What can the little rock do against the strength of Aoun?" he asked.

The woman was the first to relax. She stepped forward and spoke in more articulated syllables. The man touched Aoun's hatchet that was passed through his belt. Harm had not sprung at them immediately, and as the minutes passed it seemed less possible. Animal confidence, born of inoffensive contact, grew. Zouah had brought with him a vine basket of dried meat. He offered it to the man who devoured it eagerly.

Before the end of day it was as if they had traveled together for months.

They watched the fire run the length of the branches with superstitious awe. When a chilly wind came up, and across the pure light air the heat of the sun receded rapidly toward the stars, they crept nearer the blaze and warmed their limbs.

Zouah tried to understand the meaning of the thick sounds and awkward gestures. He discovered that the man was designated by a name that sounded like Rah and that the woman answered to Mao. He wanted to find out if there were others of their race in the forest and if they formed a large clan.

Aoun discovered that they were almost as agile in tree climbing as the rhesus, that their senses equaled his own, and that they could see in the dark like a panther. Their speed, not as great as that of Aoun, equaled that of the Wah. Their only weapons were pointed stones, which served them also to cut roots and bark. They willingly ate flesh, but knew how to sustain themselves on roots, tender shoots, and mushrooms.

FORMERLY, in the tertiary forests, their Lemuroidea ancestors had discovered the spoken word and fashioned

rudely the first weapons. They spread out upon the world. Other clans learned to serve themselves with fire and cleverer hands improved the weapons and tools, but the Lemurines, because of an easy, abundant life, did not progress beyond ancient times.

Their language, almost invariable across the centuries, had lost a few articulations. Their gestures remained at the same point of development. Nevertheless, they could adapt themselves to new circumstances. They had learned to face the leopards, panthers, wolves, or dogs. Their agility in climbing put them beyond the reach of the tiger. Feeding, as they did, on vegetables, they were seldom hungry.

They escaped the terrific cold that the Houlamis and other clans beyond the mountains were forced to endure. But the race was facing extinction, even though they had habituated themselves to the woodlands and jungles.

Other men, stronger, equipped with a more articulate language, knowing fire, possessing strong, effective weapons, drove the Lemurines from place to place. For a thousand years the conquerors had not multiplied more than two or three times each generation, but they moved about, and at their approach the primitives fled. There were periods of terror when memory of bloody massacres marked itself in the instinct as well as memory.

Rah and Mao had not known these tribulations. They were young and had not witnessed invasion. Once or twice, at the extremity of the plateau, they had seen the fires of a camp, an imprecise and unpleasant memory that confused itself now with the fire that warmed them and cooked their food.

When Zouah learned to understand them better he discovered that there were other Lemurines in the forest and that they had avoided the travelers. Aoun heard this news casually. They had fled from him once, he reasoned,

they would do so again, unless, seeing Rah and Mao, they approached for an alliance.

THROUGH the arcades of the foliage the horns of the crescent moon showed among the stars. Rah and Mao were feeding the fire under the direction of the Wah. A quarter of a deer was roasting.

When the flesh was cooked, Aoun gave a share to the Lemurines and divided the rest with Zouah. Inoffensive one against the other, ready to defend themselves together against the dangers that surrounded them, the savage beings tasted the joy of healthy bodies, rest, and abundant food.

For days there had been nothing to disturb the tranquillity. Both Aoun and Zouah knew that this peace could not last. Zouah was not surprised when Aoun became suddenly alert.

"There are men near," he announced.

Mao was staring into the shadows with her night-seeing eyes. Zouah touched her shoulder and questioned her with the signs they both understood. She signified affirmation.

Aoun gathered his weapons and moved out toward the odor. One instant the emanations seemed near, the next moment they were scattered.

In the ashy light that found its way through the branches, the Houlam thought he distinguished human forms. He rushed forward and found nothing. Treacherous, boggy ground held him back. On the opposite bank shadowy creatures seemed to spurt out of the water plants.

Aoun shouted to them: "Aoun and Zouah are the allies of the Men of the Forest!"

At the sound of his voice they turned and looked at him, then they grumbled hoarsely and menaced him with the sharpened rocks. Rah approached and called out in their own language and placed his two hands on the arm of the

Houlam to signify friendship. When Mao and Zouah appeared, they cried out again in fear and amazement.

"How did the Men pass through the marsh?" Aoun asked the woman with gestures.

She laughed and deviated toward the left. Under the water Aoun perceived dimly a gray shadow. Mao plunged in up to her thighs and moved forward along the under-water ridge. Aoun followed her, and Rah preceded Zouah.

The Lemurines had waited, motionless. When Aoun stepped on firm earth panic seized them. A woman gave the signal for flight. Rah called out in an excited, pleading voice. A thick-set fellow, who seemed to be the chief, stopped. The others came back from the bushes and waited in a long zigzag line.

The chief waited uneasily while Rah approached, staring past the man of his own race to the tall Houlam. After several maneuvers he allowed Aoun to place his hand upon his shoulder. A childlike joy swept over the Lemurines—eight men and four women. They gathered around Aoun and stared at him in amazement, proud to be allied to a chief who was taller than the greatest of their conquerors.

VI.

FOR A MOON the allies roved about the forest. The Lemurines knew where to find springs of crystal water and edible roots and the sago pith. The Houlam fashioned for them clubs and hatchets. Everything about him that had terrified them at first now spoke of security.

They admired Zouah for his ingeniousness. He understood their gestures and some of their words, and they knew that the chief listened to his counsel. They felt for him something akin to comradeship such as they granted to each other, but they looked at Aoun

with an emotion that was almost worship.

As they advanced toward the south, they showed a growing hesitation. When Zouah noticed it and questioned Mao, she explained that they were nearing the end of the woodland. The plateau descended to an area of humid heat, palms, vines, and bamboos.

They were stopped abruptly by a torrential river that followed a narrow bed. On the opposite bank the slope was on a lower level than the ground on which they were standing. So they looked down upon the vast savanna, dotted with islands of small trees and shrubs.

The Lemurines hesitated to come out into the open, beyond the line of bushes, and when they did, scrutinized the land below uneasily.

Mao communicated their fears to Zouah. "It is the hunting land of the Men of the Fire," she said.

AMONG the rocks near the bank was a long cave that could be defended against animals or men. Before it was an open space where a fire could be lighted, screened from the opposite bank by thick, high bushes.

A cool wind swept the flames through bark and branches. The carcass of a deer was roasted whole for the clan. Before the meal was finished, however, Rah got up quickly, spoke in the language of his race, and pointed excitedly across the river.

Upon the lower level, another fire glowed.

Feeble at first, it seemed to hesitate to plunge the length of twigs and branches. Suddenly, the flames leaped high, threw brilliant light into what was, a moment before, shadows. Red smoke floated above the flames, and the silhouettes of men could be seen, black or copper-colored as they passed before the fire or on the sides.

Aoun counted seven—probably a small expedition of hunt or exploration

sent out by the clan. They were preparing meat to roast when they showed the first signs of uneasiness. From time to time they looked upward across the river. After a while they stood up and stared fixedly toward the elevation.

Zouah said: "They have seen the glow of our fire above the bushes."

Their lack of excitement astonished the Houlam until he remembered the swift current of the river. No man could cross it swimming. On both banks security was for the moment complete.

Aoun watched curiously these human beings who were nearer to his own race than were the Lemurines. Even at the distance he discerned their short legs, deep chests, narrow craniums, heavy faces marked with bushy eyebrows.

Zouah had discovered two small fires at a distance from the main fire. "They do not know the secret of the fire in the rocks," he said.

That night two Lemurines watched with Aoun. When he awakened Zouah the moon had set, and the fire below threw out only pale lights. The warriors were asleep, all except one who moved about in the half shadows. When Zouah could no longer see him, the night vision of the Lemurines followed his movements.

Toward daylight a mist gathered over the river, veiling the opposite slope. At daybreak the camp below was invisible. The fog persisted, gradually showing rifts cut out by the morning wind. When at length it was dispersed, the Lemurines cried out dolefully. Only a few ashes and blackened firebrands showed where the Chelleans had camped.

Aoun decided to fortify the cavern. To inclose themselves against a large number was death, but he had counted only seven, and the barricaded camp would serve as a decoy. They killed antelopes, the flesh of which could be dried in the sun or by the fire, and

gathered vegetable provision. Every one watched all the time as naturally as dogs or jackals.

AT TWILIGHT the Lemurines scattered. Aoun climbed on a high rock for a view of the surrounding country but saw nothing to cause concern.

When he came down he reassured Zouah: "The Men of the Fire realize they are only seven. They have gone away."

"Perhaps the size of the fire made them believe it was defended by many, and they have gone to seek help from the clan."

"Their clan is far. Why would they come back?"

"Because the Men of the Forest do not know fire. They will want to know what strangers are in their land."

This disturbed Aoun. Again he examined the surroundings of the cave. To the south was the river and the rocks, to the east a long open spread, to the west marshy ground. There was but one danger route—the forest which stretched out at the rear. But between the forest and the cavern, only grass grew with a few isolated trees. To reach the shelter, the Men of the Fire must cross a long distance, menaced by the propulsors, lances, and spears, if the attack took place when there was light.

Aoun changed the watchers again to avoid all possible surprise. The crescent moon, larger and more luminous, would not set until midnight.

Seated by the fire, Aoun dozed, his senses only watching. The crescent was two thirds of its course when he lifted his head. The fire was reduced to coals. He threw on wood. Sniffing suspiciously, he looked at the watchers. Two of them were standing. The third got up immediately. Weak emanations came from the woods.

Aoun joined Rah. Rah, his ears strained, large nostrils flaring, wrinkled

his forehead and murmured sounds meaning that the Chelleans had crossed the river and were near. Hidden in the fringe of the forest, they watched the fire while they themselves were invisible.

Aoun held back the angry war cry that trembled in his throat. He was enraged because the Men of the Fire had dared cross the river to attack his camp. They showed thus their courage and hostility, and he sent back the same qualities to meet them.

He moved about near the cavern, trying to locate more definitely the emanations and learn the number of the enemy. Two spears and two darts were suspended from his shoulder, and he held his propulsor ready. If he could attract the Chelleans out of the forest, armed only with lances and clubs, even in the dim light he could wound or kill many with the propulsor before they were near enough to overwhelm the camp.

Meanwhile, the Lemurines had come out of the cavern one by one, apprised of the unwelcome presence. With the exception of the chief, a young boy, and Rah and Mao, they showed great terror.

"Are there more warriors than we saw yesterday?" Zouah asked.

"There are no more. Aoun will give his war cry."

"Zouah always prefers alliance to battle. Zouah will speak to the Men of the Fire."

The Wah called out loudly in conciliatory tones: "The forest is large. There is prey for all men. The Hou-lam and the Wah have never fought the Men of the Fire. They are not their enemies."

When there was no reply, Aoun called out in his turn: "Aoun and Zouah are ready with their weapons. If the Men of the Fire want to fight, not one of them will return to the clan!"

No sound came except the light rustling of the breeze. Aoun moved

nearer the woodland, and his voice rang out louder with an impatient note: "The Men of the Fire will not answer?"

Knowing that he was watched, the silence threw him into sudden fury. He beat his chest with his fist, and his voice sounded like the howl of a wolf: "Aoun will open your chests and bellies and give your bodies to the hyenas!" He moved forward still farther and continued his threats: "Aoun will break your backs with his club!"

One moment the emanations seemed near, the next moment they appeared to recede. Aoun went farther toward the woods, standing at his full height, until he was within range. He was fitting a dart into the weapon when a cry of alarm from Zouah brought him around.

On the left a bush had moved forward, concealing men who intended to come between him and the fire, cut off his retreat. Aoun fell back without haste. Then three Chelleans rushed out from the right.

Faced with their conquerors, the Lemurines broke and scattered, all save Rah, Mao, the chief, and the boy. The propulsor turned and a spear was planted in the shoulder of the nearest Chellean. Zouah started forward, leading an attack.

Surprised at the range of the propulsor, astonished to see the Wah leading the Lemurines, the Men of the Fire retreated. But they carried Mao with them. She had leaped forward to drag back a Lemurine woman who in terrified bewilderment was fleeing toward the forest. Her screams joined with the angry lamentations of Rah.

The wind had changed, and the scent seemed lost. The tracks, scattered among the thickets and marshes, were not easy to follow and could not be relied upon until after many detours. A ferocious enthusiasm carried Aoun forward. To have one of his number captured was the same as defeat.

AFTER a while they picked up the emanations again, stronger than before. The trail penetrated deep into the forest, then swung out toward the river. The trees were more widely spaced and an area of grass appeared.

The Chelleans had halted and lighted a fire. An old man, seated upon a rock, watched Aoun and his followers approach without concern. Aoun understood why when he reached a wide fissure in the earth, at the bottom of which a creek followed its swift course.

The distance that separated the two bands was four times greater than the range of the propulsor. The Chelleans stood up now, in all their strength, superior in number and filled with contempt for the allies of the Houlam. Their chief showed a deep chest, and powerful arms that could stifle a panther. He pointed toward Zouah, turned to his followers and opened his enormous mouth in a deep laugh.

Around the fire, large boulders made the position of the Chelleans almost unattackable. Every chance was with them if the propulsors were not taken into account. Aoun came to a quick decision. He turned toward the woodland to follow the chasm to some distant point where it could be crossed.

They did not have far to go. The fissure closed, and the narrow, clear torrent rushed on through subterranean passages.

"Aoun will go first," Aoun said. "The Men of the Fire are not swift enough to capture him."

When he showed himself near the camp, the Chelleans did not move. Three of them held their positions in the openings between the boulders, while the others remained near the fire. They were ready with stakes, hatchets, and throwing rocks. Aoun shortened his pace, then stopped.

"Give me back the woman, and we will allow you to go to your hunting grounds in peace," he called out.

They did not understand his words, but the gestures were those of all nomads. Coarse laughs answered him. The chief disappeared from view, then reappeared again in full view near the fire. He dragged Mao by the hair and beat her down with a blow of his fist upon her skull, then, pointing to the stretched-out body, then to his jaws and the fire, signified that he would roast her and eat her.

Aoun waited for Zouah to join him. When they were in range of the propulsors, he said: "Aoun will go toward the right. When the Men of the Fire show themselves to follow his movements, Zouah will send shafts into them."

Aoun circled the fire. A spear whistled, answered by a groan. Then the Wah brandished his weapon insultingly and moved toward the left. Aoun sent a dart that reached its human target. Another shaft from Zouah and Aoun shouted:

"The Men of the Fire have three wounded now! They will never return to their clan!"

At daybreak, while the Chelleans waited behind the rocks, and Aoun watched, a storm announced itself in a black cloud. The exhaustless energies, rushing from the sky, enveloped the two belligerent camps in the silence of expectancy.

The beasts hiding in the woods were still. The rain, when it fell, came down in large drops. The Chelleans who had been hiding from the propulsors were seen, scurrying about, trying to shelter the fire cages.

The chief gave orders, and with a unanimous yell, the warriors rushed out. Battle was preferable to the loss of their fire.

THE CHIEF and the strongest of the warriors directed themselves at Aoun, the others toward Zouah and the Lemurines. They sent two spears, fol-

lowed swiftly by two more, but the darkness and their own speed destroyed their aim. To gain time, Aoun fell back toward the river, Zouah toward the woods.

With cries of victory, the Chelleans came forward again. Aoun continued to fall back, and the Wah was near shelter when the heavens opened. Sheets of water came down on the fire, extinguishing the last spark. One of the warriors, wounded slightly by the propulsor, left on guard with the fire cages, tried to shelter them under a boulder.

