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CANADA'S ALL-STORY MAGAZINE

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by MORGAN FLANDERS



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# **yarns**

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**W**HO SAID that Canada hasn't produced any great writers? The editor of Yarns has been swaped with manuscripts, good, rip-snorting yarns that keep you in breathless suspense right to the climax; enough of these yarns have come into keep Yarns in material for many issues.

To the writers, Yarns owes an apology that we have only been able to give definite reports and criticisms to a very few of these authors who responded so quickly. We hope to whittle down the pile in the next couple of months, and ask our authors to bear with us.

And to our readers, thanks for the many encouraging and complimentary letters. There wasn't a brickbat in a carload! In the issues ahead, you're going to have as fine a dish of yarns from Canadian writers that has ever been served an appreciative reading audience.

Among our correspondents, some have become so enthusiastic that they've supplied us with short yarns of their own, though they make no pretence of being writers. So Yarns is opening the doors to all its readers. Each issue Yarns will pay \$3, \$2 and \$1 respectively for the three best yarns received—fact or fiction. So sharpen your pencils. This reader's department for swapping Yarns has been postponed until the next issue. Lack of time made this a necessary decision. Watch for it—and write for it.

*The Editor*

# **yarns**

FOR JULY 1941

Canada's All-Fiction Magazine

The hard-punching tale of a champion who lost his crown and found glory

## **DEFEAT OF A CHAMPION**

by MORGAN FLANDERS

**4**

From beyond the veil a former idol called the plays and won a ball game

## **GHOST ON THE DIAMOND**

by CHARLES BENTON JOHNSTON

**14**

Sometimes a dead man can do more harm than a live one, especially if he was a man in love

## **DEAD MEN DO TALK!**

by FRANKLIN MARTIN

**23**

A slick killer slips up just as he was complimenting himself on having committed the perfect crime

## **THE BLANK PAPER CLUE**

by FRANK NICHOLLS

**31**

Back home they'd branded him "bad," and Bill Malop wanted the deputy marshal's badge

## **BADLAND'S PURGE**

by MATTHEW NORTH

**38**

His ship was slowly sinking but there was still a chance she could make port with her cargo

## **THE RESCUE**

by DEREK SINCLAIR

**61**

Short sketches of the Mounties when they faced death in Canada's wilderness

## **TALES OF THE N.W.M.P.**

by BLAINE ARNOLD

**71**

Two quick-shooting hombres both wanted the same girl. A two-part yarn with plenty of action

## **DECISION FOR GUNPLAY**

by LAWSON JAMES

**74**

## **THE COVER**

By JOSEPH DREANY

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# Message To Canadian Writers

## **yarns**



The invitation extended by Yarns last month to Canadian writers who have a story to tell was accepted with such overwhelming response that it has not been possible for us at this early date to read all the manuscripts that have poured into our editorial offices. Need we say that we are delighted! This magazine is specifically for Canadians, and its columns are especially open to those young Canadian writers who have not, as yet, broken into print. To them we offer every encouragement. To the established authors, we merely repeat, here is a new market for you. The "Welcome" sign is still out—so send in that yarn today!



**Yarns Publishing Co.**

73 Wellington Street W., Toronto

# DEFEAT OF



Thousands were waiting in the mammoth arena to see the championship bout of a century. Out of the warm summer darkness came a mighty roar of ovation as Murgo entered the ring. Their welcome to Harley was conservative, a polite tribute to a man who had been an idol too long.

# A CHAMPION

A fast-moving, hard-punching yarn  
that will stir your emotions and  
thrill you to the end. Written by

Morgan Flanders

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## 1

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### THE DOWNWARD PATH

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**F**EET SCRAPPED on canvas and leather smacked on bare flesh. The bodies of the boxers glistened dully, red and wet. It would soon be over. The crowd, sensing the nearness of the end, stirred restlessly and was strangely silent, only a few hoarse shouts breaking out here and there. They had been pulling for the challenger all the way and they knew he was licked.

Up there under the bright lights in the ring, Mugs Harley drove his man back to the ropes, and moved in to finish him, weaving in his old crouch, gloved hands never still. The challenger was groggy now, all the young arrogance beaten out of him.

Old Mugs Harley was still a killer and he looked it. Short, powerful, with a close cropped head, thick muscular legs and long arms. Not pretty to look at, but deadly.

Mugs weaved before the drooping challenger, hands leaping in and out. With cool, cruel perfection, he sank a terrific jolt into the red welted body. The crowd came up with a long gasp as the challenger crumpled, beaten, to the canvas.

The ref started to count but there was really no need of it. Everyone knew the bout was over. Mugs brushed the back of his hairy forearm across his sweat-smarting eyes, and watched the swinging, white shirted arm of the referee. Without waiting to have his hand raised in victory, he turned and shuffled towards his corner.

MUGS HARLEY sat facing his manager, Callahan, across a round wooden table, loaded with steaks and French fries. They had come here to relax after the fight. There were a few men scattered around at different tables. Mugs and Cally had been coming here for after-the-fight snacks for a decade. It was a ritual with them.

Mugs and Cally looked at each other.

Ten years in the fight game hadn't left Mugs unscathed. He was scarred, battered and misshapen. He had started fighting when they really fought. Now, Mugs was about the only one left who did fight, and strangely enough he was unpopular. He had been at the top too long. Now the fans were weary of him. They wanted to see him knocked off.

Mugs couldn't eat. Bitterly he looked at Callahan. His old friend. How could he explain to him what he meant to say.

"Cally, they want me to lose. Every time I'm up they're yellin' for my blood. I'm all mixed up. After other fights the steaks taste good. Tonight I can't eat, I'm not happy, somethings wrong."

"Maybe it's your wife. She's got no interest, no sympathy, nothin'. She don't even come to see you fight anymore. She'd rather go off and play bridge or somethin'."

Mugs Harley grinned. "Maybe she's tired of seein' me win too."

For a while they sat in silence. Then Callahan paid for the untouched steaks and they got into a taxi and rode to Mugs' home.

AT THE Harley home they got out and tramped into the house. Feminine voices came from the living room. There seemed to be three or

four women all talking at once. They tried to sneak past the door but they were spotted, and a female's voice trilled out, bringing them to a guilty halt.

"Oh, Mr. Harley. You won, and by a knockout too. I was so thrilled. We heard the announcement over the radio. Do come in and tell us all about it."

Champion and manager shambled into the room, reluctantly, like a couple of bashful school kids. Mugs never had learned to feel at ease in his new home, with its heavy drapes, thick rugs and modernistic furniture. These voluble women terrified him. His own wife had become a stranger to him.

Joan Harley was an attractive woman, though a trifle bold and too made up. She had a fine figure but she overdressed and wore too many jewels. The spectacle of her dazzled Mugs. She was like another woman, a total stranger. She had become an imperious personage, gilded and artificial. Mugs was uneasy in her presence. She bewildered him. He couldn't penetrate that polished surface at all. He wondered what had become of the girl he had fallen in love with and married. She had been warm, human, impulsive, lovable. She had been sincere and sympathetic at the ring-side, behind his corner for every fight. Loving him, pulling for him, proud of him. Now she spoke a cold haughty language Mugs couldn't even understand. It hurt him to have her this way, so aloof and distant and strange.

She was talking now . . . "Really there's no reason why he should go on with this brutal business."

"But he loves to fight, don't you, Mr. Harley?"

"I sorta think a champion shouldn't retire," Mugs explained thickly. "It ain't the way to go out."

"He wants to go down fighting," explained Joan. "Gallantly. A romantic notion, my dears, but rather silly don't you think?"