Zouah and his companions were surrounded. A young Lemurine was struck down with a stake before he could take refuge in a tree. Rah and the chief of the Lemurines tried to defend themselves from their powerful enemies with their light clubs. With the hatchet, Zouah finished a Chellean already wounded in the shoulder, but another sliding behind seized him and disarmed him.

Aoun, who had turned toward the woods to join his companions, swung his club again. The first blow had broken a stake, this cleaved a cranium. He found himself face to face with the Chellean chief.

The chief held an ebony stake, heavy and sharp. His round, phosphorescent eyes glowed savagely, and he came forward steadily, confident in his deep chest and high body set firmly upon round thighs. He struck first, and the side of his weapon grazed the Houlam.

The club swung, met nothing but the earth. The two chiefs fell back and waited cautiously. The rain enveloped them now, and they saw each other only during the flashes of lightning.

Aoun took the offensive this time. The club swung, tore the skin from the hairy body, but before he could leap back the sharp point of the stake lacerated his own shoulder.

Again the stout wooden weapons clashed. Again Aoun leaped. This

*A new, rich
land! A new
world to ex-
plore!*



time the stake had reached his chest. Blood flowed from two wounds, and the Chellean chief came forward, head low, animated by new confidence.

Aoun, realizing that he was weakening from loss of blood, used his ebbing strength to scream his battle cry, seize the stake with his left hand and strike blindly with his right. The blow landed full on the skull. The Chellean waited, stunned, and the second blow broke the clavicle. Others followed swiftly, crushing the ribs.

The flashes of lightning were less

frequent now. Aoun searched vainly for Zouah and the Lemurines. The storm had killed all odors.

He called out: "Where is Zouah hidden? Aoun has vanquished his enemies!"

He crawled about in the darkness, moving more swiftly in the flashes of light. He thought he saw Rah. He followed and instead found the Lemurine chief. In the rain he was as powerless as the insects hidden under the leaves. It was a long while before they found Rah. He gesticulated excitedly.

Aoun understood that he had not seen Zouah, so he called again and again:

"Where is Zouah hidden? Aoun has vanquished his enemies——"

Then he wept, his tears mixing with the rain. He gave again and again with a growing note of hopelessness the calling cry that they had always used when they were separated in the open.

Hours passed. The rain ceased. A pale glow showed in the east, lighting dimly the Chellean killed by Zouah and the young Lemurine who had been pierced by a stake. They found the bodies of the warrior and the chief brought down by Aoun. Near the fire, a Chellean tried to stifle his groans. When he was discovered he threw himself before Aoun with hoarse supplications. Two of the Lemurines struck him down with their clubs. Mao, hidden under a boulder, laughed loudly at this and came out, weak and shivering.

Mao listened to Rah, then made Aoun understand that the Chelleans had captured the Wah, taken him with them into the forest when they fled. Aoun ordered the Lemurines to scatter and hunt for the trail. Those who had broken before the battle came forward now timorously and added their piercing night vision and keen nostrils to the hunt.

Aoun led a party upstream, the chief with the other men searched downstream. It was afternoon when Mao stopped with a sharp cry. Among the tracks on the clay were those of Zouah. The trail was not fresh. The Chelleans had passed that way in the morning, and it would be impossible to overtake them before the next day.

"The Men of the Fire are far away and swift," Aoun said to Rah. "Aoun, alone, can overtake them."

When at last Rah understood and explained to the others, a low, wailing protest spread from one to another. They lamented openly while Aoun made preparations to leave. Three spears and

two darts were attached to his belt, for the propulsor, flint and macassite in an inside pocket of his garment, club and hatchet in his hands.

The Lemurines accompanied him to the crest of a hill, where they huddled together, watching him disappear from view in the distance.

VII.

AT TIMES the trail was clearly revealed. At the first halt the earth was filled with strong odors. Aoun found a wad of grass that Zouah had held in his hand and thrown behind him when he left. There could be only one reason why the Chelleans allowed a prisoner to live whose weakness halted their flight—they wished to use the Wah as a hostage in case of attack.

When night came, and Aoun sought safety among the boulders, the trail was still fresh.

At daylight he circled a pond and entered a woodland. Often he had been uncertain and misled, forced to retrace his steps. Now, there could be no doubt. A second small hunting party had joined the first and Zouah's captors numbered six.

An emotion stronger than caution gave new energy to the pursuit. Aoun knew that he could outdistance the short-legged warriors. Toward the end of the second day he lost the tracks near a river that was neither deep nor swift. He forded it and searched the bank.

The country was broken, clearing succeeding woodland. Emanations came to him that the rising wind made more intense. He moved forward cautiously among the bushes and bamboos. He crawled through a stretch of high grass and met the strong odor of human beings. He whirled quickly, tensing his muscles for conflict.

To his surprise he found himself confronted by two women. Thickset, with

short, heavy faces, each held a long stake. Among the Houlam's the women rarely handled weapons. Even though he had seen the Lemurine women almost equal to the men in strength and agility, it startled him to see these two in so belligerent an attitude.

He spoke in a friendly voice and lowered his club: "Aoun has not come to kill the warrior women."

They listened intently and suspiciously and continued to threaten him as he came toward them.

"The heavy club of Aoun could break the two stakes at one blow," he said.

One woman with hard arms, thick shoulders, muscular cheeks, healthy energy shining from her frightened eyes, launched her weapon when he was within range. He turned it aside and broke the point.

"Why do you seek war with the Houlam?"

The woman made hasty signs of peace and backed away, followed by her companion. Aoun followed them at a distance.

They reached a clearing among the brakes. There were other women there, twelve in number, including the two he had first encountered. They jumped to their feet when they saw him and cried out shrilly in their excitement. The woman who had attacked him seemed to be the chief. She calmed them with words.

Half-grown children peered at him from behind their mothers. Three small babies were asleep in a bed of brakes. The women formed a narrowing circle and the chief, speaking in a strange language with a soft intonation, proposed an alliance. Aoun had never heard of clans where men and women traveled separately, and he looked again for signs of warriors. The women laughed and drew nearer.

They were young, rugged, with large jaws, all except one who had the slender flexibility of the Houlam. Masses

of shining hair fell on her shoulders. Her lips were apart in astonishment, and her even teeth gleamed like pearls.

The women turned to each other and murmured their admiration. Never had they seen so tall a warrior. They knew three clans only—the Chelleans, the Lemurines whom they rarely saw, and their own clan where the men and women hunted separately and ferocious rites consecrated marriage. The men of their clan had not appeared for many moons, and the women believed that they had perished in battle with the Chelleans.

Had Aoun belonged to their own race they would have rejected him. As it was, they were fascinated by the strangeness of the adventure. Also, they had recently passed through an unlucky period. Half of their number had been massacred by the Chelleans; they had lost their fire cages and had wandered about miserably, weighed down by the memory of their misfortune and filled with hate for their enemies.

Aoun's strength astonished them, evidenced by the size and weight of his club. They admired his weapons, above all the propulsor, after he had sent a shaft into the bushes, far beyond the range of spears and lances.

They pressed close about him, trying to understand his language and gestures. They understood quickly that he searched for one of his clan captured by the Chelleans.

When he gathered dried grass, the women looked about for his fire cage. They stared with breathless awe when he brought the fire from two tiny pieces of rock, illuminated a dry blade of grass that communicated the blaze to a twig. When the fire blazed up, warm and comforting, the chief spoke to the other women in a cadence which they picked up and repeated, a kind of worshipful hymn.

AT DAYLIGHT, Aoun set out again to find the trail of the Chelleans.

The women followed him with growing confidence. They were robust and agile. Those with children carried them on their backs without fatigue. The young boys and girls showed the endurance of jackals.

That night when Aoun built the fire they gathered again and chanted the rhythmic words. Aoun sought out Djeha, of the heavy hair. When he was near her a soft and fearful strength seemed to come from somewhere within his heart, which beat faster. The next day when he was away from her, following the trail, he thought of her and wondered if Ouchar, the chief, would give her to him for a mate.

At the end of the week, the trees thinned, and a long steppe stretched out, dotted with scattered clumps of alders and more isolated tree clumps. They went forward looking for a height of land from which they could scrutinize the horizon. Toward midday a woman who had circled toward the east called out. No explanation was needed. Every one recognized the ashes of a fire.

The camp was at least two days old. The emanations had disappeared completely. There seemed to be the same number of Chelleans. Nothing showed that Zouah was still among them.

Soon after that the trail became more precise, was easier to follow because the party had directed themselves in a straight course toward the north, doubtless returning to the clan. Twice the signs of a fire indicated a recent camp.

The third morning Aoun found the marks of many feet in the moist soil, among them the long narrow footprint of the Wah. From now on the pursuit would be easy. The emanations grew stronger, proof that they gained ground. That evening they pressed on, although the moon had not risen, guided by one of the women who possessed night-seeing eyes.

They ascended a gentle slope, came down on the other side, crossed a spread of bushes and saw, revealed in a wide, spacious valley, a small lake. Across the lake, toward the north, a fire glowed. The wind blew from the north which meant that they could draw near the camp without being discovered.

There were five men about the fire. Zouah was awake and seated near the shore. The seventh man was asleep. Although the Wah appeared to be dozing, Aoun, who knew him well, believed that he was alert. Doubtless he waited every night for one of those events of nature that come unexpectedly and offer cover for escape. Also, he must realize that Aoun would make every effort to follow him.

The Wah, a slow runner, was, like all the men of his race, at home in the water. He could outdistance the swiftest of the Houlams. He dived like a crocodile and could stay submerged longer than most men.

Aoun explained his plan to Ouchar. Leaving one woman with the small children and the babies, the others, led by Ouchar, descended the slope toward the west shore of the lake. Aoun followed the east shore.

The hill was gentle, grass-grown, and without deep crevices. The wind carried his odor to the south as he skirted the lake and neared the camp. The moon had risen, and he was forced to proceed cautiously under cover.

Five of the Chelleans slept now, the sixth watched, scrutinizing more often the south and east because of the direction of the wind. Occasionally, he turned and walked in the opposite direction, breathing through flaring nostrils.

Aoun waited for one of these moments, then showed himself before Zouah. Zouah was staring at the water, and so Aoun was forced to wait for the watcher to turn his back again. This time the Wah lifted his hand slightly

to show that he had seen. Aoun pointed to the lake, and Zouah signified that he understood.

When the watcher turned again, the Wah leaped up and ran to the bank. The Chellean heard the light step, but he was on the other side of the fire, and by the time he had found the prisoner gone and shouted to the sleeping men, Zouah was in the water, speedily drawing away from the shore. Two of the Chelleans plunged in, but realizing soon that they were no match for the swift swimmer, they abandoned that method of pursuit.

Aoun retraced his steps swiftly toward the southern shore. He could follow Zouah's course, as he rose now and then to the surface, swimming like a reptile with long, sinuous movements. Aoun called out, and Zouah changed his direction toward the eastern shore where the warrior women were waiting.

"They are swifter than Zouah, and their chief is as strong as a leopard," Zouah panted, when he stood by Aoun's side.

"But we have our allies. They will not attack us."

Zouah had expected to see the Lemurines. He stared at the women and they at him in open astonishment. The Chelleans had rushed forward, but drew back when they saw the number of their opponents.

Ouchar was eager for battle. "If we do not pursue and kill them, they will come back with their clan and kill us," she said, explaining her words with gestures.

A great weariness suddenly swept over the Houlam—relaxation after the strain of pursuit. The sentiment of benevolence that he felt because the Chelleans had not killed their prisoner was overshadowed by another consideration—the fear that in the combat, Djeha, of the heavy hair, would go down under a club.

"We will go back to the cavern in the rocks," he said to Zouah.

THE RIVER tightened between steep banks. An enormous wall of schist barred the route. On the west it descended into the river; on the east it touched an immense and treacherous marsh. A single issue offered itself—a narrow defile that could be reached by climbing a steep slope, strewn with fawn-colored boulders.

To retrace their steps meant a wide detour around this same marshy land that they had been avoiding all day. Aoun, Zouah, and Ouchar, on a rocky height looked over the situation.

Zouah pointed to vegetation near the river bank. "The ground is firm there," he said. "And there is timber for a raft."

On the opposite bank the jungle came down to the water. Zouah was about to descend when Ouchar, who had turned to call the women, cried out shrilly. She pointed in the direction from which they had come.

The Chelleans were in sight; a group of seven appeared at first, followed by others. There were at least four times seven. The women below had heard Ouchar's exclamation of alarm. Already they were hurrying up the steep slope.

"Aoun and three women will defend the defile," Aoun said. "Zouah and the other women will build the raft."

As soon as the women were behind him in the pass, he rolled rocks into the entrance.

The Chelleans approached the shelter of the boulders warily, keeping out of range of the propulsor. The chief, whose body was as hairy as a bear, held a stake that was heavier than Aoun's club. He ordered his men to scatter and seek another way around or over the ridge to head off the fugitives. There were many routes, but all ended in vertical walls.

Aoun, Ouchar, and the two women chosen for their strength fortified the entrance and gathered rocks to throw down upon the assailants.

It was possible for the Chelleans to reach the pass by two routes—up the steep rocky slope that the Houlam and his allies had ascended, or from the river bed, a more gradual rise but lacking the shelter of the scattered boulders. They had gathered at a safe distance and were watching the movements of Aoun and the women. Their large, coarse faces were split by their laughter, blue-black lips drawn back over brilliant teeth. Suddenly they joined each other in a war cry that was like the howling of wolves.

Aoun waved his spear and replied with the battle cry of the Houlam.

Ouchar called out in her tongue: "Our allies will massacre the Men of the Fire and kill their women and children!"

A warm, humid wind came from the marshes. Eagles and vultures soared placidly over the summits. The voice of the river was heard in the immensity of space.

The Chelleans separated into two bands and scattered on the steep boulder-strewn slope, the chief with his group swerving wide, hoping to ascend the height above the defile where he could take advantage of an attack from above.

Ouchar and the women threw stones down upon the assailants, but with little result, for the warriors protected themselves behind boulders. Swiftly the propulsor turned, and a spear buried itself in the ribs of a Chellean who was running from the shelter of one boulder to another. The wounded man cried out and disappeared. Aoun fitted another shaft into the weapon.

The chief with his warriors were on the same level as the defile. To make his plan effective they must mount still higher along the precarious ledges.

From below, fifteen men hurled forward. Rocks and spears came down on them. Ferocious, plaintive cries echoed through the mineral corridors. Three of the attackers rolled into the river. The others were hidden from view, dead or wounded.

Aoun abandoned his weapons and threw down rocks. Yells of pain and hate rose from below. Then a stone, launched from a ledge above him, struck him full on the skull. He fell back dizzily and seized his club as four of the Chelleans, led by the chief, leaped down into the pass.

THERE was a brief, ominous truce. Fear of the unknown held the Chellean chief motionless. He felt again the weight of his stake, longer by a length than those of his followers. His whole body spoke of the long habit of victory. He whirled swiftly in a surprise attack on the woman chief. The sharp point of the stake tore into her flank.

With a sweeping blow of the club, Aoun beat the stake down, and, swinging again, crushed the shoulder of a warrior who had come to the chief's aid. But others were behind him. Also those who had been driven down the slope had re-formed and were ascending again. Ouchar called out shrilly for the women who had gone below to help with the raft to come to her aid, and the next moment one of the women went down with a stake in her entrails.

Aoun drove back three stakes and broke the points of two. Before his heavy club the Chelleans piled up at the entrance to the pass. Other warriors, who had followed the chief along the high ledges, leaped into the fray when they saw the tide of battle turning against him.