"Charming," murmured one female. "Fascinating" amended another.

Mugs started for the door with Callahan trailing behind him. On the stairway he said to his manager, "Why did you let me do all the gab-in'. Why didn't you say something?"

Callahan wagged his head eloquently, a sickly grin on his thin hard face. "Your toughest battles ain't in the ring Mugs," he said with deep sympathy.

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## 2

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### IDOL OF THE KIDS

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**T**HAT SPRING it was a big relief to get away from the house, out to a training camp in the country. It made Mugs feel young, and happy as a kid. Joan did not accompany him. The breach between them had grown even wider and appeared to be final. Rebuffed when he clumsily tried to restore something of their old intimacy, Mugs had given up and gone into his shell. After his new match with the promising young challenger, Murgo was made, Mugs was glad to withdraw completely into the country training camp, where everything was clean, free, open and fine.

The Champ entered into his training with a zest that filled Callahan and his handlers with delight. In the roadwork, Mugs led the way, and set a pace that ran his followers ragged. Mugs liked the gang at the camp. In the day they worked and sweated in

the sun, in the evening they rested, played cards and told epic stories of the ring.

Mugs Harley grew sunburned and hard and strong. He liked life at the camp very much. In the afternoons school children would come out to admire the Champ. Although they annoyed Callahan, Mugs had given strict orders that they were never to be chased out of the camp. He liked to play with the kids. He would pose with them before the bevy of newspaper photographers. He would show them boxing tricks, run with them and make them laugh at his antics. The kids worshipped him and had the time of their young lives. Mugs often thought of the children. It seemed that they were the only ones who were still rooting for old Mugs Harley. By God he wouldn't let those kids down, whether the public liked it or not.

The newspapers carried daily stories of Mugs and Babe Murgo. They said Mugs looked better than he had in years. The said his legs were as springy as a colt's, and that his famous short arm blows were tearing his sparring partners to pieces. They began calling him "Killer" Harley, portraying him as a cold ruthless killer, a mechanical demon with a white flame behind his fierce eyes, driving him on to smash, crush and annihilate. Babe Murgo was looking good too, they added. Fast clever, smooth, with a mean stabbing left hand. A hard man to hit solidly, and a dangerous fighter. The betting ran about even, with Mugs favored slightly. But all the papers said Babe Murgo had youth on his side and that was a big factor.

A whole nation of sport followers wanted to see Mugs Harley groveling in the resin, where he had

stretched so many men. They wanted to see the grim old tyrant of the ring hurled from his pinnacle, broken and bloody in defeat. They wanted a new Champion. Harley had reigned too long. But Mugs was used to being unpopular. He had almost forgotten how it seemed to have the crowd roaring for him, instead of shrieking for his blood.

Sometimes it was hard to go on, working and aiming to win, when no one wanted you to. It made a guy feel sort of lonely and hopeless. It made a guy wonder what was the use. He felt lonely and bitter. Somewhere he had read about the loneliness of kings. That was the way Mugs Harley felt. Champions were like kings he guessed. People always wanted to see them kicked off the throne. Especially old kings. Well, here was one king who wouldn't give up his throne without a battle at any rate.

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### 3

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#### THE DOUBLE CROSS

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THINGS WENT along smoothly enough in the champion's camp. Sometimes Mugs missed Joan. The old Joan. When it got pretty bad he would go out and walk along the dark gravelled road by himself. Then Callahan worried about him. But Mugs always came back from his walks, calm and quiet as if the cool friendly night had soothed him. Then he kidded Callahan and the others and went up to bed. Everything was fine on the whole, till Hersovitz came along.

Morry Hersovitz was Babe Murgo's manager. He had a big forehead and hard lips. His eyes were wheedling, crafty and sinister. His hair was

black and greasy.

Hersovitz came to the camp one night when all the boys but Mugs and Callahan had driven to town to see a movie. He walked into the living room where Mugs and Cally were reading magazines. He smiled broadly and brought with him the strong reek of whiskey. Mugs Harley hated Hersovitz with a bitter intense hatred, that made him long to smash the man's evil face, blot it out.

"Hello boys," said Hersovitz. "Are you alone?"

Mugs threw his magazine to the floor. "What do you want here Hersovitz?"

Hersovitz insolently helped himself to a chair still smiling "Just dropped in to have a little chat with you fellows. How are you, Cally? How's the old man here?"

Mugs got to his feet. This man was like an evil omen. Mugs said between his teeth, "Beat it Hersovitz, or I'll throw you out."

"What's the matter Mugs, nerves?" Take it easy man. Your'e certainly on edge. What's the matter Cally, are you overtraining him?"

"No," Callahan said. "He just don't like rats, Morry, that's all."

Hersovitz laughed. "Cally, you and me did business before you ever handled Harley. I thought we might get together again ye' know. No use bein' enemies just because we're handlin' two boys who're going to fight. Sit down Mugs. Don't excite yourself."

Callahan looked uncomfortable and guilty. He wasn't proud of having had relations with Hersovitz, but he had always been afraid of the man. Hersovitz was so supremely sure of himself. "What's on your mind, Morry?" Callahan asked.

Hersovitz said, "I though we

might get together on this fight and clean up big. Mugs' about through, anyway. My boy is the next champ whether he beats Mugs this time or not. Now if you boys wanna talk business, I got a swell proposition to make ya."

Mugs said, "You're wasting your time."

Callahan puffed at his cigar. "Let's hear this scheme, Mugs. It can't hurt us to hear it."

Mugs looked long and hard at his manager. He'd never known Callahan to act this way before. He wondered what was wrong.

"The idea is," Hersovitz said, "for Mugs to lose. He probably would anyway. But if we make it sure we can clean up plenty, see? There's a lot o' money up on this fight. Besides we'll give you the winners end. That and the dough you make on bets, will leave you sitting pretty. You got everything to win. Mugs is bound to lose the crown soon anyway. Might as well cash in on it. You can make a fortune on this fight. And if you lose to Murgo, you're loosing to a good boy."

"Does Murgo know about this?" asked Mugs.

"Not a thing so help me. The kid's on the level, straight as they make 'em. He's got the goods. I really think he could beat Mugs, but there's nothing like betting on a sure thing. What do you say, Cally?"

"I dunno, I dunno," muttered Callahan.

Mugs shot a hard look at Callahan who avoided his gaze.

Hersovitz said, "We could give you more than the winner's end. It'd set you both up for life. Mugs can lose anyway he wants to. Taking the count is the best way of course. It's all set up for you boys if you want

to be smart and grab it."

Mugs Harley's mind was numb, dazed, hurt. Why didn't Callahan say something? Why didn't Callahan tell the greasy mug to scram? Something was wrong there. Cally had turned against him. Cally was afraid he'd lose to Murgo. Even Callahan didn't want him to win anymore. That didn't leave a guy much, with Cally gone too. First his wife had let him down, and now his manager and pal, Callahan.

Mugs got slowly to his feet. He felt as if he'd taken one on the button. He felt as if he'd lost everything and was all alone. All alone. The king was all alone and the whole world was yelling for his head. What was the use of trying to be on the square? Everyone was against him. Everyone was crooked. Why not lay down? Everyone wanted to see him lose. His wife and Callahan, nobody cared.

Mugs walked to the door and stood looking out into the dark murkiness of the night. The other two watched him silently. To think it had come to this. Sordid and bitter, success turned to ashes. One against the world. Then he thought of the kids. They were for him. They thought he could mow down anything that was in his path. They'd never think that Mugs Harley could lie down, quit and cheat. The kids were for him. They thought Mugs Harley could lick the world. Well he was a champion, and there was only one way for a champion to go. He wouldn't let those kids down. He was the champ. He knew the way to go.