He recovered his stake and stood, breathing noisily, in front of his men, waiting for those whose weapons were broken to give place to those coming up from behind. He ground his jaws

to inspire terror and, his tiny eyes roving under the shaggy brows, studied the position of his antagonists. His muscles tensed for the spring. Then he drove forward with terrific impact.

Aoun dodged and lifted his club, intending to beat the chief down; but the point of the stake tore his hip. At sight of the blood, the Chelleans shouted their cry of victory; but already the club had gone up and come down again on the thick skull of their chief. He fell back without a sound and rolled down among his men. They stepped aside and watched him unbelievably as he disappeared under a boulder.

A younger man took his place, waiting calmly for those who were still climbing the slopes to reach his side. Aoun and Ouchar were forced back before them, the club breaking the points of stakes and reaching out in a wide circle to find the bodies of the assailants. They were near the point in the defile where the corridor widened. The women were waiting there, screaming their defiance.

The propulsor in Zouah's hand turned, and two darts, one after the other, found living flesh. Aoun gathered his allies and rushed forward to clean out the defile. Sudden panic seized the Chelleans. The young chief had disappeared from view under the bodies of the dead and wounded. They had been cut down two thirds of their number. The remaining warriors fell back down the slope, hiding behind boulders to protect themselves from darts and rocks.

In spite of their losses they were still superior in number. Only Aoun and Ouchar could compete on even terms with the stakes wielded by strong, muscular arms, and both were weakened by loss of blood. While the women screamed of victory, Aoun watched the gathering of the Chelleans below.

A woman who was wounded saw approaching the mysterious horror—the

icy breath of annihilation. Turning toward the sky her dilated pupils, she watched confusedly the vultures and the crows with the white heads. Her limited consciousness filled itself with prayerful desire.

She saw again the gentle sunrise over the forest, and relived the past when life was abundant, the evenings when the fire gave out its warm light. Her stern features softened, then became rigid. The women near her hummed a solemn chant, broken and primitive, following a plaintive cadence from which would grow the hymns of men.

Aoun knew, from the revengeful cries that came up from below, that the Chelleans were planning another attack. He sent Zouah and the women to the river bank to work on the raft during the lull.

Not long after, the warriors showed themselves again, following the route traced by the first chief, climbing on each other's shoulders, mounting cautiously toward the ledges over the pass. Aoun waited with his propulsor ready.

The first shaft rebounded from the rocks. The second brought a moan of pain. But the Chelleans came on, more determined than ever to massacre their dangerous enemies. The struggle was between those near the river who worked with branches and vines and the Chelleans climbing the almost-inaccessible ridge. It would not be long before they were massed there or had found a way to descend on the other side and cut off Aoun from help from his allies.

"Is the raft ready?" Aoun shouted to Zouah.

"It will carry us across the river," Zouah answered.

The Chelleans were nearer now. Aoun could see them dodging behind the boulders that rendered the propulsor useless. So he ran down the slope with the women and embarked on the half-finished confusion of vines and

branches. Whirled by the eddies, carried by the swift current, the hastily constructed raft seemed at every moment ready to fall apart.

The women wanted to leap into the water to lighten the weight and try to reach the shore by swimming, but Ouchar pointed out the danger and ordered them to stay.

High on the cliff the Chelleans watched them, howling with baffled rage. In order to continue the pursuit they must take the time to make for themselves a raft or go down the stream a great distance to a point where it was fordable.

VIII.

THE NEXT MORNING and the day after the flight was continued. On the other bank of the river a line of rocks appeared that resembled those that surrounded the cavern. It would be necessary to build another raft, but Zouah advised Aoun to continue on the left bank to a point where the current was less swift.

Both Aoun and Ouchar believed that the Chelleans had given up the pursuit. Before the midday halt they climbed upon a hill that dominated the surrounding country. They were about to descend when Aoun paused and narrowed his eyelids to shut out the bright light. A movement at the fringe of the jungle caught his attention. Ouchar followed his gaze.

"They do not follow our tracks," Aoun said.

"But they have seen us now," Zouah affirmed a moment later.

"Their number has not grown unless there are others in the jungle," Aoun declared.

They hurried to the river bank, to a cove where black poplars flourished. Fallen tree trunks hastened the task. Aoun and Zouah worked feverishly, while the women brought vines and tough, green bark.

The Chelleans did not show themselves. They were approaching cautiously, perhaps had sent a scout ahead who must return with information to the troop. The raft was still unfinished, however, when they broke suddenly from cover. Again Aoun, Zouah, and the women and children embarked upon a dangerous crossing.

The current caught them and whirled them back toward the shore where the Chelleans were waiting, strong-armed and vindictive. Aoun lifted his propulsor, but before he could send a shaft into them, they had protected themselves behind the trunks of the poplars.

The raft floated into calmer waters, on the lee of an island. There was no more danger of a forced return to the bank they had just left. So they dragged it to the shore, strengthened it with vines and branches, and then leisurely chose the widening, less swift route to the mainland.

Behind them, the Chelleans could be seen, scurrying about like jackals, building a raft. Ahead, was the refuge where they had spent so many days of security, enjoyed the clear mornings and the tranquil nights.

WHEN they reached the platform beneath the fissure, they were a little ahead. Aoun climbed first to the platform, then assisted Ouchar to ascend by means of the leather thongs that they had not removed when they left the cavern. Ouchar in turn helped the women and children to reach the elevation. Zouah had left them when they reached the ridge, to skirt the buttress and seek the den of the great feline.

When the Chelleans were near and discovered their enemies on the top of the boulder, the chief sent out six men, three to the left and three to the right, to seek another route to the cave behind the narrow fissure. Everywhere the wall of basalt rose, sheer and inac-

cessible. So they gathered below near the river bank.

Their discouragement was short-lived. The chief talked to them, pointing out that the men and women whom they hated were at last cornered. The hour of their descent would be the hour of their death. What could eleven women and two men, weakened by hunger and tormented by thirst, do against twenty warriors in full strength?

Ouchar was uneasy. She did not openly question the wisdom of the Hou-lam. She was the first to enter the cavern through the fissure. She moved cautiously down the incline, seeking another fissure. Aoun preceded her.

Time had passed since the alliance with the lion. What if the feline had not recognized Zouah, if memory did not bridge the gap between to-day and yesterday? To his joy he heard the Wah, speaking in a gentle voice.

"The lion of the rocks is always the ally of Zouah," he said.

Ouchar in turn looked through the crevice. The lion, scenting an unusual presence, stirred uneasily. The woman chief was terrified, even though she saw Zouah in the same den with the lion. She turned and ran toward the light of the high cavern.

Aoun asked: "Zouah will go out to-night and hunt?"

"Zouah will hunt at night. Now he will go as far as the pond for water."

Aoun sighed. Thirst tormented him, heightened by the hot pain in his wound.

"Thirst burns Aoun, but he can wait until night."

"The pond is near. Aoun and his allies must have water."

REFRESHED with the clear liquid that Zouah brought to the crevice in a bark dish, Aoun went to sleep. Ouchar summoned the courage to reach for the dish through the crevice, but the women must wait until nightfall.

They waited patiently. The mystery of the great feline and the absence of the Wah excited their obscure mentalities. They were accustomed to times of drought and famine.

The Chelleans, leaving part of their force on guard, followed the river bank to circle the ridge and seek another entrance to the cavern. They turned around the southern buttress, seeking a crevice or cavern other than the narrow fissures through which no man could pass.

The corridor that led to the lion's den brought a shout of satisfaction. But when they had passed it and saw before them the larger shadow which was the mouth of the cave, the strong odor of a carnivorous beast put them to flight. They searched until nightfall, then returned to the camp beneath the platform and persuaded the chief that there was no other entrance.

The other party had gathered wood and lighted a fire. They roasted an axis deer, stripped the bones of flesh with chuckles of laughter, looking up toward the platform where the women had gathered, sniffing the savory odors. Then they slept heavily, all save two warriors left on watch.

Toward midnight a sharp call echoed under the rocky vaults of the cavern. Aoun had built a fire on the platform from the wood left there by Zouah and himself. He picked up a brand and descended into the lower cave. The carcass of an elk was in the lair.

Aoun made several trips from the den to the platform, carrying water and meat. The women fed the fire until it blazed high into the night. The Chellean watchers informed their chief who got up and stared at the amazing spectacle of the trapped clan warming themselves and feasting. The women laughed and threw down bones in the direction of the fire.

The chief realized then that there might be wood in the cave and that the

flesh came from game killed during the flight. Water, even, could have been carried in leather pouches. So he went to sleep again.

When four days passed and each night the women feasted and drank, the Chellean chief grumbled and expended his anger insulting the men who had searched for another opening to the cave and returned with the information that a carnivorous beast occupied the cavern in the rear.

The women watchers informed Aoun that the men below were fashioning new weapons. That same night they awakened him with the news that the Chelleans were gathering for an expedition to the other side of the rocky chain. Day showed itself, a pale light under the clouds. Aoun went into the lower cavern and awoke Zouah.

"The warriors are ready. Soon they will seek another issue to the cave. Zouah will show himself outside of the corridor that leads to the home of the lion and lead his enemies into the claws of his ally."

WHEN the chief of the Chelleans saw the Wah, with no other arms than his spear, apparently returning from an unsuccessful hunt, he hesitated suspiciously, aware of the dangers that might threaten him in a narrow rocky pass, barricaded and defended. So he gathered his men around him and sent the swiftest runner back to the fire to watch the Houlam and the warrior women, who were on the platform. Then he led his band in pursuit of the Wah.

Zouah turned, and when he saw his pursuers, dropped his spear. In the moment that it took him to recover it, the warriors gained upon him, their speed increased by the thought of capture. The chief was in the lead, imagining already the evenings he would spend torturing the Wah in the firelight for the benefit of the Houlam. When he was not thirty paces behind, a but-

trex in the basalt hid the fugitive from view. The warriors were howling their triumph, intermixed with loud praises for their leader.

When they again saw Zouah he had swerved between two large boulders. Again the odor of the beast reached them, but they had seen with their own eyes, the frail form of the Wah disappear between the rocks. With a loud cry of victory, the fearless chief rushed forward.

It was too late to turn back when the great, black, shaggy form appeared in the open before the cave. Three men rolled over, slashed with the feline's claws. A fourth fell back with his throat torn open. Zouah, high out of danger, sent shafts from the propulsor that he had left near the cave for this purpose. The lion followed the fleeing men, cornered them against a sheer wall, his claws sweeping from left to right.

Three of the number escaped, fled toward the fire, dropping their weapons, yelling in superstitious terror. Those who had not passed through the corridor caught the terror of those who fled and joined them in panic. The women, waiting on the platform, heard the echoing roar of the lion and huddled together, shivering.

Aoun descended from the platform and with his club put to flight the watcher and drove away from the fire with savage blows those of the Chelleans who had escaped death from the lion and who were gripped in the mad disorder of unexplained horror and death.

Aoun, Zouah, and the warrior women stayed a moon in the rocky chain. Delivered from the Chelleans, they were the masters of the savanna, the jungle, and the river. The feline, by his presence, drove afar the smaller meat-eating animals. He hunted only at night, and at sundown the women who had searched for roots and mushrooms climbed to safety by the leather thongs.

Zouah spent more time with the lion

than with the clan. He wandered about vaguely during the day, lulled by the ease of life, falling into the gentle, non-combative mood inherited from a race destined for extinction.

Aoun, on the contrary, was the prey of tumultuous emotions. The floating of Djeha's hair about her shoulders when she went about her tasks, the changing light in her brilliant eyes, held his thoughts when he was far away from the cavern, hunting, or seated alone by the fire.

The women asked no other existence than this which gave them so deep a sense of security. Freedom meant nothing to them. They wished to shelter their destiny under the protection of the powerful Houlam in this tranquil abundance that renewed itself each day, an abundance that was so satisfying that imagination could not stray into the past for unpleasant memories, nor seek to know the future.

Along with the disturbing thoughts of Djeha, the memory of the clan of the Houlam's struggled for the possession of Aoun's tranquil moments.

One morning he said to Ouchar: "Ouchar will give Djeha to Aoun for his woman?"

Ouchar understood his gesture toward Djeha. The laws of her people were ancient. The women of the clan had never united with the Chelleans or the Lemurines. Continued ill luck had caused Ouchar to question those laws, even before she had joined her fortune with that of Aoun. She did not even know if there were men of her race alive.

She stared at Aoun deeply and steadily, for she could not understand why he preferred the young girl to a woman chief who had fought so valiantly at his side against the common enemy.

She called Djeha to her side, seized her by the hair and threw her to the ground. With a sharp rock she cut a long wound from one shoulder across

the chest. The blood gushed out. Then she gestured for Aoun to drench his lips. After that she pronounced the words spoken by her ancestors, words that gave the woman to the man.

"Aoun, Zouah, and Djeha must go back to the clan of the Houlam's," Aoun said. "The warrior women can remain here until they wish to find another cavern in the mountains."

AOUN, Zouah, and Djeha reached the high defile that led them through the mountain barrier. Two days later, near sunset, they caught the first glimpse of the clan of the Houlam's, at the foot of a hill, under an overhanging cliff. The women were gathering firewood. Baoh, the chief, was lighting the first tiny blaze that would spread along the dry branches.

The watchers cried out and the chief looked up. When his son appeared before him, he said: "Baoh thought Aoun was dead."

"Aoun and Zouah have crossed the mountains and found great hunting lands!"

The Houlam's gathered around and listened to the story of his travels.

"Aoun has the heart of a chief," Baoh said, and looked into the faces of his followers.

There was little enthusiasm. Khaoum, Aoun's younger brother, had stayed with the clan, shared the hunts and dangers. Aoun had brought back a strange woman and his timid companion whom no one respected or liked.

"Aoun cannot say that the lands are warmer than here," Khaoum declared. "When we cross the plains under the sun the women and children will die like grasshoppers."

Voices, all around, agreed with him. Aoun knew that they liked him less than before his departure. Always they had reproached him for preferring the companionship of the Wah, and now he was united to a woman born in a land that

no hunter of the clan had ever seen. Thus, he seemed a foreigner.

The women, more than the men, detested him. They turned upon Djeha insulting glances. Even the sisters of Aoun looked upon her with scorn.

Aoun found himself isolated with Zouah and Djeha. In the hunt he wandered off alone, when the orders of the chief did not hold him with the clan.

One evening when he returned, he found Djeha, seated alone, wiping the blood from a cut in her cheek.

"Djeha is wounded?" he asked.

"The women threw rocks. Djeha would like to kill them with a pointed stake."

"Where are they that threw the rocks?"

"Djeha does not know."

"Does Djeha want to go with Zouah and Aoun across the mountains?"

Joy spread over her face. "Djeha will go where Aoun goes," she said quietly.

Aoun searched for the Wah: "Would Zouah like to go with Aoun and Djeha across the mountains?" he asked.

Zouah looked at him with the blank stare that had been in his glance for two moons. Aoun repeated the question. Then the eyes of the Wah lighted up as if touched by two tiny flames.

He answered in the same words that Djeha had used. "Zouah will go where Aoun goes."

Baoh, the chief, listened gravely when his son told him of his decision. He knew the aversion of the clan and dreaded the inevitable painful conflicts.

"The clan is rightly discontented to see the oldest son of the chief preferring strangers for companions," he

said. "But the Houlams always respect their allies. In the spring, Baoh will lead his clan across the mountains. He will follow the river to the cavern in the cliffs. There he will form an alliance with Aoun."