He turned on them fiercely. "It's all of you guys. If Babe wins he's got to knock me out to do it. Callahan, if you're with this heel I'll be needing a new manager. Hersovitz, I oughta kick that dirty mug of yours

into jelly. Get outa here before I do."

**T**HE CHAMP was different after that. He seemed older. He took his workouts methodically. The vim, fire and dash were gone. But he still hit as hard as ever. He was cold and grim. He didn't laugh any more. Outwardly he had forgiven Callahan, but something was gone. Callahan knew better than to make excuses for himself. They had been together for ten years and they would go on together but something was dead, something was missing.

The papers blazoned forth the fact that the whole sporting world was rooting for Babe Murgo to beat Mugs Harley. Mugs read the stuff but was beyond being hurt by it. He had become resigned, patient, stoical. When the time for the fight arrived he was in perfect physical condition, and many a veteran reported sagely remarked that Mugs Harley would win another fight and that's all there was to it.

They moved into town before the bout. Mugs sort of hated to leave the camp, but he said nothing about it. It seemed that his world was coming to an end with that bout. He couldn't see anything beyond it. There wasn't anything left for him. Joan was travelling with friends in the United States. Mugs got a wire from her the night before the fight: Having a grand trip. Sure you will win, Mugs. Then you can retire. Love and best wishes—Joan.

Callahan came to Mugs that night in the lobby of the hotel before they went to bed. "Mugs," he said, "do you mind if I lay some money on you?" His thin face and his voice were both deadly earnest. He was trying to show Mugs that he was with him now all the way.

"I wouldn't, Cally," Mugs said kindly. "You know, you can never tell."

In the dressing room before the fight, Mugs was nervous. He cursed Callahan for not taping his hands right, and he drove the handler out of his way. After they were gone he sat staring at the floor. Callahan asked, "How do you feel Mugs?"

Mugs raised a set face. "I fell nervous Cally. Nervous as hell. I ain't been nervous like this since I was a kid."

"It's a good sign," Callahan told him cheerfully. "You're pitched to the right point, and you'll kill Murgo. All ya gotta do is watch his left. He's got a bad left hand, Mugs."

"Yeah I know."

"Fight your old fight," Callahan



A fire in his lungs choking him, and his limbs going dull and dead. He knew he was finished.

went on. "He'll dance around you. Let him dance... When you go in, go fast, and chase him to a corner. A couple in the belt will sag him."

Mugs stared down at his feet. A great thundering roar broke loose overhead. Mugs' seconds came back to the room to gather up pails and towels. Someone opened the door and said, "Murgo's in the ring Champ." Mugs got up and gathered his faded old robe about him. "Let's go," he said.

Out there in the mammoth arena thousands were waiting in the warm summer darkness for the championship match between Mugs Harley and Babe Murgo. They had greeted Murgo with a mighty ovation when he entered the ring. Their welcome to Mugs Harley was conservative, a polite tribute. Mugs' dark head was drooping sullenly. Murgo's blonde head was thrown back, calmly confident. They were being introduced and photographed, the champion was dark and scowling. Murgo was smiling and boyish.

They presented an equally direct contrast when they came out and touched gloves for the first round. Murgo was big and rangy, clean-limbed and smooth-muscled, a good-looking boy. The champion was short and blocky, hairy powerful and ugly. Murgo danced on his toes like a featherweight, making the flat-footed champion look slow and stolid.

Nothing much happened in the first round. Babe stabbed home a few long lefts to Mugs' face. When Mugs hit the challenger he was always dancing away. In the clinches Mugs used his great strength on Babe's lithe body, to give the kid an idea of the steel spring muscles he was up against. It was a slow round.

In the second, Murgo opened up.

He could move like a flash and his left hand whipped out like a striking rattlesnake. Mugs kept plodding grimly in, rolling his head with those flashing punches, boring in as he always did, sudden destruction curled in either hand. Several times Babe connected squarely, and Mugs' head bobbed back, red started from an old cut over his eye. Mugs seemed slow and his timing was off. He was missing to often. Between rounds he grinned at Callahan. "The old legs are gone Cally. The kid's got a swell left, ain't he?" Callahan shook his head.

In the third they mixed it and the crowd went wild. Mugs Harley swung into sudden action, blasting Murgo with lefts and rights that sent him reeling across the ring, shaken from the terrific onslaught. Babe danced away and kept backing up, his long left out, until his head was clear and he felt steady again. Then he stepped in like a streak to jab Mugs off balance with his left, and snap his right across. Mugs Harley went down and the crowd came up roaring with mad savage joy. They hadn't seen Mugs Harley on the canvas for a long, long time! And this was the first time they realized that Babe Murgo had dynamite in his right glove. Mugs was surprised himself. It was strange to be down here on the floor with your head ringing. Mugs took nine and then got up, to be hacked to pieces by that spearing left hand for the rest of the round.

"He knocked me down, Cally," Mugs panted in his corner as they worked over him. "He . . . knocked me . . . down."

Cally was tongue tied.

**T**HE FOURTH ROUND was about even. Murgo outboxed Mugs and made him look slow, but a couple of

times Mugs got in close and shook the challenger with short vicious smashes. He was still dangerous. At any moment he might slide in and tear Murgo's head off with one of those old punches that no man could take without going under. The gong clanged and Mugs Harley stretched his mighty frame in his corner. His great chest heaved and the steel-thewed body gleamed red and wet with sweat.

The fifth was all Murgo. He was all around Mugs, shooting in punches from every angle. He raked Mugs with the left and jarred him with the right. The champion took a terrific beating. He was in bad shape and his handlers worked frantically over him. "He's beatin' me pretty bad ain't he Cally," asked Mugs. Cally no longer tried to hide the tears in his eyes. "No, Mugs, he ain't. You're doin' allright."

The sixth stanza opened with Babe jabbing the champion to the ropes. But Mugs Harley bounded back and drove Babe across the ring with a flurry of his old time short arm jolts. Murgo tried to cover up and dance away but Mugs kept after him, smashing in blow after blow. Babe was game and smart. He clinched and after they broke he slammed his left to Mugs' bad eye. When the gong rang Mugs was half blind with blood and sick with pain.

Mugs Harley went out for the seventh like a maddened grizzly, but he was missing. Babe lay back and waited, and when Mugs missed with a hay-maker, Babe ripped in his left. It was no ordinary left. It had plenty of steam behind it. It was beating "Killer" Mugs Harley, slowly but surely. It was blinding him. It was dazing him, making him dizzy and sick. Then Mugs was down, sitting on

the canvas and shaking his head. Crazy thoughts flickered through his dizzy, spinning mind. Nothing gallant or romantic about this. Blows flashing out of everywhere, smashing his face and body, jolting, jarring, hurting. The air full of fists that rang bells and lighted lights in his brain. A fire in his lungs choking him, and his limbs going dull and dead. The way for a champ to go.

He was up at nine. He bored in crouching low. That was the only thing he knew, to keep boring in. And Murgo realized that he was dangerous, and kept away, using his lightning left on Mugs' head. Mugs' knees were sagging when the bell ended the round.

The end came in the eighth. A left stab pushed Mugs off balance, and Babe popped in a right with everything behind it. Mugs fell on the ropes, to land on his side and twist over on his stomach. He tried to rise but couldn't. The old legs wouldn't answer the call. He kept trying but it was no use. He didn't know when the count was finished. There was a great roaring in his ears. It came from inside his head; the thunder of the crowd was far away, and faint. He felt dull and numb, and there were funny lights in front of his eyes. He could taste blood in his mouth.

Then bare strong arms were lifting him up and he knew it must be Babe, and he tried to say, "Good Boy!" He heard a voice that was Babe's saying something about, "Great Champ." Everything whirled about him when he was on his feet. All he could see was Callahan's face and he knew Callahan was feeling bad.

They placed him on a stool in his corner, and sponged his face off with

water. The water felt cold and good. Cally was leaning over talking to him. There were tears running down his dirty, sweaty face. He kept talking.

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REUNION

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IN THE morning Mugs Harley woke up in his hotel bedroom feeling very bad. His head and face were sore all over, and his body was lame and bruised. He lay there thinking what a licking he had taken, and how he'd fought his last fight. He was glad it was over. He knew Babe would make a good champion but he had to see that he got away from Hersovitz. He hoped the world was satisfied now that he had been whipped. He wondered where Joan was, and what she'd think about him. She'd probably be glad along with the rest. He wondered what he'd do now that he was through with fighting. There didn't seem to be much of anything left for him.

The door opened and Callahan came in. He had a newspaper in one hand and a wide grin on his face.

"Take a look at this, Mugs," he said, handing him the paper.

Mugs sat up in the bed and looked at the paper. There it was in glaring headlines across the front page: **GREATEST CHAMP OF THEM ALL GOES DOWN IN GLORIOUS DEFEAT!** Mugs Harley shook his battered head. "It sure is a funny world, Cally," he said.

The door opened again and a woman came in. It was Joan Harley. She rushed straight to the bed and threw her arms around Mugs. "Mugs," she cried, "Mugs, are you all right? I came as quickly as I could when I heard. . ."

Callahan discreetly withdrew from the room.

"Joan," murmured Mugs Harley, holding her close.

Joan sobbed on his shoulder, "I'll never leave you again." Her body was racked with sobs. "Your poor dear face!" she said, "Did he hurt you awfully?"

"Naw, he didn't hurt me," Mugs said smiling over her shoulder. "I'm too tough, Joan." And there were tears in the eyes of the greatest champ of them all.



**"I**T'S ALL RIGHT with me if you feel that way," he said angrily. "There's plenty of other girls in the world". It was just another of their quarrels, the things that kept the course of true love far from smooth. But this was the final one. James couldn't stand it any more.

It was an old bone of contention. "It's nearly a year since Malcolm died," Rita had said. "And what have you done? You, the boy that was going to take his place as the best pitcher on the team. You've settled down in the infield, content to get by. Malc used to say that you could be a lot better than he was, that you could even get into the big leagues if you worked hard. . . ."

It was a sore point. James couldn't see that Rita was simply trying to make him snap out of it.

"If you think it's easy to get transferred from the field to the box, you're crazy. Miff's got three twirlers now. I'm the youngest player on the team as it is. You're just stuck on going around with a pitcher, because they get all the honor, that's it. . . ."

**A**ND THEN they'd quarreled. Of course it wasn't so strange that Rita should be hipped on the idea of his being a pitcher. Her father had stood in the box years ago, on the first Newmarket nine. But that was no reason, James thought, why she should think that every ball player has to get into the box.

He was in the wrong and he knew it; but he wouldn't admit it to himself. After all they weren't married

# Ghost on the Diamond

By

CHARLES BENTON  
JOHNSTON

yet. She had no right to pick him to pieces. He had done well, coming up from the soda-fountain to a berth in the infield of the best bush league team in the west. Miff's Cardinals looked pretty good.

James remembered when Malc Martin had first found him when he was mixing it up with the neighborhood boys. Malc liked his style, green though he was. With Malc's patient coaching, he'd gotten into the Cardinals. Malc had played with them for fifteen years and scouted for three or four more.

It had been the dream of Malc's life that Jimmy should follow in his footsteps, winning games from the box as he had done, and maybe making the jump to the big leagues as he had always hoped. He'd spent



hours on a vacant lot near Newmarket, teaching the ins and outs of big-time baseball to Jimmy. No one ever had a better teacher or a better pal.

Jimmy had played through one season as a substitute outfielder, waiting for his chance in the box. Then Malc had died from the effects of a bit of mustard gas he had picked up at Vimy. He knew it would get him in the end, but he'd hoped to live long enough to see Jimmy make good in his old place.

After his death and the shock of losing him, Jimmy had been content to take anything that Manager Miff had offered. Miff needed an infielder more than a pitcher, so there he was and there he stuck.

JIMMY'S mother was reading in the living-room when he returned after the scene with Rita. She looked up surprised at his early return for it was hardly nine in the evening.

"Is something wrong, son?" Her motherly intuition told her that there had been trouble.

Jimmy couldn't talk about it. He couldn't bear to think that everything was over between him and Rita. There had never been anyone else. He would always love her.

"Nothing's wrong," he said sullenly. "We had an argument. She wants me to be a pitcher overnight. That's all."

"Maybe she's right, son. Malc wanted you . . ."

"I've heard about Malc all I can stand," he shouted suddenly. "He's dead and gone and I have to live my own life don't I?"

"Yes, Jimmy. But maybe he knows what is happening, wherever he is. What he wanted was always the best for you. He took the place of a brother to you, my boy. If it wasn't for him, you'd still be behind that soda-fountain."

Jimmy knew all that and he was grateful enough, but . . .

"When Malc knew that you cared about Rita, didn't he drop out and give you a clear field? Didn't he even give you the photograph of her, that he always kept on his bureau? It was just as though he expected you to go on and live his life for him, marry his girl and take up his work . . . because he knew that his lungs were gas-burned."

"I know that as well as you, mother. and I want to pitch too. But things don't work out just as they're planned. Malc is gone now and I have to work out my own future."

His mother smiled gently.

"My faith teaches that the dead don't really die. I think that Malc may be looking down from some distant land, that he may be sorrowful, because you aren't fulfilling his dreams for you."

"That's the bunk. That's superstitious hooey. Nobody believes that rot any more, mother."

"I do," she said. "And the belief of one is more than the doubt of many."

The next few weeks found Jimmy very lonely. His pride wouldn't allow him to call Rita, after the quarrel they'd had. The fact that he was beginning to think himself in the wrong, did not make it any easier to take the first step. It was a relatively small town and they avoided places where they might meet, but Rita did not send back his ring.

Jimmy met her father on the street one day just a week before he was scheduled to join the rest of the Cardinals at their southern training camp. The old man was a veteran of baseball, and like the rest of the town, an ardent fan to boot.

"Jimmy, my boy," he said. "Why don't you come to see us any more? Rita wanders around the house like a lost soul, waiting for the phone to ring."

"Ask her what the trouble is. I never go where I'm not wanted, besides what she wants is a pitcher. I'm not good enough for her."

"So that's it? Well we're proud of you in this little town. We hoped that you would go on and be a pitcher as Malc used to predict. But you know how women are. Don't take Rita too seriously and let it make you both unhappy."

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders.

"It's up to Rita."

"No it isn't, Jimmy. It's up to you. I've always like you, ever since Malc

brought you over to the house two years ago. I felt as though you were a son already. Take my advice." He drew closer. "If she's set her heart on your being a pitcher that's not so impossible. After all, Malc trained you, and taught you his favorite balls that he used to fool batters with..."

"Every one but the fade away. That one I could never get the hang of."