"Aoun will present the teeth of leopards and brilliant stones to the chief of the Houlams when he comes to form the alliance," Aoun said solemnly.

A tenuous mood of melancholy hung for a moment over father and son. Baoh, himself, had carried his youthful daring far. The hunting lands that the Houlams had crossed he had found by dangerous exploration. Now the deeds that had made the father a respected chief made the son an exile.

"Aoun will lead a new clan that will grow under his command," Baoh said.

STANDING upon the platform, Aoun looked down upon the river. He was rich in the vigor that he had inherited from a conquering race. Around him, others waited to carry out his wishes, moved about in the bounty of his wisdom and protection, seemed to be the very prolongation of himself.

The women laughed aloud and threw branches on the fire. Zouah did not linger in the open. He passed through the fissure into the cave and descended the incline. He turned to find Aoun by his side.

Zouah held the torch high and looked through the crevice, perceived the pile of dried bones, sniffed at the faint odor that still persisted in the lair.

Then he wept.

"The lion of the rocks was lonely and has gone far away to seek his kind," he said.

Unto Death

*Then one long arm
lashed out and caught
Mackenzie flush on
the jaw.*



*Illustrated by
Don Hewitt*

The story of a one-man dog

by Sewell Peaslee Wright

TO THE OTHER bushmen around and north of Heron Lake, Douglas Mackenzie may have been a bit of a rascal; a hard-eyed, ready-fisted rascal with a none-too-savory reputation. But to Trooper he was a god.

Of course, Trooper was prejudiced, for since the confused days of his puppyhood, Trooper had recognized Mackenzie as his god.

It had been Mackenzie's hands which

had fed Trooper, Mackenzie's feet which had kicked him, and Mackenzie's voice which had praised him carelessly, or cursed him with animated violence, according to the man's mood. And now that Trooper was wheel dog of Mackenzie's string, it was Mackenzie's whip which stung Trooper's flanks and cracked beside his battle-scarred ears.

Trooper was the natural handiwork of such a god. Ill-favored by virtue of his mixed blood, Trooper was nearly

a hundred pounds of concentrated, shaggy, yellow-and-white ugliness. His tail had been broken as a pup, and hung somewhat askew; his wolfish muzzle bore the jagged marks of battle; and both ears had been slashed by whip and fang so that they flopped crookedly about his head.

But Trooper had a broad, deep chest and good legs, so Mackenzie laughed at the dog's ugliness, and evaluated him according to the work he could do.

Mackenzie was a fur buyer, and he needed good dogs. He had a camp of his own, south of Heron Lake, but he was seldom there. He preferred to travel over the territory of the trappers north of the lake, masking with a loud joviality the profane and contemptuous pity he had for the men who so unceasingly fought the snow and the wind and the crackling cold to bring him pelts to sell at a comfortable profit.

Mackenzie's method of fur buying was all his own. Cash he had, though he had paid but little cash for the bales of fur under the tarpaulin of the toboggan. What could one buy with money, far back in the bush?

There was shrewdness in Mackenzie's plan; he brought with him to the snow-buried camps of the trappers tinned delicacies for appetites sickened with beans and bannock and venison and rice. He brought tobacco for pipes sucked dry and empty in long, lonely hours; .30-30 and .303 cartridges for rifles so old their actions clattered; beads and bright cloth for the squaws; and tall, dark bottles for weary men with lips black and furrowed by frost.

These things Trooper's god traded for prime fur, while he laughed secretly at the fools who made his living such a simple matter.

Mackenzie's eyes, dirty gray with flecks of yellow, like grains of gold seen in the muddy water of a sluice, narrowed thoughtfully as he studied the camp across the lake. "Red" Taplin

distinctly was not the best friend Mackenzie had in the Province.

AS THEY drew close to the camp, Red Taplin's dogs, tied out behind the camp, raised their voices in angry greeting. A moment later the door of the camp opened and a man—a tall, young man with long arms and legs and a great shock of fiery hair—stood waiting.

"*Jour!*" called Mackenzie genially. "How's tricks, Red? Haven't seen you since right after the break-up. Anything on the fire?"

"*Jour.*" There was no warmth in the greeting, as Red Taplin returned it. He glanced automatically at the sun, still a goodly distance above the frozen horizon. "We'll be eating in an hour or two, if you care to wait—but I'm afraid I can't offer you a bunk for the night."

Trooper, who was watching his master, saw Mackenzie's eyes harden. Trooper knew that look and feared it; he wriggled his belly closer to the snow, his battered ears laid back.

"What do you mean, we?" asked Mackenzie coldly. "I didn't hear of you goin' partners with any one this year."

"Perhaps not. But it happens I was married this fall, just before coming in."

"Oh, ho! Well, congratulations, Red. Tell you what; let me talk to the little wife, and I'll see if I can get her to let me unroll my sleeping bag on the floor somewhere. Sleeping out and keeping a fire going ain't what it's cracked up to be."

"Sorry, Mackenzie!" Red Taplin shook his head slowly. "I told you last spring you needn't bother stopping to see me. There's just the one room to the camp, as you know, and Mrs. Taplin isn't a squaw."

"Oh, I see!" The voice of Trooper's master matched the hard look in his mottled eyes. "Well, I'm not begging you, or anybody, for a hot meal and a place to sleep."

"You're welcome to stay to supper—but that's all. I just thought you might want to make camp before dark. There's a fairly decent old camp about a mile up the stream that comes in at the far end of the lake, if you remember; you could just about make that by dark."

"Oh, sayin' it another way, you don't like me—is that it?" asked Mackenzie.

He took a few steps toward Taplin, walking carefully, menacingly. Trooper had seen him walk that way many times, the lash of his whip trailing from his right hand, when one of his dogs had not obeyed a command to keep quiet.

"Since you ask for it, that's right, Mackenzie. I know too much about you."

Mackenzie grunted as he leaped at Red Taplin. Taplin grunted in turn as, caught unawares, Mackenzie's mittened fist crashed against his jaw.

Then one of those long arms lashed back at Mackenzie and he stiffened in the air, reeling backward. Trooper started barking and tugged frantically against the confining traces. His master—

Mackenzie tried desperately to get his feet under him, but they wouldn't obey. He was numb—dazed—

He tripped and fell. Something hard and sharp and cold gashed his head.

"Right against that old ax in the chopping block," muttered Red Taplin as he lifted the limp figure. "Of all the rotten luck!"

Trooper fought his harness until the snow flew in nostril-stinging flurries as he tried to tear himself free that he might sink his fangs into the flesh of the man who had dared to hurt his god. His hackle bristled and his eyes were deep-rimmed with red—for there was wolf in Trooper.

He struggled until he was utterly exhausted, and then lay quiet in the blue-shadowed snow, his muzzle on his paws, and his somber, vengeful eyes fixed on the camp.

THEY were strange creatures, the two humans in the camp which had swallowed up Trooper's god. Their voices were soft, and their eyes—particularly the brown, long-lashed eyes of the woman—held some meaning Trooper could not understand.

"He's a beauty, that yellow-and-white one," said the woman the second evening, while they were feeding the dogs. "Isn't he, Red?"

"A beauty?" The man laughed, and glanced down into the woman's face. Trooper liked the sound of their laughter; Mackenzie seldom laughed except when he had been drinking, and then his whip hand was always heavy. "He's hardly that, Anne."

"I wasn't referring to his good looks; I meant his build and the strength of his body. And he's got a head on him; haven't you noticed how intelligent his eyes are? What's his name; do you know?"

"Trooper, I think."

Trooper bared his fangs tentatively at the mention of his name. Neither of them was master to him; he wished they would go away and let him finish his meal in peace.

The woman came a step closer. "Don't you like me, Trooper? After all the nice things I've just said about you?"

Trooper definitely stopped eating and snarled up at her, his legs stiff with anger.

"Apparently he doesn't, Anne. Better not get any closer; there's slack in his chain, and he might sink those fangs in you if he had half a chance. He's got the amiable disposition of his master."

The woman quickly drew close to her husband and linked her arm through his.

"Mackenzie," she said, with a sort of shudder. "How I hate him! He keeps following you around with his

eyes as though he would like to—to kill you."

"Perhaps he would," Red Taplin answered reassuringly; "but don't worry. He won't try anything. He's all scowls and bluff."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, dear. Oh, I wish he were miles and miles away! How long will it be before he can go?"

"Three or four days, anyway. That's a nasty cut he has in his scalp, and he can't go until it's healed enough so the frost won't get to it. We could hardly turn him out in his present condition, could we?"

"Of course not, Red. Perhaps he won't be quite so vindictive when he feels a little better."

"Please don't worry, Anne." He slipped his arm about the woman's slim waist, and together they walked back to the camp. "I know how to handle his kind."

Trooper wondered more and more about this strange pair of humans as the days went by. They came out often, to stroll around the clearing and talk in soft voices, while little tufts of steamy breath hovered white around their faces. Often they paused to watch Trooper, standing carefully just out of reach.

"I think you've fallen in love with that ugly brute," accused Red Taplin one day. "Have you? You're always stopping here to look at him."

"There's something about him that interests me, dear. Haven't you noticed how he's changed in the last few days? He doesn't snarl at us any more, and his eyes aren't like they were. Can't you see how—well, almost wistfully he looks at us?"

"You're imagining things!"

"No, I'm not," the woman said earnestly. "Look at him, Red; see how puzzled and full of longing his eyes are? As though he were trying to understand what manner of creatures we might be.

I could make a pet of him in a few weeks; I know I could."

Red Taplin laughed and kissed his wife swiftly. "Anybody, or anything, would have to love you," he chuckled. "Trooper, I don't blame you!"

Trooper pricked his ears to the extent the slashed muscles would permit and studied the man who had spoken his name.

This man was not his master, and yet he was not like all the other men in the world. He stood out, he and this woman, from all the others. Before, only his master had been a definite human entity in Trooper's mind.

In his own way, Trooper had begun to think about these two human beings. He no longer hated them. He had never been afraid of them.

They spoke kindly to him, and they fed him each evening. And when the woman looked at him, Trooper was aware of a restless desire to turn away—although her gaze always held him. Trooper could read a great deal from a glance, and what he read in the woman's eyes was strange and disturbing.

AT LAST, Trooper's master came out of the camp, dressed for the trail. His eyes were sullen, and his voice made Trooper afraid. The other man walked beside him, long arms dangling.

"So you think I should be hittin' the trail, do you?" Mackenzie was saying. "Can't stand me around any longer, eh?"

"I said I thought you were in shape to go on, Mackenzie. Why not let it go at that?"

"Oh, I'm in good enough shape to go on, all right. Don't fret about me." He snatched up Trooper's harness and jerked the collar on over Trooper's head.

It was a moment for which the dog had waited long days and nights. Here was his god, putting on the harness. They were going out on the trail again—together! Trooper shook himself and

turned around gleefully to lick his master's hand.

"Quit!" snapped Mackenzie, and brought his fist down heavily on Trooper's muzzle.

Trooper whined and groveled in the snow, making it difficult for Mackenzie to buckle the strap around his body.

"Get up, damn you!" Mackenzie kicked the dog, drawing the strap a couple of notches too tight. "What's the idea of acting up?"

"You don't deserve a decent dog," observed Red Taplin in a cold, level voice. "Some day one of them will tear your throat out for you."

"Yeah?" Mackenzie dragged Trooper away and snapped his traces to the toboggan. "Suppose you mind your own business for a change?"

Trooper waited patiently for his master to harness the other dogs. His muzzle still hurt from the rap Mackenzie had given it, and the strap around his middle cut into him so that it was difficult to breathe.

However, his master was his master, even though he was not soft-spoken and gentle like this other man, and the woman who was nearly always with him.

The other man stood by, hands thrust deep in his pockets, as Mackenzie harnessed the other dogs and snapped them into place. As Ted, the lead dog, was brought up, Red Taplin sauntered over and quietly loosened the strap which was biting into Trooper's ribs.

"Leave my dogs alone, will you?" growled Mackenzie. "What you doing?"

"Giving the beast a chance to breathe. That strap was hurting him."

"I'll show you whose dogs these are!" Trooper cowered at the anger in Mackenzie's eyes, his voice. "What I do to my dogs is my business, not yours." The loaded butt of his whip whistled down across Trooper's shoulders, a

numbing blow which brought a whine from the trembling dog.

The whip rose again. Trooper, his eyes rolled upward fearfully, knew exactly what to expect. His god was in one of his blind rages; Trooper could read that in his face. He would strike and strike—

A brown, hard hand closed around Mackenzie's upraised arms.

"Do that again, and I'll take the whip away from you and beat you with it until you beg, Mackenzie."

There was something in the voice of the other man which made Trooper stare in wonder. This was anger, but it was not the kind which made Trooper afraid. It was a new kind of anger; quiet and deadly and awesome.

Trooper watched the two men anxiously. The brown hand dropped from Mackenzie's arm, leaving it free, but still the whip did not fall. The two men stood staring at each other, both grimlipped and silent. It was Mackenzie who spoke first.

"You're a smart guy, Red," he said in a shaky voice. "Oh, you're awfully smart. You don't know yet how smart you are. I'll be seein' you one of these days."

He dropped to his knees on the back of the toboggan, and the lash of the whip cracked beside the lead dog's ear.

"Mush along!" he snapped. "Ya, Ted! Mush!"

As the toboggan steadied itself on the smooth, wind-swept ice, Trooper cast a swift glance over his shoulder; not at his master—at the clearing slipping behind.

The man was standing there, motionless, watching them, his hands deep in his pockets. Behind him, in the doorway of the camp, stood the woman, and somehow, from her attitude, from the way she clutched at the coat thrown about her shoulders, Trooper knew she was afraid.

TROOPER was stretched uncomfortably in the snow, his muzzle on his paws. At intervals, he wriggled his hind quarters, nervously and without reason. His eyes seldom left the man crouched over the little flare of red fire, in the lee of the patched and dirty tarpaulin.

The other dogs were watching Mackenzie, too, for they also had caught the glint of firelight on glass and the reek of liquor. In the brains of all Mackenzie's dogs these things were associated with a railing voice and the slash of a frost-stiffened lash.

Mackenzie drank moodily and in silence. He finished one flat bottle and threw it aside. He opened another bottle and flipped the cork into the flames, where it blazed blue for an instant, and then slowly blackened, twisting in the heat. It was very late when he dragged up the big logs for the night fire.

"Not good enough for him, eh?" he muttered, frowning the stubble on his chin with blunt fingers. The dull flecks of yellow in his muddy eyes seemed to dance in the light of the flying sparks as he dropped a log heavily onto the fire. "Busted my head on an ax, and then turned me out before it was half healed. Treated me like a dog; like a mangy Injun cur. 'Cause he's got a woman in camp I can't even bed down on a damned pole floor to keep the frost outa my bones——" His voice trailed off into an indistinct muttering.

Foolishly, stirred by the sound of the man's voice, Trooper whined. Mackenzie straightened up and glared.

"Shut up! Hear me? One yap outa you again and I'll make ribbons of you."

Trooper wriggled his belly deeper in the snow, and Mackenzie turned away. The man was still grumbling to himself as he rolled up in his soiled rabbit-skin robe.

The fire died down, but the man did not awaken to shove the unburned ends of the logs into the blaze. The coals

glazed with ashes, until at last only a few patches of red showed. When the wind came up at dawn and blew the light gray ashes away, only black coals remained.

It was a strong wind, and it had in it the smell of storm. Trooper scented the storm and watched the sky with worried eyes. It was not good that the man should sleep when that smell was in a rising wind and the sky was dark and menacing.

When Mackenzie did awake, his eyes were shot with fine tracings of swollen red, and his hands were unsteady on the dishes in which he prepared his morning meal. But on his frost-furrowed lips, as he studied the first spitting of snow, there was a sort of smile that Trooper could not understand.

Nor did Trooper understand when the man turned them back on the trail they had made the day before, but because that was what his god wished, Trooper knew it was wisdom, and he pressed steadily against his heavy collar and was grateful that it did not please the man to lash his dogs that day.

By the middle of the forenoon, the storm was really upon them. When the trail led close to the shore, or across a portage, Trooper could hear the trees groaning as they rubbed together, or thumping angrily as their overweighted tops collided in their wild thrashings.

Now and again he heard the earth-shaking crash of a tree or stub falling, and he tucked his tail tighter between his legs and lowered his head. The year before, a stub had fallen across the trail and crushed one of the dogs in the swing, but a few inches from Trooper's muzzle, and he could still remember how that dog had yelped, just once, as the whistling trunk struck.

But strangely, in spite of the storm, the man was in no hurry. He did not press the dogs, and he lingered longer than usual at his noon camp. It was already dark when they came to the lake

upon which Trooper's instinct told him, was the camp of the man and the woman who were not like Trooper's master.

Mackenzie stopped the team on a game trail which skirted the lake behind a sheltering screen of tag alders and red willows.

"Stay here, and keep quiet!" he growled, above the angry roar of the storm. "Hear me? Quiet!"

Trooper knew the word quiet, but some perverse instinct caused him to yelp a soft understanding. Instantly, the loaded butt of the man's whip crashed down on his head, bruising one of Trooper's already-battered ears.

The blow made lights flash before Trooper's eyes, and the pain which followed almost blinded him, but he groveled in silence, burying his head in the snow and rubbing the burning ear with a frantic paw.

"I said quiet!" grunted Mackenzie. "Now keep still while I take a look around."

ALL THE DOGS were uneasy at being deserted. They whined softly and tangled themselves in their traces. They snapped at each other and leaped about, trying to free themselves from the tangled harness. But their fear of the man kept them almost utterly silent, for their fear of him was greater than their fear of being left alone in the storm.

Mackenzie was gone nearly an hour, and when he returned, his voice was almost genial.

"I told him he'd see how smart he really was," he said as he made a tiny blaze atop two sections of a rotten stub which he had pushed over for the purpose. "He'll see when he finds his fur gone, and a three-day snow on top of my trail. He may have a good idea where it went, but he'll play hell provin' anything."

Trooper's master frequently talked to himself as he made camp, and Trooper always listened attentively, because he

could read the man's moods in his voice. It made Trooper's aching head feel better to know that the man was in good spirits now; he would feed the dogs well and would not beat them.

But it was strange that the man did not unharness the dogs. It was dark, and the man was making camp. Trooper and the other dogs should have been unharnessed and tied out long ago.

Mackenzie fed the dogs sparingly and ate his own simple meal, hunched over a tiny fire. He had not unpacked his tarpaulin or sleeping robe, however, and it gradually dawned on Trooper that they had not reached the end of the day's trail. That was why the man had not unharnessed them.

Mackenzie smoked several pipefuls of tobacco, making no move to depart, although twice he pulled out his big silver watch and consulted it. Several of the dogs stretched out in the snow and napped, but not Trooper. At intervals he got up and shook the loose snow from his coat, while the other dogs snarled at him softly for disturbing them.

At last the man rose and kicked snow on the little fire over which he had been hunched.

"She ought to be abed and asleep by now," he muttered, and then, in a louder voice: "Come along, you pups. And keep quiet. Hear me? Quiet!"

Ted, the lead dog, followed close behind the tails of Mackenzie's snowshoes as he led the way, packing a trail for them. After a few minutes the darkness ahead thinned out before Trooper's eyes; even through the driving smother of snow he could see the dim, vague bulk of the camp in the center of the clearing. The camp was dark, but there was a faint smell of wood smoke in the air, and Trooper knew that meant the camp was occupied, but that whoever was in the camp was asleep.

Mackenzie left the dogs at the edge

of the clearing and walked forward cautiously. Beside the camp was a smaller structure, with long legs which lifted it high above the snow. Trooper knew what this structure was—a sort of camp, only a couple of times larger than a kennel such as some men built for their dogs, and in which trappers kept their furs. Trooper had many times seen men take furs from their caches and trade them to his master.

From a drift of snow, after considerable silent fumbling, Trooper's master drew a short ladder, which he leaned against the little camp in which the fur was stored. After a moment's pause, and a careful look around the clearing, he started to mount the ladder.

Trooper, watching his master, was vaguely uneasy. Never before had his master gone up to the cache; never before had a cache been emptied at night. Something in the man's actions made Trooper feel that all was not well. So, cringing in anticipation the instant the sound had cleared his throat, Trooper yapped an anxious warning.

THE MAN froze on the ladder; a fragment of a sibilant, angry whisper came down the wind to Trooper. Then, as the seconds passed, and there was still no sound from the camp, Mackenzie slowly made his way to the top of the ladder.

He had just tossed down one heavy bale of fur, which fell noiselessly into the soft snow, when a startling beam of white light cut through the slanting haze of snow.

A woman's voice, shaky and edged with fear, challenged the man at the cache. "Get down from there, you thief! And don't try to—to run away. I have a gun, and I—I'll shoot."

Slowly, his back to the wavering beam of light, Mackenzie came down the ladder. But even with face concealed, the woman must have recognized him, for she called out his name.

"Mackenzie! I told my husband you'd try to—to do something like this. Hold up your hands and don't move. I've a gun, I tell you, and I'll shoot."

"Oh, no, you won't." Mackenzie's voice was sneeringly confident as he turned and walked toward her. "You wouldn't shoot a man in cold blood just for no reason at all."

"I have plenty of reason—and stop where you are! I mean it; I'll shoot!"

"If you shot me, it'd be on your mind as long as you live," he said. "You'd never forget it. Now, if you'll just listen to reason, and let me explain——"

"Stop, or I'll kill you!" The woman's voice was almost a scream.

The words were barely formed when Mackenzie leaped forward, and the beam of light shot upward erratically. There was a searing flash of scarlet thunder, the thumping of bodies in the snow, and an exclamation of triumph from Mackenzie. The tiny white line of brilliancy shot around the clearing and disappeared.

Trooper stood tense, watching. He could see what Mackenzie could not see—a hurrying figure beyond the camp, running on snowshoes in great jerky strides. An instant later the figure paused, and a voice rose, sharp and dangerous, above the hollow sound of the storm:

"Anne! Where are you? And what——"

"Here, dear!" gasped a muffled voice. "Mackenzie came——"

"I thought so. Stand up and stand still, Mackenzie, or you'll stop lead. Plenty of it."

The two figures rose suddenly. Mackenzie fairly flung the woman against the newcomer and without a word raced toward the waiting team.

Red, caught off balance for an instant, fired as soon as he could bring his rifle to his shoulder. Trooper heard the bullet crack into a frozen trunk only a few feet away. A second shot was

wild, for Red Taplin was running as he fired.

Mackenzie, gasping and muttering incoherently beneath his breath, yanked his rifle from beneath the lashings of the toboggan and threw himself in the snow behind the dogs.

"Get back, Taplin!" he shouted. "I'll kill you, I swear I will! Go back!"

He started shooting, as rapidly as he could pump cartridges through the rifle. Still Red Taplin kept coming on, firing twice at the flashes from Mackenzie's rifle. Trooper felt the snow from the bullets spray down on his head.

Behind Red Taplin a second figure hastened, stumbling through the soft snow. When she was abreast her husband, the white dagger of light stabbed through the storm again, wavered a second, and came to rest on the figure of Trooper's master.

The hammer of Mackenzie's rifle fell on an empty chamber; he cursed and leaped to his feet, swinging the gun by its muzzle.

"If your life's worth anything to you, you can still save it," Red Taplin warned sharply. "Drop that gun and put up your hands!"

TROOPER'S master hesitated for an instant, and then dropped the gun. Slowly, his hands went shoulder-high, as he stood there staring into the un-wavering ray of light.

"That's more like it," Red Taplin said grimly. "Keep the light on him, Anne, until I can get the muzzle of this gun against his back."

He came on slowly, cautiously, his weapon menacing constantly. Trooper, deep in his mighty throat, rumbled a warning which was lost instantly in the storm.

Red Taplin circled slowly, while the snow drove hurriedly through the ray of revealing light, and back in the bush top-heavy trees groaned and cracked in the merciless punishment of the storm.

Trooper snarled again, and as though the sound were a signal, Mackenzie dropped to the snow behind him with a commanding shout:

"Get him, Trooper; get him!"

Trooper felt the man's body go down before him. The dog was hampered by his harness, and he missed his hold on the throat, but his teeth did clamp down on bone and flesh, through the sleeve of Red Taplin's fur parka. Trooper shook his head savagely, even as they went down into the snow together, to drive his fangs through the heavy garment.

The woman screamed, and the sound of her voice made Trooper loosen, for an instant, that deadly grip. There was a terrific tug at his throat as the woman tore at the harness, and Trooper was thrown floundering in the snow. Before he could spring again, the man and the woman were beyond his reach. Trooper's master had disappeared.

"There's your wonder dog, Anne!" the man said bitterly as he felt the arm upon which Trooper's jaws had closed. "This arm's half numb; he would have torn to the bone, if I hadn't been dressed for the trail. And the worst part of it is that Mackenzie has got away, and God knows——"

From back in the bush came a soft crash. Trooper trembled; that was the sound the stub had made when it fell across the trail and crushed the dog ahead of him into the snow. He would always remember——

A cry, ghastly and not far distant, hung for an instant in the wind and was blotted out.

"What was that?" asked the woman swiftly.

"A stub—a falling stub. The bush is full of them, and they're dangerous in a storm. A couple of them fell close to me while I was waiting and watching the camp. I didn't want you to worry, but I didn't trust him, either, so I decided to watch the camp for a

couple of days, unknown to you. It was a mighty good thing I did."

"But—but that cry, Red? What was that?" She drew close to the man, staring into the blackness in the direction from which the sound had come.

"I think, dear, you'd better forget that, if you can," Red Taplin said slowly. He glanced toward Trooper, and the woman followed his eyes.

TROOPER'S muzzle was pointed at the black, roaring heavens, and the great cords of his throat were vibrating with an eerie, mournful cry of grief. He had recognized the voice which had cried out in the night and the storm, and Trooper knew, somehow, that his god had gone forever.

"Faithful—unto death," the woman said softly. She came close to Trooper, without fear, while the man watched anxiously. Her hand was soft on Trooper's battered, throbbing head.

"You deserved a better master to mourn, boy," she murmured. "Wouldn't you like to belong here?"

The long cry of anguish died in Trooper's throat. He looked up into the face of the woman; glanced from her to the man.

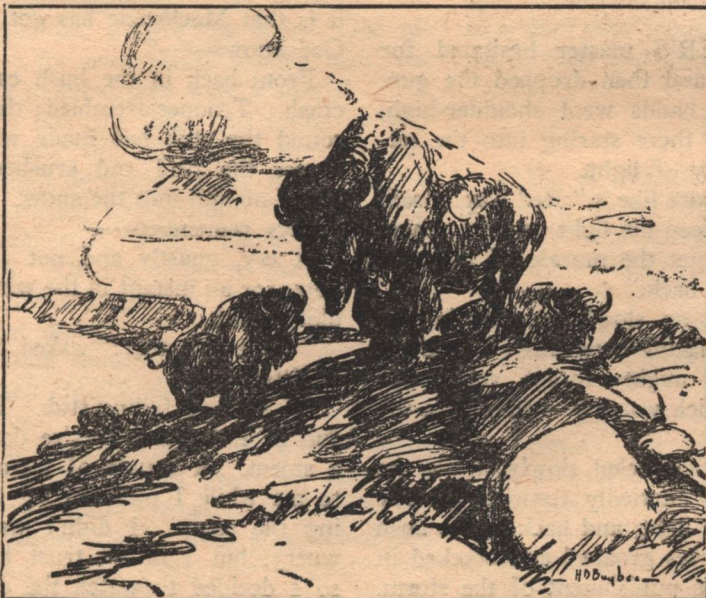
There was no anger in the eyes of either. He had tried to kill the man, and still they did not beat him, or shout at him angrily. They must have understood about Trooper's god; that while he had one god, he could have no others.

But it would be good to work for this man and this woman, now that his other god was gone. He crouched in the snow at the woman's feet and licked her frosty paws. When she put her hand down, he nuzzled it, and whined almost as a puppy whines when it finds an anxiously sought mother.

"He's yours, Anne," the man said in a voice which was not quite steady. "Body and soul."

"And unto death," she nodded. "Aren't you, Trooper?"

Trooper wagged his broken, lopsided tail; a gesture of homage before the altar of his new gods.



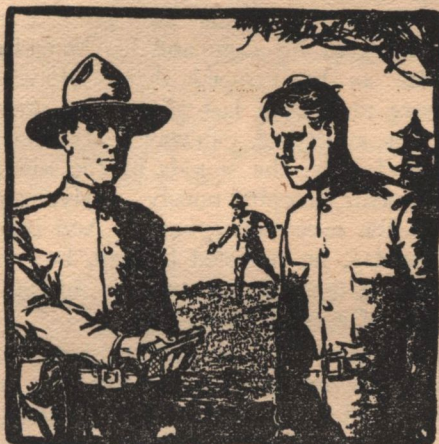
THE SHORT SHORT STORY CORNER

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All stories are considered for three issues of TOP-NOTCH.

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*\$50⁰⁰ Prize
Story for May*

Second Choice

by Charles Kelly Sinclair

LEUTENANT MELVILLE ripped open the missive just received. He read it. Re-read it. Then stood staring at it with unseeing eyes as if solving some weighty problem. With an obvious effort he jerked himself out of his thoughts and, turning, spoke to the young ensign who had been watching him with puzzled attention.

"This, my lad," he said, "is a note of courtesy from the rebel chief." He walked to the window. "You would not understand—it is—ah—" He stammered and hesitated. "It is not in our language," he said then, "so I shall tell you the contents. For the thing itself—this!"

Crumpling it into a ball, he flipped it through the high, barred opening.

"Briefly," he went on, "it offers one of us freedom from captivity, but—there is a first and second choice of the method. First choice is to be executed by a firing squad. The second is—well, to be frank, he is not to be shot at all."

"What do you propose, sir?" inquired the boy. "Shall we toss for it—or—"

"No. Nothing like that," said Melville firmly. "As your superior officer I have the painful duty of ordering you to take first choice. At sunrise you shall face the firing party."

Ensign Willis stared for a moment

in incredulous amazement. Then he laughed bitterly.

"This decision has been reached," Melville continued evenly, "after careful deliberation on my part. I regret having to make it, but—fortunes of war, you know. I hope," he added, "that you will die—as I should hope to do were I in your place—with a smile on your lips."

"Yes, sir; I hope I shall," assented the boy coldly.

"Very well. That's settled." Melville's voice was nervous and his eyes uncertain, continually seeking the floor as if reluctant to meet those of the boy. "Is there anything I can do for you, Willis?"

"If you don't mind, sir," the boy replied, "I'll try to snatch a little sleep." He retired to a corner of the cell where some rough blankets had been thrown and lay down, face to the wall.

TWO HOURS later the blare of a bugle split the silence. As the call ceased, the first rays of dawn burst into blood-red light. Sunrise! Sunrise in the east.

Melville went over and laid a trembling hand upon the boy. "Time, Willis," he said gently.