"Well, he taught you enough so you could make good in the box. I know it. If Rita's heart is set on your getting there, GET THERE! It's a good thing for a man to do something for the woman he cares about. And you want to pitch, too!"

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## 2

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### CALLING FROM SPACE

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JIMMY looked doubtful.

"Why don't you go to Miff and ask him to try you out this summer in the box? I know it's not common to make the switch, but it's been done. Your batting average is higher than that of most pitchers. They'd be glad to have a pitcher who could slam the pill as well."

Still Jimmy shook his head stubbornly.

"It wouldn't do any good. I'm nothing but an infielder, and I'm glad to keep my place at that. If Miff wanted to switch me he'd do it without asking."

Rita's father looked at him queerly.

"It's up to you, my boy, but did you ever think that maybe Miff is watching you to see if you got enough ambition to make the grade? Are you practising the curves Malc showed you? If you really want to be a pitcher and if you really want Rita,

telephone. Before he could life the receiver he noticed a letter addressed ot him in Rita's neat sloping hand-writing.

Jimmy tore it open to find only a blank piece of paper. Then something fell to the floor with a tinkle and rolled across the room. It was the engagement ring he had given Rita five months before!

There was no use calling her now. At last everything was over between them. He went back upstairs slowly, and began to pack his things for the short trip to Danville. But his heart wasn't in his work and his mother had to do most of the packing.

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### 3

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#### JIMMY'S CHANCE

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ONCE in camp, Jimmy found that there was only one way to attain peace of mind, and that was to work on the field till he was worn out. Even then he used to sit up half the nights playing cards so that he would not be alone to think.

They were going to give him his regular berth in the infield. Nobody ever thought of Jimmy in any other spot—least of all himself. Dreams of being a great picher, of following in Malc's footsteps were definitely over. Losing Rita had been the finishing touch, and it didn't matter.

He didn't care about anything but working off his energy somehow. All day he practised batting the pill, and playing catch. When the others had gone to the showers, he'd still be slinging the horsehide back and forth with anyone who wanted to play.

Days full of hard work, days without much sleep. Slowly they wore him down. His nerves and stamina

began to wobble, but he still kept up the killing, fast pace.

One morning, he was out there as usual throwing the ball around as usual. He did not see that Miff was watching him intently. He picked up a hot grounder and let it go back with every ounce of strength he had. The catcher got it but didn't send it back. He just stood there open-mouthed, gaping.

Miff came up behind him.

"Good Lord, Jimmy, I didn't know . . . I guess I'm going batty or something. When you threw that, you looked just like old Malc. I could of sworn that it was him instead of you . . ." Miff blinked

Jimmy looked up, puzzled. Mory, the boy who had made the catch was approaching, looking at him strangely.

"Where did you learn to throw that way?" he called, as he came over. "That was Malc's old favorite, the fade away. Didn't know you'd ever learned it."

"I didn't learn it," he told them. "It was the one ball Malc never succeeded in teaching me."

The two of them loked at each other and then at Jimmy.

"Something creepy about that for a minute," said Miff. He shook his head. "Maybe it was the bright sunlight, or something. Let's see you do it again."

MORY tossed him the ball and ran back, grabbin ga catcher's mitt instead of the light glove he'd been wearing.

He held the ball as Malc had shown him, two fingers together against the thumb, and let it fly with all the steam he had. But it was useless, as Jimmy had known it would be. Just as he'd tried many times, when Malc

was alive and beside him, he couldn't make the ball whirl in the air as it should . . . he couldn't make it blur into the fade away that had fooled so many batters.

Miff kept Jimmy at it for half an hour, but he couldn't get what both him and Mory insisted. Jimmy had done . . . just once. At last he stopped the practise.

"Rest your arm, kid." He looked at Jimmy appraisingly. "Maybe it was an hallucination that you threw the fade away, or an accident or something. But it's no hallucination that you've got a lot of control and some speed. So Male taught you all he knew, did he? Well, Male was the best pitcher I ever had. I'm going to try you, Jimmy. After lunch you can throw some to Joe."

He turned and walked away. Jimmy stood there, gaping. So it had happened! He was going to get a trial as a pitcher, he was going to practise shooting the ball into the mitt of Joe Marks, the best catcher in a generation!

He was in a daze that afternoon as he tried putting the pill over the plate and into Joe's worn mitt. In spite of himself, he seemed to be realizing his ambitions. Was Male's dream coming true?

Anyway, here was the chance. It was all he had left, now that Rita was lost.

Old Joe and Jimmy, spent the next two weeks in working out all of Male's balls and plays. Try as he would, the fade away still eluded him. But he was slowly developing into a fair pitcher. Maybe it was because he had been taught by a wonder teacher.

He was a member of the pitching string when the Cardinals left camp and returned to the city. But he hadn't been used in any of the pre-

liminary games. Miff thought he wasn't ready yet.

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## 4

### GHOSTLY GAME

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THE FIRST real game of the season was with the Malvern Cadets, the Cardinal's chief rival in the series. Male had played against them many times . . . holding them scoreless time and time again.

There were a few days or rest before the first game. Jimmy wasn't sure that he would play, but he knew that he'd have one chance and only one chance to make good. He'd have to be on his toes.

The day before the game found Jimmy in an agony of excitement. After supper was over he went up to his room and stared out of the window. It grew darker outside, and the wind rose. Suddenly Jimmy started. It was dark now and his face was reflected from the window-pane. The effect was as though someone was peering at him, some dim and half-formed face from the darkness. It gave him a thrill of fear. He smiled at himself for being afraid of his own reflection, and then he moved back from the window.

His heart almost stopped beating. The face did not move! It was not his reflection after all. It was not his face!

It was Male's!

Slowly it grew clearer. The eyes seemed to burn into Jimmy's. He was rigid with horror.

He moved his head back and forth, hoping against hope that it was just a twist of the imagination, just an illusion. But the face remained stationary, just outside the window.

As it grew clearer, there was a sort of sad smile around the mouth, a drawn expression of the eyes. It was the most brief of impressions, for when Jimmy could function again, he ran from the room.

IN A MOMENT he was out of the house. He went on and on, half running, to sink exhausted on some park bench. At every sound of footsteps behind him, he turned, fearing to see the dread apparition again. A panic took possession of him and he hurried on again through the crowded streets. The night was a blur, filled with no thought of anything, but to get away...away...away.

Hours later he stumbled into a cheap gin mill in a slum district. The place reeked with the odor of unwashed bodies and cheap liquor, but anything was better than the haunting darkness outside.

The rest of the night was a dim red ugly blank. It was noon of the next day when he came to himself. All around him were others who had passed out, and the air was thick and stale.

Jimmy struggled to his feet and found that the unaccustomed drink had half poisoned him. His head felt like a football, full of an awful, steady pounding. At last he managed to call a cab and set out for home.

He tried to freshen up at home but he could not get the fuzzy feeling from his head. He wanted to crawl into a hole, somewhere, and remain alone, but today was the day of the game. He couldn't let the spirit of Malc down. He rushed out to the field as fast as was possible and found that he was only a few minutes late.

When he finally went out on the

field it was to sit on the bench as a spectator. Miff wasn't going to use him at first. Maybe he wouldn't play at all today.

Mex was pitching, starting the game brilliantly as he always did. Billy Hall, the first string pitcher, was sitting beside Jimmy on the bench.

Things weren't going so well.

In the fifth, Mex began to weaken and walked two men. A long fly whipped past the outfielder, letting two men in. It was one of those things, but it upset Miff greatly.

The score was two all, when Miff dropped down beside Jimmy on the bench.

"Feeling O.K., kid?" he asked.