Willis opened his eyes at the touch and a smile flickered for a moment about his lips. Then, as memory lashed his sleep-fuddled mind, he sprang abruptly to his feet.

Again Melville laid a hand upon his shoulder. "Steady, lad! God bless you!" he said.

Outside, a high-pitched voice barked a military command, and the thud of grounding arms, near by, echoed into the room. A key rattled in the lock. The door swung open to admit an officer in the nondescript uniform of the rebel army.

"You have decided, uh?" He addressed himself to Melville. "Which of you chooses to go first?"

Willis strode forward. The rebel stood aside and pointed to the door.

Melville extended his hand to the youngster. "Good-by, Willis," he said. And again: "God bless you!"

"Good-by, sir."

Their hands gripped hard in farewell. Then the boy drew himself up to his full height, lingered a moment to light a cigarette, and stepped jauntily over the threshold.

"You have courage, sir," the officer mocked Melville. "You are to leave here at noon. I shall call again, uh?" He leered evilly. Then the door clanged shut behind him.

ON TIPTOE, his face pressed to the bars of his cage and his knuckles white as he gripped them, Melville strove to catch a last glimpse of them at the courtyard gateway. He could hear, faintly, the sounds of the town, early astir, trooping noisily—gayly, even—to the execution ground. And only yesterday, he reflected bitterly, he had been out there in the sunshine, in command of a company of men.

The gunboat, after landing him and his party, had gone on up the river in pursuit of a retreating rebel army, leaving him to police this pillaged town and round up the stragglers that might have remained in its precincts. But things had not gone as expected. Under cover of darkness, two thousand of the enemy had returned, annihilated his small force and taken him and Willis prisoners. It had been beyond his comprehension why they had been spared instant death at the time. But the courtesy note, delivered later, had explained that.

Wearily his mind plodded over and over these things, as it had not ceased to do all the intervening hours, while his ears listened acutely for the rattle of musketry. Every sound that came to him sent a wave of sick apprehension through his every fiber. Could these

bloodthirsty wretches be trusted in this, he wondered? Would they, even now, carry out the arrangement their letter proposed?

Time ceased to exist. The suspense at times seemed to suffocate him. What if, after all, they did not shoot the boy? Momentarily, the sweat of torture hung on his brow at this thought. And still the sound for which he waited did not come. Perhaps it had all been a trick. Or perhaps they had changed their minds——

Crash! The echo of a distant volley smote dully upon his straining ears. Hearing it, he repressed with difficulty an impulse to cry out. Nausea, and a sudden weakness in all his joints, swept over him so that he clutched at the window bars for support. So! It was done, then. There was a certain satisfaction in that knowledge. Yet this was not war, he snarled. It was murder. Child murder, at that. His own part in it sickened him.

As he clung there, retching, suddenly there was a deafening crash close at hand, and the building tottered. The room was filled with dust and lyddite fumes. The door swayed drunkenly and fell outward. Through the aperture where it had been, Melville could see the guard lying dead, half buried in fallen masonry. There came another dull crash which he recognized as the bark of cannon from riverward, rumbling above the noise of falling buildings. Rescue, then, had come!

FRENZIED with joy, Melville scrambled over the obstructions, half barring the way, into the open. In the distance he descried a party of men advancing from the jetty at the double, and he ran in that direction, jostling, as he did so, some natives who, suppliant and fearful now, were seeking hiding for themselves.

Presently, as he ran, some one hailed

him. "Melville! Hey! Is that you, Melville?"

He stopped.

It was a captain of marines who came toward him.

"Yes, I'm Melville," he said.

"Lord, man, what's got you?" asked the captain. "You look like death. And where are the others?"

"Dead, sir."

"Dead?" shouted the captain. "But not all of them—not wiped out?"

"Melville nodded a mute assent.

"Hell! That's bad business!"

"All dead. All but me," Melville went on. "Willis——" his voice broke. Then he was able to continue: "Willis was the last. He was executed a few minutes ago. If you'd only been half an hour earlier!"

"Executed!" cried the captain, astounded. "Shot—in cold blood? That boy? But why—why?"

"A condition offered by a courtesy note I recei——"

"Pardon, sir," interrupted a sergeant of marines advancing at a run, "I have a message to deliver, sir."

"Well, what is it?"

"It concerns Mr. Melville, sir. Shall I speak in his presence?"

"Of course! What is it?"

"Mr. Willis has been rescued from a firing party. Mr. Melville, it seems, ordered him, as junior officer, to submit to the demand of the rebel general that one of them be shot at sunrise."

"And what of Mr. Melville?" the captain asked sternly.

"We had trouble to get that from him, sir. But after a good deal of questioning—a loyal lad, Willis!—he admits having heard the officer tell Melville he would be released at noon."

"Is this true, Melville?" asked the captain, his voice terrible in accusation and loathing.

"I did order Mr. Willis to choose execution. But——"

"That will do, Melville," snapped the

captain. "Silence!" as, again, Melville would have spoken. He seemed to weigh the situation briefly. Then: "As your superior officer, Melville, I will now give you a choice: Court-martial, or—death. And I'm sure it would save your brother officers embarrassment, the shame of seeing you convicted of cowardice"—the words whipped like a lash—"if your body were to be found in some alley in the town, here, say in an hour." He held out a service revolver. "Take this, and—die!"

"Pardon, sir," said a runner, coming up, breathless, at that moment. "Mr. Willis asked me to deliver this to the officer in command immediately. It contains valuable information."

He handed the captain a crumpled paper, saluted, and withdrew a pace or two.

The officer smoothed the paper and read:

This ultimatum is offered as a gesture of courtesy to our enemies now in captivity. It is my wish to convey my terms of release, and leave the choice of those terms entirely to yourselves. The first choice is lenient. One of you is to be shot at sunrise. The second choice is not so humane. One of you shall, according to the creed of my soldiers, suffer torture, as befits a foreign devil who has destroyed life on behalf of the tuan devils who wish to destroy me. Therefore, to allay the anger of my soldiers, at the hour of noon, he who has second choice will be led forth and put to torture until the flesh leaves his bones and

the vultures have been mocked and fight for the scraps that will be scattered in the square.

(Signed) GENERAL TU SHOU.

SHAKEN with horror, the captain reeled as he finished reading. Then, with unaccustomed gentleness he turned to Melville and said: "There is but one thing I can do, Mr. Melville. I ask your forgiveness. If you grant me that, permit me to shake hands with the most gallant gentleman it has been my privilege to meet."

"By the way, Murphy," he asked a moment later, "did Mr. Willis say where, or how, he came to have this letter?"

"Yes, sir. He picked it up outside the prison window where Melville had thrown it. He hadn't any chance to look at it till we had rescued him and his wounds had been dressed. Yes, sir," in reply to the unspoken query in the captain's face; "he'd been pretty roughly handled. But he'll be all right. Soon as he'd opened it up he sent me, hot-foot— Is it in English, sir?"

"Yes, Murphy; in very good English and very well written. Why?"

"Queer!" commented the runner, puzzled. "Just before he fainted young Willis said: 'Sure enough, it isn't our language. But I understand.' Now what did he mean?"

"Just delirium, probably," remarked the captain carelessly.

But Melville smiled.

Top-Notch is giving you twelve or more stories every month. The short short story corner is unique and different. The feature stories are vitally alive.

Next month:

SALTWATER FURY

by Jack Allman

offers you gripping, fascinating adventure.



The Bush Rat

by Daniel J. Colich

"What's it mean? Why, it means that you killed Ed Connel—and that you're my prisoner!"

THE WINTER trail wound tortuously over the storm-swept wastes of snow, through frosted, snow-scathed canyons, and over bleak, bitter mountain passes. Tiny spirals of snow rioted in the wind and eddied crazily away to the dim horizon. High above, the rocky crags and dizzy summits of the mountains were shrouded in racing, gray-black clouds. Sleet and snow, riding the wild wind, stung like shot.

Jim Proctor squinted calm brown eyes to mere slits and pulled his heavy cap farther down as a protection against the wind, sleet, and snow. Lowering his shapely head, he plodded wearily on. The storm, he realized, was growing steadily worse. And it angered him—angered him so much that he cursed violently. He cursed the storm, he cursed the fate that sent him trudging through the snow-slashing weather, and he cursed the man who moved slowly but surely onward up the trail a short distance before him.

Would he never stop?

For nearly forty-eight hours, Jim had followed that man. Uphill and down, across wind-torn plains, scarcely resting, he tenaciously stuck to the trail. Strangely enough, he neither gained on the man nor lost distance. He man-

aged, by some fortunate streak of luck, to stay a certain distance behind.

At times, it was only by a superhuman effort that Jim managed to stay within eyesight of him. At the moment, Jim's legs ached with that dead, dumb misery that results from bitter cold and utter exhaustion. Each labored step sank his booted leg nearly knee-deep into the shifting drifts of snow, and each breath was a short, labored gasp. His anger rose to white heat as he wondered how much longer he or the other man would be able to carry on.

Minutes later, Jim ascended a rise and stood for a short time looking down into a little valley. To the left, beneath him, a small cabin snuggled against the hill. Surrounded with snow-mantled evergreens, the cabin suggested a picture of sheer, frigid beauty. But Jim had no time now for beauty. His mind was filled with other and more important thoughts. He plodded on.

When at last he reached the little cabin, smoke, torn to ragged wisps by the wind, was tumbling from the snow-capped chimney. The thoughts of a warm, cozy fire and hot food filled him with a pleasant glow of contentment. He pounded mittened fists on the heavy door.

Heavy footfalls approached inside, and the door squeaked open on cold, rusty hinges. A short, bewhiskered man stood framed in the doorway.

"Hi, stranger!" the man cackled in a thin, rasping voice. "Come in."

"Howdy!" Jim said. "Glad to." He stepped inside the cabin.

The luxurious warmth of the fireplace filled Jim with a sense of utter contentment, and the anger that had gripped him on the trail was now gone. He watched the short, stocky man as he busied himself about the fire.

"I didn't know anybody else was galivantin' around in this storm," the man remarked. "But I see I ain't the only fool about."

Jim laughed. The next instant his gun was in his hand. "Turn around, Bill Haag!" he said. "I want to look at you."

BILL WHIRLED suddenly about. He stopped short as he looked into the blue-black revolver. His faded, cunning eyes glared at Jim in mingled alarm and anger. Loose lips, parted in sheer surprise, revealed tobacco-stained snags of teeth.

"What—what's this mean?" he snapped.

Jim grinned pleasantly. After all, he decided, things weren't going to be as tough as he had thought. "Mean?" he repeated. "Nothing. Except that you killed Ed Connel, the sheriff of Sierra County; and that you are my prisoner. There's a reward for the killer, and I intend to get it."

Jim felt the icy coldness of those faded blue eyes as they tried to penetrate his own mind. He felt that Bill Haag could be as cold and cruel and merciless as sudden death.

Bill uttered an explosive curse. "Waal," he demanded gruffly, "what now?"

"Just turn around, Bill, and raise

your arms. I want your gun and cartridge belt. No tricks, or——"

Bill turned. Jim perked the gun from the holster and unbuckled the heavy belt. Then with a swift, brushing movement he made certain that the other had no more hidden weapons.

"All right, Bill. You're safe, now. You can get along with the fire and the grub. I'm hungry as the devil. You'd better not try to escape. It isn't very pleasant to die out there in that storm."

Bill listened to the howling wind and looked at the window. Snowflakes pelted the windowpanes in a silent, ghostly tattoo.

"I'm not that big a fool," Bill snarled.

"Good! I'm a kind-hearted fool. I'd hate to get hard with an old man like you."

The conversation between the two was interrupted by a rat which scampered across the floor. Both men noticed it. It disappeared in a hole in the wall.

"I guess," Bill cackled, "I'll feed them things some poison. I hate rats. They're a damn nuisance." His menacing eyes turned to Jim meaningly.

But Jim ignored them. Instead, he asked: "What have we to eat?"

"Ain't got nothin' but beans and bacon."

Jim shook his head in disappointment. "I don't like either of them."

"That's all I got. If you don't like 'em, you can go hungry."

"O. K. I'll eat."

While Bill cooked the beans and bacon, Jim made himself comfortable. He drew a heavy chair up near the fire and, taking off his heavy outer clothing, seated himself and smoked. Once he looked up to see Bill eying him directly, but the latter quickly withdrew his eyes. Jim wondered what might be passing through that thick, slow mind.

Time passed slowly. The storm

roared on. The old cabin creaked cheerlessly.

THE MEAL was finally finished and placed on the table. Each man eyed the other with a distant, alert respect as he ate.

"So you think it's goin' to be easy to prove that I killed the sheriff?" Bill growled, a bean-laden knife poised halfway to his mouth.

Jim smiled easily, sure of himself. "Yes. I was only ten feet away when you shot him." He noted with satisfaction the quick, fearful glance that Bill shot in his direction. "I guess Ed was arresting you for stealing from that grocery when you whipped out your gun and fired. Poor Ed! He never knew what struck him."

"I guess you don't miss nothin', do you?"

"Not much."

After the meal, Bill moved slowly about, gathering up and washing the dishes. Occasionally, Jim noted, Bill glanced furtively in his direction. Jim smiled pleasantly to himself. He wasn't afraid.

Once more a rat scampered over the floor. But, unlike its predecessor, it failed to reach the hole in the wall. Rather, it stopped suddenly, rolled over on its back and, after thrashing wildly about in terrible agony, died.

Jim looked at the dead rat for a long moment. Then he glanced at Bill. That rat poison, he thought, was certainly potent and very effective.

And at that particular instant, a gripping pain shot through his own abdomen. The pain was so great that he nearly cried out.

"What's a matter?" Bill demanded.

"I've got a pain in my stomach," Jim answered. "Indigestion, I guess. I always have it."

A look of shocked surprise flashed over Bill's wrinkled features. He snapped his fingers in a gesture of dis-

may. "Waal, I'll be damned," he cried.

Jim looked up to see Bill shuffling slowly to the small packing case that served as a cupboard. He returned with a green cardboard box.

"I guess," Bill apologized, "I put some of this rat poison in our grub. I been feelin' some pains myself."

"What!"

"It's this a-way," Bill cackled slowly, "I allus like plenty of pepper in my beans and bacon, and I put a lot of this rat poison in, thinkin' it was pepper." A shudder seemed to rack his own body.

"Why—you damned murdering skunk!" Jim cried in horror. "You not only kill the sheriff, but you go about trying to kill every one else."

Grim defiance lurked in Bill's eyes as he looked at Jim. "Waal, it was an accident."

Jim roared in terror. "Accident? Well, watch this accident."

HE WHIPPED out his gun and pointed it at Bill. But before he could pull the trigger, a terrific pain gripped him. He staggered weakly to a chair and sat down. He cringed as he beheld the smile of utter contempt on Bill's lips.

"I guess you murdered Sheriff Connel by accident, too, eh, Jim?"

"Why, you——"

"Come clean, you rat! Chicago gangsters ain't got no business out here no-how."

Jim sat suddenly upright. Insane fear gave way to a feeling of despair and frustration. Defiance gripped him. "Sure, I killed that meddling sheriff! And I'm going to kill you, too, you bush rat!"

"Naw! You ain't got that much grit. You're dyin' from that rat poison and you want a living soul to stick with you to the end. You're afraid to die alone. But shoot if you want to."

Suddenly, quickly, Jim fired. Day-

light followed the lead slug through Bill's battered old hat. And then Jim cried aloud as a pain flashed through his own body. The gun slipped from his hand and clattered to the floor.

Bill quickly picked it up. "Up with 'em, Jim! High as they go."