Jimmy nodded bravely.

"Then go in and replace Mex. Billy's hand isn't healed yet, or I wouldn't send you in. You look half-shot, but this is your chance, so hop to it. Show me how good you are."

Jimmy took a deep breath as he ran out on the field. For a moment he forgot his headache and the previous evening in the deep thrill that came to him. His loyalty returned and he was glad to be one of the gang again.

Old Joe was catching. He came forward to meet him.

"You look all rags and tatters, kid," he said kindly.

Jimmy's exhilaration passed. He knew that his only hope was to have it end quickly so that he could slink home in disgrace. His dreams had been of a no-hit, no-run game, of being a second Malc. Here instead, he was in rotten shape. He had broken training...been seeing things. Never for a moment did he imagine that there had been anything real outside the window of the room.

**M**ECHANICALLY he wound up and delivered the first ball. It was low and outside. The next few were just as bad. A pitcher is like a racehorse. Condition is everything. It was no surprise to Jimmy when he walked a few men.

The rest of the inning was a nightmare. The two all score mas now six to two. Jimmy's ears were still smarting from what Miff had said to him. "This is your last chance." The words read like a sentence of doom. The last chance!

Jimmy was only a kid, and it was tough to see everything in life fade away . . . mostly his own fault, he knew. There were wild thoughts of suicide, of throwing himself under a streetcar on his way home. He wanted to leave the field, then and there, but something made him go on.

Although he was making a mess of the game, Miff did not signal him to come in. But the fans did. For the first time in his life he heard the booing of the stands. "Take 'im out. Shoot 'im. Kill 'im, tear 'im apart." But Miff did not move.

That was the last straw. The fans, his own people, were against him. He must leave the field. But still Miff made no move to send him out. He must stick it.

Jimmy took up the ball, shivering. How long must this torture last? Why didn't he just die? He failed everyone, himself, and Malc.

If only Malc could see him now.

He wound up again. The ball left his hand, when . . . suddenly . . . he was conscious of a shadow . . . a Presence . . . behind him.

There was a dim figure behind him. It was moving . . . it seemed . . . it was . . . Malc! Malc whom he had seen laid to rest in Greenlawn Cemetery!

tery!

Malc, his big brother, his pal. The best friend of this or any other world.

But this was not the Malc beside whose bed he had watched. This was the other Malc that a previous generation of fans had known and loved. His face wore that characteristic twisted smile, and he was dressed in the same old uniform.

Jimmy's blood was ice in his veins. He stood there, he could not move, just oblivious to everything.

## 5

### MALC'S LAST PLAY

**T**HE EYES of the figure were commanding Jimmy. He took a step . . . forward! The eyes held and drew him on. Without will of his own he walked towards Malc. Slowly he drew closer as a bird might have done, fascinated by the eyes of a snake. Except that those eyes were kind, for all their command.

There was no more fear in Jimmy's heart. This did not seem strange to him now.

He took another step forward, and then . . . he walked through Malc! There was no other way to describe it. He and the Ghost were one!

The vague and misty presence of his teacher dissolved Jimmy's personality into that of his teacher's. Then he lost sense of what was happening. The game went on . . .

They say that Jimmy seemed to be playing mechanically, though brilliantly. When he came to bat he instinctively faced the pitcher from the left instead of the right side, just as Malc had done. He hit a smoking grounder and brought two men home,

he pitched a brilliant game . . . but he couldn't remember anything of it.

Old Joe, the catcher, clapped him on the shoulder in the middle of the game. "Where did you catch onto that old fade away again?"

Jimmy was conscious of his touch as though he were in a coma, but he could not reply.

As he left the mound for the last time he came out of the coma with a stumble and a gasp. Malc stood beside him again. Jimmy tingled all over, as if his circulation had been shut off and then turned on again. His headache returned.

"Malc," he mouthed the word, "Malc, is it really you?"

The shadowy figure nodded and then slowly began to fade before Jimmy's eyes. Jimmy turned around, bewildered. He was not aware that thousands of people were looking at him in astonishment. Shaking his head he walked towards the dugout. Miff said nothing as usual, but he could see that he was pleased with the way that Jimmy . . . or Malc . . . had played.

Jimmy's one idea was to get to Rita. He wanted to explain to her something of what had happened to him. But suddenly as Malc had appeared, she was before him. She must have climbed down from the stands

to intercept him. Words failed him as they took each others hands.

"Why did you misunderstand me, Jimmy? I knew you could be a great pitcher. As great as Malc. But I'd love you if you were only a bat boy!"

Jimmy drew her closer.

"Jimmy, something made me come here today. I don't know yet what it was. Somehow I felt as though Malc were telling me to come. I must be crazy, or something."

Jimmy started. He explained to her what had happened to him. For a long time they stood together, looking into each others eyes.

"Rita, I think I know what happened. I think that somehow, somewhere, Malc found a way to help me when I needed help most. He came back to this world and the diamond to save me from disgrace, from the consequences of my foolishness and fear. He had been my big brother in life and the grave did not take him away from me. When I was under his influence I used his style. I'll probably never get that way again. But winning the game was of little importance. Winning back my self respect and you, that was what Malc did for me.

"If we ever need him again, Rita, I feel that he'll come. The next time we won't be afraid."



# DEAD MEN DO TALK!

By FRANKLIN MARTIN

**T**HE SILENCE of the pretty room was slain by the jangle of a telephone bell, which brought its only occupant precipitately to her feet.

The woman knew only too well who was calling at that hour, and approached the instrument hesitatingly with a furtive glance in the direction of the kitchen where her maid was undoubtedly listening.

"Hello!" she called, cautiously modulating her voice . . . "Oh, I've begged you not to do this, it is so dangerous . . . Yes, of course I am all right . . . I have written . . . Only once. I am afraid to write often since you have given up your own office and the letters have to go to that place. . . .

"No, I could not possibly go to town this afternoon. . . . Because I've work to do here; we're cleaning house—and the children are not well. I can't leave them. . . . No, nothing serious, only slight colds; but you can see for yourself how difficult it is for me to get away. . . .

"Yes, of course I do—just the same—but I am worried about everything. My nerves are on edge. There may be someone listening now. And suppose he had been here! He often

waits over for the late train. . . . No, you couldn't pretend to be the butcher; he would recognize your voice instantly. Please, please don't do this again, it is too risky. . . .

"I'm sorry you are not feeling well and I'm sorry you are lonely, but I can't help it. . . .

"No, I couldn't meet you tomorrow; his mother is coming out to spend the day. . . . Well, if I must, Wednesday, then. Same place—same time. . . .

"Yes, I'll call up your friend and leave a message if I am unable to make it Wednesday. Good-by. Please never do this again. Good-by."

She left the phone, sending another stealthy glance kitchenward, and returned to her desk. With trembling fingers she seized a lead pencil and entered again upon her task of balancing the weekly housekeeping accounts.

**O**N THE following Wednesdays at noon, a tall, slender woman, heavily veiled, lurked at the extreme downtown end of the subway's long platform at Fourteenth Street.

The restless streams of humanity which flowed ceaselessly up and down the stairs and in and out of the

constantly arriving and departing trains made her dizzy, and the volume of sound compressed in the dense underground atmosphere left her deafened and bewildered. She was fanned by rigid draughts flung from the long trains rushing in opposite directions, and could not repress and occasional shiver.

"Oh, why is he always late?" she asked herself bitterly. "When he insists upon my meeting him like this, if he cares so much why is he never considerate enough to be on time? He knows how I worry!"

She shrank suddenly and turned her back before the approach of a half-familiar figure, but the hurrying man jumped aboard a train and her pulses slackened again.

"I know somebody will recognize me, and what excuse could I make for being here?"

It was with a shock that she at length saw her friend making his deliberate way down the stairs, a man in early middle life, whose good looks were tainted by a premature touch of senility. He was thin and tall and carried a cane with an attempt at jauntiness, as he pressed a slow, laborious passage through the scattering crowd.

She did not go forward to meet him nor make a motion to attract his attention, so that, peering near-sightedly through large, round eye-glasses, he almost passed her by. When he did realize her presence, however, a charming smile played over his lean face, and by its light one could grasp the reason why this man had been so successful with women in the days of his prime.

"You did come!" he cried. "You have fooled me so often I was afraid to hope."

His voice, deeply resonant with a

caressing charm, was, curiously enough, the one thing about him that had escaped the touch of decay.

"Hurry and we can catch this train," she urged, seizing him by the arm and frenziedly drawing him along.

They rode up to Fiftieth Street and walked to a secluded restaurant, where they were greeted with friendly affability by the head waiter and ensconced in a cozy corner.

The man ordered cocktails and then, as she shed her veil, settled himself to feast upon her charming face. She was distinctly beautiful despite her pallor and the evident traces of agitation which ravaged her delicate features.

The lady, however, applied herself in a businesslike fashion to the menu card.

"I'm awfully hungry," she quavered.

"What are you going to eat?" he asked, but dismissed the question next moment in a rambling dissertation upon some recent adventure, so that his companion was compelled to take the matter up with their waiter and place the order for lunch without assistance. She had grown accustomed to taking the lead of late, finding it increasingly difficult to pin the man down to concentration upon the slightest details.

Suddenly he leaned across the table, and caressingly covered her fluttering hands.

"Is it just the same?" he asked.

"Of course." But her eyes drifted away from the eager query of his gaze.

"You're sure you still care?" he persisted.

"You know I do."

"Sometimes, when you evade me for so long, I get frightened and think

you are tiring. Then I remember what you used to tell me about your love. You are a good woman, dear, and it is not possible that a love such as you once felt for me could ever die. I know I am not the man I was. I have lived too fast, and I've gone downhill of late. I should not have gotten out from under the business end. I guess work was a blessing for me after all; held me down, you know. There wasn't so much time for drinking then. But I'll soon get into something else. Things are quiet just now and I don't need to be in any hurry. I'm so confoundedly lonesome, though, hanging around the clubs and hotels all day, thinking about you and seeing you so seldom, that I have to hit it up a bit now and then. But You're not sick of me, are you?"

Her eyes deepened pityingly, catch-

ing the quiver of his loose lips, and noting how his hand shook as he lifted the cocktail glass; and so she pulled herself together and lied to him, as she had lied many a time before—the victim of her own cowardice.

She had been weak enough once to fancy herself deeply in love with this man, and now lacked the courage to abjure her own extravagant protestations by confessing to the truth.

They spent the afternoon together, and he insisted upon accompanying her all the way to the station. He always did that in spite of her desperate pleadings, loath to lose her from his sight. She was in terror lest they should meet an acquaintance or one of her neighbors. Why, even her husband might chance to be in the vicinity and take the train from uptown.

Scarcely conscious of what her



companion was saying, she curbed her own light, nervous step to fit his tardy, uncertain gait. There was only one more train that would carry her home in time for dinner, and it wanted but ten minutes to starting time.

"When am I to see you again?" the man pleaded, oblivious to her impatience.

"Oh, I don't know," she fairly wailed. "Dear, I must run or I shall miss that train. I'd rather leave you here anyhow. No, don't try to hurry—I'll write. Good-by." And she dashed forward and down the steps, running through a maze of scurrying commuters, until she burst by the gates, the last passenger to board her train.

Breathlessly she sank into the first vacant seat, struggling to suppress the rising tears. She must be calm; there were undoubtedly several people on the train who knew her.

It was too bad that she had been compelled to leave him like that. A wisp of tenderness from the past momentarily shook her sympathies.

Mentally she could see him, cut short in his harangue, turning back toward the crowded avenue, chagrined and bewildered.

She lifted her veil, since it was insufferably close in the overheated train, and her tremulous lips curved in a bitter smile. This, then, was the sort of thing that was supposed to be pleasure. If the commonplace suburbanites by whom she was surrounded could know the facts about her hidden life, they would call her a "gay woman." Her smile deepened satirically. And yet, once upon a time the intrigue had shed a glory of romance over her stale, narrow life. It was difficult now to realize how she could ever have been foolish enough to compromise herself so shamefully; on the other hand, she could still re-

call how matrimonial existence had suddenly palled before the sparkle of this tenderly proffered devotion. Her husband, a clerk in an insurance office, had showed in comparison as ineffably tiresome.

The evening of that first meeting still lingered in her memory. It was a conventional enough occasion, a card party in Brooklyn given by the head of her husband's department. She had not sought the other man out by word or glance; such an idea would not have occurred to her, perfect little puff-pillow of respectability that she was.

She told herself that any woman might have felt flattered by his advances in those days, armored as he was in such perfection of finish, flaunting his wordly sophistication with a high, bright good-humor.

At that time he was a man of affairs, a familiar figure in the world of finance, with superior family and social connections.

Was it any wonder that she lost her head and promised the impossible—to go on loving forever? Why, at one period, regardless of all material and domestic responsibilities, she had even professed a willingness to run off with him, and had been deeply hurt when he refused to count the world well lost for her sake. Now she was thankful for his attitude of caution. What a horror to have to live with him always, when one afternoon of his society was well-nigh insupportable!

A man passing along the aisle paused at her elbow, and her heart missed a beat. Was it her husband? She felt unequal to facing him yet. And if he had seen them! But the man, a stranger, passed on, and the tumult of her sense lessened.

She wondered if her husband were

on that train, forward in the smoker. Probably, though, he had taken an earlier one, and she would find him awaiting her at home with an effect of irritating integrity. He always managed to reach home early on those rare occasions when she was detained in the city.

Oh, what an impossible man he was, that husband of hers! Here she pulled herself up short with a twinge of conscience. After all he was preferable to the other. Personally her husband showed as too small, and too bald, and too tiresome, but in his relation to herself he loomed largely comforting, a shield against the world's vicissitudes. So long as she could hold the approval of that insignificant little man, all the slanders of Greater Suburbia could not prevail against her authority in his household, nor tear away her children.

Ah, the children! How could she ever have thought it possible to give them up, to sacrifice their young happiness in the flame of such an unworthy infatuation?

Indeed, one of her reasons for continuing the intrigue was in a way on account of the children. He was so strange nowadays she felt afraid of what he might do if she refused to continue their meetings. If he should be guilty of any rashness, the ensuing scandal would be misery for the children just growing old enough to suffer keenly from such a disgrace.

On the other hand, she knew that it was desperately dangerous to let the thing drift on so, year after year. Who was it that said such affairs were always uncovered in the end? She shuddered. What a mockery that would be if she should lose everything for his sake now, when he meant worse than nothing to her!

As the train drew into the pretty little station and the woman made her way from the car, she was seized by another misgiving, a qualm of superstitious terror. Suppose something had happened at home during her absence, a fire, or an accident to one of the children, in punishment for her sinful transgression.

Mechanically she greeted a few acquaintances, walking rapidly toward home, holding herself back from running, anxious as she was to learn the worst as soon as possible.

Turning the corner she could see the little girls at the gate waiting. Thank Heaven, they were all right!