Jim raised his arms. His easy, dashing manner left him.

"That idea of rat poison was all right, wasn't it, Jim? But don't worry too much; I never put any poison in the grub. That was just a trick. And your indigestion—waal, that was just what a Chicago doc said would happen to you if you et beans and bacon. And that dyin' rat was sure obligin', kickin' off that a-way in the middle of the floor."

A sigh of relief escaped Jim. He looked hopefully at Bill.

And Bill grinned.

"When you shot Ed," he went on, "I was over in Dry Branch, doing some deputy work. They phoned me and said that you was a-headin' for the mountains, so I tried to beat you to it. I did. But I got to hand it to you. That was a clever trick tryin' to fasten that murder onto me. You never intended to take me to town, though. That was just another trick to keep me from suspicionin' you till the weather broke, then you was goin' on alone. Ain't that right?"

"Go to hell!"

"Sure! But put these bracelets on, first. I need that reward."



A Little Faith

by Richard Carol

"So I've caught ye at last!" he cried.

THE STREAM was in flood and the muddy water rushed hungrily over the tops of the stepping-stones, seeking to swallow them up. But Alastair Macrae, even in the darkness, splashed surely from step to step, and in a few moments he stood on the other side, facing the formidable dike that reared its jagged crest above him.

He shook his head as he looked at its grim silhouette against the cloud-racked sky. Somehow it seemed imbued with

life and to have assumed the character of its builder. Rugged and hard, immovable, immutable—that was the dike; that was Angus Melrose. If only he had been reasonable and not so fanatical in his pride!

It had all been so stupid in its littleness. For generations the farm of the Melroses had been taken as including this bend of the stream until Alastair discovered an old deed which showed that actually the strip of land through which the stream ran belonged to the

Macraes. He had taken action to get the position established and gain legally that access to the water which was far too valuable to forego.

He told Angus at the time that it was a mere formality. He had no use for the narrow strip beyond the stream which both could now use for watering their cattle; for Alastair was not the man to remember that the other had never thought to offer a similar concession to himself. But Angus had drawn himself up at that. He was indebted to no one, and Alastair Macrae was the last man on earth to whom he would be beholden. It was his justification of his previous conduct.

So he built the dike to mark the boundary with his own hands and his hard pride deprived his cattle of a natural watering. A queer man, Angus, since the day wee Jimmie fell from the hay cart.

Alastair clambered over the dike and dropped on to Melrose territory, the land he had been forbidden to enter. He looked across the fields and saw the flickering light from the farmhouse. Angus was away from home and he was going there, as he had often gone before. For Jeanie, wife of Angus, had sent for him.

Through the mire of the cart track, through a wooden gate, and a dark form leaped toward him.

"Hello, Colin!" said Alastair quietly and the collie, his tail wagging with joyful recognition, danced around him till he reached the door.

A GENTLE KNOCK, then he lifted the latch and went in. But as he closed the door behind him, a form appeared out of the barn opposite and vanished again in the darkness.

Jeanie rose from the table to greet him. "It's awful good of ye to come, Alastair," she said.

"It's hard to refuse when ye call," said Alastair with a bit of a smile.

Then his face grew serious. "I like to come, Jean—and I don't. I'm just afraid he'll catch me one of these days and then it'll be a terrible time he'll be giving ye. Since—yon time, ye ken what I mean—Angus looks at things aye the bad way, and he'll mind the time I was sort of keen on ye, Jeanie, and he'd say I was coming here to see you."

"Which of course ye don't," put in Jeanie quietly.

Alastair looked uncomfortable. "Weel, I don't just come exactly for to see you. Mind ye, Jean," he burst out, "I'm real glad to see ye all the same, but if it wasn't for Jimmie I'm thinking I wouldn't be taking the risk."

"I ken, Alastair," said Jeanie, and the smile had gone from her face. "I was just teasing ye a bit as I used to. It's no' often now I get the chance. But tell me, Alastair, do ye really think Jimmie will ever get right again?"

Alastair looked away, but Jeanie's eyes drew him back.

"What does the doctor say?" he temporized.

"He came last Wednesday, and he said it's stayed the same too long now for there to be any hope of a change."

"Then it means—" began Alastair.

"Ay!" Jeanie nodded, looking at him bravely. "It means he'll be paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life unless—" She paused.

"Unless what, Jeanie?"

"Unless the doctor's wrong, and you're right. Now I'm asking ye to tell me the truth, Alastair Macrae. It's broken Angus' heart, for he blames himself for letting Jimmie get up on the hay cart that day. And it's near broken mine. Do you really believe he'll ever get better?"

"Jimmie thinks he'll get better," said Alastair.

"Ay!" Jeanie turned her head away and added softly: "It's made it easier for him thinking that, and it was you put the idea into his wee head when

Angus and I could only see the worst. But I'm asking ye, Alastair, do ye really believe it?"

"Jean, lass, there's nothing that's impossible. Times, I admit, I can't believe it; but Jimmie's that sure about it, he just persuades me, the wee de'il, that it's not only possible but certain."

"I see. Thanks, Alastair." Jeanie pointed upstairs. "He's waiting for ye. He was just terrible keen to see ye the night. He wouldn't tell me why, but as Angus had said he would be back late from Kinlochie I thought it would be safe enough."

ALASTAIR tiptoed up the stairs, cautiously opened the door and stepped into the little bedroom, both hands behind his back.

"Hello, Uncle 'Stair!" came a voice from the bed.

"Hello, Jimmie!"

"What have ye got yer hands behind yer back for, Uncle 'Stair?"

"Nieve, nievie, knicknack, which hand will ye tak?" chanted Alastair mysteriously.

Jimmie deliberated a moment. "The right," he hazarded.

Alastair showed the hand. "Na, ye're wrong. Try again."

"The left."

Again he brought to the front an empty hand.

"Oh, ye're cheating!" cried Jimmie.

"Ay, but ye're right this time," admitted Alastair, grinning, and handed over the bag of bull's-eye candy.

Alastair sat down on the chair beside the bed and accepted the proffered bull's-eye. "Now, Jimmie, what made ye drag me out on a night like this?" he asked.

"Is it muddy?"

Alastair showed his boots. "Look at that, ye wee rascal! And the streams in flood."

"Is it running over the stepping-stones yet?" inquired Jimmie eagerly.

"Ay, is it!"

"Oh, I wish I could be there!" breathed Jimmie, his eyes aglow.

"Take my word for it, Jimmie, it's much nicer to be in bed. But what's this ye want to tell me?"

"Have ye licked the stripes off yer bull's-eye yet?" switched Jimmie, pulling his out of his mouth.

Alastair solemnly produced his own for inspection. He turned it round.

"Look!" cried Jimmie. "Ye've still got a wee white bit on yours and mine's all black. Cheers, I win!"

"But I wasn't trying to lick the stripes off quick," Alastair expostulated. "I was trying to make mine last."

"Weel, crunch it up quick and let's start again," suggested Jimmie. "Tell me," he went on, "how do ye become a steeplejack, Uncle 'Stair?"

"Is that what ye got me out on a night like this for?"

Jimmie hesitated. "Ay, in a way."

Alastair shook a finger at him. "Ye're a wee rascal, Jimmie, dragging me out for a daft thing like that."

"But it's no' daft, Uncle 'Stair. I've got to think out what I'm going to do when I grow up and ye see I can't—talk to faither about it. Ye're no' angry wi' me, Uncle 'Stair?"

And the wee laddie looked so pitiful, what could Alastair say?

"Of course I'm no'. The fire had gone out in any case, and I would have had to light it again if I hadn't gone out, too."

And so they sucked their bull's-eyes, and Alastair tried hard to explain out of his vivid imagination how one became a steeplejack.

SUDDENLY the noise of an opening door came to them. Alastair stopped abruptly and listened. There was the sound of an angry voice.

"It's faither," whispered Jimmie, and Alastair turned to the bed with a half-born suspicion in his mind.

Why had Angus come back so early? Was it—could it be a trap, contrived by that tortured brain? Then Jimmie must be in it. Jimmie? He couldn't. And yet he had asked him to come specially as if there had been something important, and it had turned out to be nothing.

And as he looked steadily down at him, Alastair saw pain and fear in those blue eyes.

"Jimmie, tell me what ye got me here the night for?"

But before Jimmie could answer, the door burst open and Angus Melrose stood in the doorway.

"SO I'VE CAUGHT ye at it at last!" Melrose cried, and there was triumph in his accusation, an insane, gloating triumph.

Alastair rose slowly from the chair and saw behind Angus the pale, frightened face of Jean. "I suppose ye have, Angus," he said quietly.

"Ay, I've been waiting for ye, Alastair Macrae. I've made opportunities for ye and—ay, I'll admit it—I've had a laddie watching when I left the way clear. Ye see, I wanted to catch ye at yer game, to see ye with my own eyes poisoning my son's mind against his father."

"It isn't true!" The agonized cry was forced from Jean.

"Silence, wumman!" thundered Angus. "Alastair Macrae, for three years ye've been coming behind my back, telling that laddie that he would get better when ye kent as weel as me that it was the Lord's will he would have to spend the rest of his days on his back. Do ye deny that?"

Alastair looked away.

"I'm glad ye don't force me to call ye a liar, Alastair Macrae. And now that I've seen, I'll tell ye what I'm going to do." There was an almost devilish gleam in his eyes as the terrible words came through set teeth: "I'm going to

let the whole country side ken that when Angus Melrose has to leave his home, it's Alastair Macrae who's quick to take advantage of it."

"That's a damned lie!" cried Alastair.

"Think again," said Angus with a queer smile. "When I tell them that, I'll be telling the truth. If folks *happen* to put the wrong meaning to it, it'll not be on *my* conscience. And the folks here are not exactly kind when they get their tongues on a story like that. Now get out of my house and never let me see yer face again."

Alastair turned slowly toward the bed. "Good-by, Jimmie," he said, bending down to take his hand, but Angus rushed forward and swept the hand aside.

"Keep yer hands off my son!" he cried.

"But I asked him to come, faither," broke in Jimmie, "to tell him——"

"What did ye want to tell him?"

"Only that he was right, faither, when he said I'd get weel again."

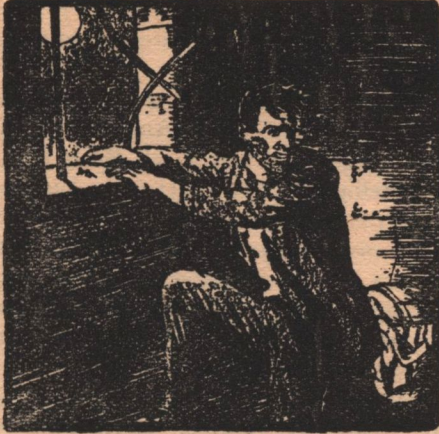
"Jimmie!" Jean rushed into the room with the wild cry, and Angus looked at his son, silent, dazed, hope and disbelief struggling on his hard face.

"Ay," continued Jimmie, "I can wiggle my feet. Look!" He pulled aside the clothes and they saw the miracle—the pale, emaciated feet moved and the toes wiggled.

"I've been trying and trying, but I only managed it yesterday, and I was that excited that I *did* want Uncle 'Stair to be the first to see. Ye see"—his voice faltered—"it was Uncle 'Stair who said they would get weel again."

Sobbing, Jean fell on her knees beside the bed. Angus bent down, gripped Jimmie's hand, gripped it hard. Then he turned away, and went up to Alastair, looked straight into his eyes a moment, then gently shepherded him from the room.

"I think there's a wee drappie in the bottle, Uncle 'Stair," he said quietly.



Wise Guy

by Hapsburg Liebe

*Five minutes after, he
had pried the bars apart
and was creeping through
to freedom.*

HE WAS ABOUT twenty-six, slim and dark and hatchet-faced. Because of his being so quick with any manner of lethal weapon, and so devilishly ill-tempered, the other New Orleans river underworld crooks knew him as the "Hornet." Now the Hornet had stung once too often. That is to say, he had shot an officer of the law.

A week after the killing, Hornet Goolsby—a new alias, Goolsby—bobbed up in a little town far over near the edge of the Okefinokee Swamp in lower Georgia. There wasn't a cent left in his pockets, and he was hungry. He chose a respectable-looking house, rapped on the back door, and demanded, rather than asked, that he be fed. One look at his villainous, unwashed countenance, and the housewife slammed the door and locked it. Goolsby went swearing back to the live-oak-bordered avenue and turned toward the little business section.

Then to his right he saw a big ancient house in a setting of moss-bearded oaks and magnolias. He crossed the rickety old picket fence and moved briskly over the weedy lawn. Nobody answered his rapping on the kitchen door. He pushed the door open, stepped inside, came upon a slender supply of cooked food in the

warming closet of an ancient range. Every morsel of this food Hornet gulped.

But he did not go when he had eaten. Some of these old Southern homes offered worth-while pickings. Goolsby tiptoed through the dining room, into the living room, into the library. Still he had found nothing worth carrying off. Then up the broad staircase and to the second floor he went soundlessly, and there in a bedroom he came upon a tableau that was striking even to him.

In the canopied bed lay an old woman, asleep. Beside her in a rocker sat an extremely pretty girl with a copy of "Evangeline" open in her lap, also asleep. Hornet Goolsby's dark gaze narrowed and darted to an antique cheval-type dresser. On it there was a small chased-silver jewel case. Two silent steps and the killer crook was peering into the case. It contained a single article of jewelry, a large solitaire diamond, all blue fire and magnificent, in a ring setting that had been the vogue many, many years before.

"Worth at least a grand," Goolsby told himself as he snatched out and pocketed the ring.

He did not continue his search for loot, but fled the house at once. Just as he cleared the back veranda the front

gate swung open to admit a tall, elderly man with a nickel-plated star on his vest and a gun ready in his hand. The woman who had slammed her kitchen door in Goolsby's face had watched him, had seen him enter the home of Mrs. Crandall Clay, had telephoned the authorities.

"There he is at the back!" called one of the two deputies who were following old Sheriff Summers Hyde.

The senior officer rushed around the house and saw Hornet Goolsby vault the rear fence. "Halt!" he bellowed. "Halt!" *Bam!*

The bullet whistled well over the still-running Goolsby's head. *Bam!*—again said the sheriff's gun. Hyde, of course, was only trying to stop the man, had no desire to hit him.

Sandy pine barrens appeared before Hornet. Keeping ragged trees between him and his pursuers, he ran as he had not run before, and he gained a little. Hyde followed the trail in the sand like a beagle; one deputy kept a hundred yards or so to the left, the other a like distance to the right. It wasn't for nothing that the three officers had hunted foxes all their lives.

Half a mile of pine barrens and Goolsby reached an edge of the Okefinokee. Without hesitation he plunged into shallow water covered with greenish scum. But five minutes later he realized that he was trapped—that is, unless he cared to take long chances with the mosquitoes and cottonmouth moccasins, wild cats, panthers, and alligators of that trackless, great swamp.

THERE had to be an easier way. He looked about him. A giant lightning-blasted live-oak tree, moss-draped, caught his eye. He could find that tree again. There were holes in it. He hid the ring in one of these holes, filled it with moss, then waded out to the dry pineland and surrendered to Sheriff Summers Hyde.

"What were you running for?" panted the old sheriff.

"Because you was after me with a gun," quickly answered Goolsby. He went on: "Boss, I was starvin'. I knocked on the door o' that house, and the door wasn't locked, and it swung open. Nobody answered the knock. I could see grub there on the range. So I went in and got some grub. That's all I done."

The deputies came up. Goolsby was ironed and searched. Lucky, he thought, he didn't have a gun on him. He was taken back to Mrs. Crandall Clay's. The shots had awakened the two women, and they were on the back porch waiting.

"Did you miss anything in the house, Miz Clay?" inquired Summers Hyde, his gray head bared.

The old woman nodded. She was white, much distraught.

It was her granddaughter that answered: "Yes, sheriff. Her—her diamond ring. You know the one."

Hyde's face went rock-hard. He turned drilling eyes upon the face of the killer crook.

Goolsby cried: "It wasn't me! I never took any ring!"

"Listen to me," bit out the old sheriff. "That ring was sacred to everybody in Clay City, except you. You got it. You're going to give it up, and the sooner you give it up the more trouble you'll save yourself. Come now, what did you do with the ring?"

"I told you I never took——"

"Throw him into jail," impatiently interrupted Summers Hyde, addressing his deputies. Softly, to the old woman he said: "Don't you worry a bit, Miz Clay. We'll get the diamond back. I give you my word for that."

"Wise guy, ain't you?" snarled Hornet Goolsby under his breath.

The Clay City jail was by no means modern, but it was fairly strong. When the lock of an iron-latticed cell door had

clicked upon Goolsby, he ambled to the small barred window and looked out. Just back of the jail building there was a smith's shop, and between the window and the shop lay a tangled litter of rusted scrap iron. Then Hornet turned to the narrow cell bed and sat down to think.

Sooner or later the sheriff would learn that he'd killed an officer over in the New Orleans section, so he had to get out of there. He cursed himself for not having a hack-saw blade concealed between the two plies of leather that made up his belt. Brisk footfalls rang in the corridor then, and he looked up to see that the tall, elderly Summers Hyde was peering through the iron door.

"Young man," began Hyde, "you surely don't realize what you've done. The Clays are the last of our oldest and best-liked family. Hard luck has dogged them for a long time. They've been living by selling off things, and all they had left to sell was that one big diamond. It was Miz Clay's dead husband's, and its sentimental value to her was a dozen times its actual value. If you'll tell me where the ring is, I'll give you a stake and let you go. Not supposed to do that, but I will. Eh?"

Goolsby's better judgment insisted that he take the officer up. His cupidity, however, rose above his better judgment. The diamond was worth a grand. He'd be out of that jail in no time.

"Boss," he declared, "I sure didn't take any ring."

"You're lying to me," Hyde growled, "and before I'm through with you I'll prove it!"

Always the Hornet's bad temper had been his undoing. "Oh, yeah?" he cried hotly. "Wise guy, ain't you?"

The old sheriff narrowed his gaze, but he did not reply. Soon he and the two deputies were searching the pine barrens along Goolsby's trail from the Clay home to the swamp. It availed them nothing. One of Hyde's men sug-

gested a crude form of third degree as a means of forcing Goolsby to talk.

"No. I'll try to think of a better way," said Hyde.

SIX DAYS passed, and Hornet, despite his cunning, was still in the Clay City jail. He had become surly, wouldn't even discuss the thing that had placed him behind bars. Not that he had given up hope of escape. Then through the cell door he spied something that brought a gleam to his eyes.

Out there in the corridor lay a broom.

Almost soundlessly he broke a narrow slat off the box that had served him as a table, stretched himself out close against the bottom of the door, thrust the slat through and found that he could touch the broom with it. A few minutes of painstaking effort, and he had the broom in his cell and was hiding it under the blankets of his narrow bed. This done, he walked to the barred window and surveyed the smith's scrap-iron pile with new interest. His gaze finally settled upon the rusted half of a broken crowbar, less than ten feet away.

That night Hornet Goolsby stole the broom from under his blankets, tore it apart, and had some four yards of reasonably strong wire in his hands. He straightened this out and fashioned a slip noose in one end. There was a bright moon. He went to the window, put the wire noose through, and with infinite patience fished for the rusted crowbar half. Midnight came and passed before he got it.

Five minutes after that, he had pried two of the window bars out of the masonry and was creeping through to freedom. Ten more minutes and he was back of Mrs. Crandall Clay's ancient silent house and heading for the nearest edge of the Okefinokee. Again he thought of the tall old sheriff and tried to imagine that officer's chagrin when the jailer told him the next morning.

The bright moon showed him the great lightning-blasted live oak standing a little way out in the shallow water. The fine diamond was exactly where he had left it. Horner placed the ring snugly in the watch pocket of his trousers and wheeled. He would hit for the railroad a mile or so below Clay City—

A low, hard laugh cut into his train of thought. Human forms appeared as though by magic from behind trees, and weapons gleamed in the moonlight. Goolsby elevated his hands, and almost in that same second irons clicked on his wrists. Sheriff Summers Hyde took possession of the diamond ring.

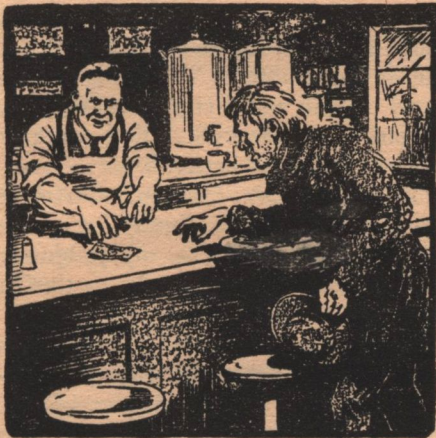
"We figured you'd hid it here in the swamp somewhere," said Hyde, "but we couldn't find it. So we followed you to it, Goolsby. Only, Goolsby isn't your name. While you were asleep one afternoon we snapped a photo of you and

sent prints to Memphis, New Orleans, and Atlanta. Just this afternoon a wire came from New Orleans instructing me to hold you for the murder of an officer there. Your career of crime is over, 'Goolsby'!"

One of the deputies grinned. "It wasn't much risk, Goolsby, what we did. We knowed you'd come heah to the swamp. We just had to git that ring back fo' Miz Clay."

Hornet was ashen and still staring at Sheriff Hyde. His lips stuck together when he tried to speak. He managed to get out two words, all that he could think of to say, and they came with much venom: "Wise guy!"

"Not sure I can deny that," easily replied the old sheriff, "because—well, Goolsby, just who do you suppose left the broom in the jail corridor and the piece of crowbar under your cell window?"



"Hard-Boiled" Gets It!

by Nina Brown
Baker

He sought instantly to regain it, but H. B. was too quick for him.

RAIN SEETHED and swirled in the gutters of West Madison Street, sweeping Chicago's forlorn thoroughfare clean of even the humblest human derelict. It was the black hour before a stormy dawn. In the deserted block opposite the great newspaper building, only the dingy front of "Hard-boiled" Hanson's all-night

chili joint showed a glimmer of light.

H. B. scowled as the door opened to admit a wavering, dripping figure. The newcomer was rather more than elderly; his shabby clothing might have been expensive once—years ago.

H. B.'s eyes narrowed as the old man snatched off his battered derby hat and advanced timidly toward the counter.

The four newspaper men, playing hearts at a table in the rear, did not look up.

Hanson laid down his racing form and faced the new arrival squarely. "Look here, bo, you're in the wrong pew. They's plenty eatin' houses for bums on up the street. I don't aim to run my place for you guys. This is a restaurant for gentlemen, see? Now you beat it."

"I quite understand, Mr. Hanson. It is why I have come to you. I—I am a gentleman, sir." The voice, though it quavered pitifully, was unquestionably that of an educated man.

Hard-boiled Hanson looked him up and down in angry perplexity. "You are, huh? Well, mebbe I'm wrong. What'll it be? A bowl o' chili? Fifteen cents, and I'll take it in advance, if you don't mind."

"Mr. Hanson, I am going to be entirely frank with you." The old man straightened his drooping shoulders and met the other's eye proudly. "I have not, at the moment, the money to pay for one bowl of your excellent chili. It has been two days since I last tasted food. I——"

"Say, listen!" H. B.'s face set like a rock. "Didn't I tell you I wasn't caterin' to no bums? You'll find the Salvation Army shelter up the street. Now get out, before——"

"Please!" The old man held up a thin hand with an odd gesture of authority. "Mine is no ordinary case, Mr. Hanson. Hear me before you judge me. I am Addison Cartright. The name means nothing to you, perhaps, but only two short years ago it was a name well-known in La Salle Street."

"Is that so? One o' them busted financiers, huh?" In spite of himself Hanson's interest was engaged. "Well, we all have to take it, don't we? Sorry, pop, but what you usta be is *nuthin'* in my life. Right up the street——"

"Only one moment, sir. I am a ruined man, yes. But ruined *how*?

Financially, Mr. Hanson. *Only* financially! I have my health, I am in the prime of life, my brain is keener and my judgment better right now than it was twenty years ago, when I made my first million. Do you think I shall allow myself to be defeated by a temporary set-back? Addison Cartright has faced difficulties before—yes, and overcome them! These, too, will pass. You may take my word for it."

"Plannin' a comeback, huh, pop?"

H. B.'s steely eyes wavered. A queer old codger; seemed to know what he was talkin' about. Still—not even the price of a bowl of chili on him! The name he had mentioned was totally unfamiliar to Hanson; but, then, he'd never claimed to move in high financial circles. If the old boy ever got on his feet again he'd *sure* remember a little grubstake now. And, gosh, you did read about them financial giants makin' comebacks, lots of times! And a bowl of chili wasn't much to gamble——

"Sit down, Mr. Cartright." With a sudden sweep of his hand he indicated a stool at the counter. "I'll stake you to a bowl of chili and a cup of coffee now, and put it on the cuff. You can pay me when times get better."

"Thank you, Mr. Hanson," Cartright answered with simple dignity. "I have always prided myself on my judgment of men, and I am happy to know that in this case I did not err."

"Hey, look! H. B.'s losing his grip!" "Red" Garrett, of the card-playing quartette, nudged his neighbor. "Passing out free food—for the first time in Madison Street history, and I know that for a fact!"

CARTRIGHT ate very slowly, restrainedly, of the fiery stew and enjoyed each drop of the hot, strong coffee. H. B. watched him with proprietary interest. Generosity was a new sensation to him, and he found the reaction not unpleasing.

"How about a piece of pie to finish off with?" he asked recklessly.

Cartright shook his head. "I must not take advantage of your kindness." He touched his lips daintily with his paper napkin and slowly arose. "I shall not forget this. Never yet has any man done a favor for Addison Cartright and gone unrewarded."

He extended his hand, and H. B. grasped it warmly.

"That's all right, brother," he said. "I ain't askin' for any reward. Oh, o' course, if things break right for you later on—well, mebbe you might feel like droppin' in and puttin' me next to somethin' good in the Street? Well, good-by, and good luck."

"And the same to you, my friend."

Cartright withdrew his hand, and fumbled with his soaking, broken hat. Just as he was about to set it upon his head, something fell from the torn lining and lay upon the oilcloth-covered counter between them.

Cartright instantly sought to cover it with the hat, but H. B. was too quick for him. His hand closed over the slip of green paper, and his eyes lighted dangerously as he unfolded it.

"For the cat's sake—a twenty-dollar bill! This yours, brother?"

"Why, yes—yes, it is." The quaver had returned to Cartright's voice now, and he looked wishfully toward the door.

"And you had the nerve to come in here and sponge a meal, with twenty bucks on you! Played me for a sucker—and I fell for it!" He glanced toward the newspaper men, who were frankly listening now, and a dull flush mounted his high cheek bones. "Say, listen, you——"

"Please, Mr. Hanson, let me explain." Cartright's assured manner had completely crumpled; he shuffled uneasily and his voice took on a pleading note. "I'm sorry you saw that. I wouldn't have had it happen for the world. I

know you won't understand; no one could who hadn't been in the fix I'm in. But that twenty—why, it's all I've got in the world, Mr. Hanson. As long as I've got it, I'm not down and out yet, don't you see?

"I'm different from these bums here on the street—I'm a gentleman, with money in my pocket. Oh, can't you see how it is? That isn't a twenty-dollar bill; it's my self-respect. When that's gone, everything's gone. I've been through bad times lately, but I've not touched that twenty. I promised myself I wouldn't break it, and I never will!"

"Oh, that's what you think, is it?" Hanson's laugh was savage. "Well, it's just too bad, bo, because you're gonna break it right now. You're gonna pay for that meal you just had, and I don't mean mebbe!"

"But I can't pay for it, Mr. Hanson! I told you I hadn't the money—oh, you're not going to take my last twenty? Mr. Hanson, *please!* I'll be on my feet again before long, I know I will! Surely you can wait a few weeks? Mr. Hanson, I beg you to give me back that bill!"

"Wait nuthin'! You had the meal, didn't you? And you got the money to pay for it, ain't you? All right, you pay, see?"

"Gosh, H. B., give him a break!" Red Garrett had left the card table and strolled toward the front of the store. "You told him you'd give him the chili, didn't you?"

"Sure I did, when I thought he was broke! The cheap grafter! Keep out, will you, Mr. Garrett? I'll handle this."

He turned to Cartright. "A bowl o' chili and a cup o' coffee—that's twenty cents, though I ought to charge you double, you low-down crook! Shut up! I've heard plenty out of you." He rang up the amount on the cash register and deposited the greenback therein, Cart-

right following it with a last despairing glance.

Very carefully Hanson counted out a pile of greasy ones and some silver. "There you are, slicker—nineteen dollars and eighty cents. And now the quicker you get outta here the better I'll like it. And don't come back!"

Silently, his eyes on the floor, Cart-right picked up the money and put it in his pocket. Then he turned and limped toward the door. His walk was the walk of a beaten, broken old man. He sighed as the open door swept a gust of rain into his face; then drawing his thin shoulders together he stepped out into the storm.

"GREAT human interest story—think I'll write it up for my 'round the town' column." Young Eddie Foster, more touched than he liked to admit, tried to speak carelessly. "You know," he went on, "I can see the old chap's point of view. A man's self-respect—as long as he can keep that he's still got his head above water."

"Yeah, and that's a swell way to keep it—at my expense," Hanson said sourly. "Imagine *me* fallin' for a racket like that! I got wise in time, though." He banged open the cash register and gloatingly surveyed the twenty. "One of the old-style big ones—I bet he's been carryin' it around for years!" He held the soiled, torn paper up to the light.

"Let me see it a minute, H. B.," Red Garrett said.

Obligingly Hanson passed it over, and Garrett studied it carefully.

"Think you were pretty smart to grab the old boy's secret hoard, don't you, Hanson?" he asked.

"Well, not so smart, mebbe, but lucky to find it out in time. Why? Wouldn't you 'a' done the same?"

"Who, me?" Garrett answered nonchalantly. "No; I don't think I would. I think I'd have made him a present of the chili."

"And helped him keep his 'self-respect,' huh?" sneered H. B. "Well, mebbe you would. But me, I'm not such a sap."

"If that's what you call it. Personally, I'd say it takes a bigger sap to give away nineteen dollars and eighty cents than it does to part with a bowl of chili."

"What are you talkin' about, young feller?"

"Ah, just something very new and smooth in depression rackets. This bill is counterfeit, old top. No; I don't believe I'd call the police. The old guy didn't 'pass' the bill—he didn't offer it to you, you know; you took it away from him after he begged you not to. The four of us would have to testify to that. Such language! Calm down, H. B.; you haven't got a leg, to stand on. I reckon you'll just have to take it."



IF I WERE ONLY BUILT
LIKE THAT CHAP, WHAT
A HIT I'D MAKE!

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*- as we
go along*



*We believe
you'll enjoy
them*

Chesterfield they're Milder
they TASTE BETTER