"Daddy's home," one of them shouted as they precipitated themselves upon her.

She moderated her gait with a pang of relief, and a wave of yratitude engulfed her heart. It was so much more than she deserved, this peaceful home-coming to find everything right, and that Providence had miraculously refrained from taking revenge for her fault.

She would never, never meet him again, no matter what he said nor how madly he pleaded. Better to run the risk of his doing something desperate, than continue thus in the direct path of danger. If he ever tried to make a scene she could claim that he was irresponsible and deny everything. She was sorry for him, of course, but she owed more to her children than to him.

Again she stooped and kissed the rosy, chattering lips.

"Mother's so glad to see you," she said happily.

THE NEXT morning she reinforced her decision to end the dilemma; it was so blissful to be good and move along softly in her appointed

rut. Never again would she permit herself to be wrenched from the security of her little stronghold.

When he wrote, as he was bound to do, she would answer just once, telling him firmly and finally what she had determined upon. After that she would never even answer his letters any more. At least, he was a gentleman, and she believed she could trust him not to betray her. At any rate, she must accept that risk.

She was almost gay for the next three days in the relief of her good resolution; then, as no letter came, anxiety again perched upon her spir-its, weighting them woefully. He was certain to have written before this. Had the letter gone astray, and would it turn up at some future in-opportune moment to her undoing? Was it possible that her husband might have intercepted the letter, and be watching her for a symptom of self-betrayal?

After five days had elapsed she was in a passion of apprehension; fearing to write lest some mysterious fate might befall her own letter; afraid to telephone, since even the walls have ears in a house where suspicion dwells.

It was strange, she thought, that he did not telephone, since in the past he had frequently been rash enough to disobey her express commands in that particular. Perhaps he knew of some reason why they should not communicate. It was borne in upon her over-wrought imagination that her husband acted strangely at times. He always had a curious habit of staring at her, but of late the shallow expression of his eyes seemed to be merely a veil for some hidden meaning behind their bland glare. She, nevertheless, realized herself to be in no condition to judge anything calm-

ly. It was as if she were struggling in a night-dark, airless impasse, where a single misstep might precipitate her into the bottomless pit of infamy.

Spiritually she wept and wrung her hands. Outwardly she was more calmly herself than usual.

**H**ER HUSBAND all innocently broke the news to her at breakfast one morning, having himself just culled it fresh from the damp sheets of the morning news.

She received it valiantly, unblinkingly, although swept by a wave of physical nausea.

"Dead—is that so?" she heard herself saying, and she knew that there was just the proper degree of shocked regret in her tone. "You remember you remarked that he seemed to be failing when you met him on the street last fall — and others have spoken of his going off in appearance. It must have come suddenly at the end, though—such things are always a clap at the last."

"Too bad," commented her husband, who had never liked the dead man. "He was an interesting chap; pity he went to pieces so. They say drink and women were his weaknesses."

"Won't you have another cup of coffee?" she urged, but he declined and hurried away.

Fighting off the torpor which immediately followed his departure, the woman realized that her every other sensation was swallowed up in an overwhelming relief. It seemed almost too good to be true. She would never have to go through the ordeal of talking to him over her phone again. There would now be no necessity for awkward explanations in ending the affair, no tempestuous pleading to

withstand.

The man was dead.

A pang penetrated her selfishness at the swift memory of what the dead man had once meant to her, but she crowded down all regrets. He could never again have attained his old happy form. This was the better solution of the problem, even for him.

The next few days held for the woman an intense though quiet felicity. She was like one who, having for long borne an intolerable ache, revels in the sudden surcease of pain. She could fairly feel her spirit stretch in the spacious peace wherein it was now engulfed. She exulted in her liberation from the shackles of sin. It was blissful to be once more a good woman; to wrap decency about her and survey the world with eyes level and unafraid.

Of course she meant to do penance, resolving that all the rest of her life, in secret, she would practice some form of self-denial in atonement for her wickedness.

The following Friday her husband went off on a business trip, promising to remain away until Sunday evening. She always welcomed any brief deliverance from his irksome presence, and at that crisis the alleviation was particularly soothing.

She wondered afterward whether it made for ease or further torment, to be rid of him at the moment when the bubble of her new-found happiness was pricked.

Curiously enough, as her eyes fell upon the paragraph in the Sunday morning paper which spelled away her security, the woman's first instinct was a fatuous attempt to think of some means of hushing the matter up. The next instant she laughed, so long and so loud that the little girls came running to see what

mother had found funny in the newspaper. But she hid the sheet behind her, sending them sharply about their play, although her lips were still aquiver with the appalling humor of the situation.

Fancy trying to hush the shrieks of the press when they have once resounded over the land!

Probably her next-door neighbor had read and relished the tidbit that morning before the person whom it most deeply concerned was out of bed.

She carried the paper into her own room and locked the door. Then she sat herself down to read every word of the dead man's tale.

**T**HE GREAT black headlines which beat in upon her aching sight seemed, somehow, to make the whole thing worse. Her own name was expressed in those headlines, and they gave to the familiar title an outlandish appearance.

The caption cried out peremptorily to know who she was, and went on to state that the family of the man so recently dead, his sisters and a brother, wanted to know why she should have left the bulk of his fortune to a stranger.

The article further stated that the family intended to contest so peculiar a will, since the dead man had not been in full possession of his senses for a year or so back. It was said that the lawyers were searching for the mysterious beneficiary, as the will gave no address.

The paper fell from her nerveless fingers, and a subconscious throb released the sudden memory of a brief sentence which the dead man had let fall once or twice, but which she had pushed aside at the time as meaningless and unimportant.

"I shall make everything up to you some day," he had said; "I'll prove my love for you."

A grimace contracted her features at the recollection. He had proved it, that devastating, ruinous love of his. Her thoughts tossed capriciously from one phase of the subject to another.

A swift vision of her husband as he caught sight of her name in his beloved newspaper again distorted her features. She could not imagine how he would look in face of such a calamity; more owl-like than ever, probably.

Of course he would never forgive her. He was not a hard man, and might have shown lenience to a personal confession, that might have lain a secret between them, especially in view of her prospective wealth which could not fail to appeal to his rapacity.

She knew only too well, however, that his slight generosity would not survive such a public shock to his dignity.

She reflected miserably that, in any event, his forgiveness would be of no use to her. It had been difficult to live under the same roof with his self-sufficiency in the best of circumstances and any possible re-adjustment of their relations which might pander to his over-developed sense of superiority, would be unthinkable.

He would take the children away from her, of course, his vindictiveness naturally prompting to such a course, even if his conscience did not second the instinct.

She could not fight for the little girls, if she had any grounds for claiming them in the face of her present notoriety, since the additional horrors of a public contest would

bruise their young sensibilities more than the mere loss of such a mother.

She wondered vaguely if money could recompense for the deprivation of every thing else which went to make up a woman's life. She had never possessed much money, not more than enough to barely scrape along on and lay by a trifle each year. She felt in herself a helpless inadequacy for living up to the demands of a large income.

At this point it flashed over her that she would probably never be called upon to live up to such demands, since the family were going to contest that grotesque will.

She was seized with a curious light-headedness, fancying herself a human straw blown hither and thither in the fierce blast of retribution, and she wondered dully where, after all its antics, the gale might toss her, and whether it would be possible for a mere weak woman to sustain the anguishing shock of that impact.

Gradually she came to her knees, sprawling ungracefully over the bed, and stuffing the edge of the pillow-case into her mouth.

Outside, the little girls, running among the flowers, shrilled joyously.

Within, the woman mechanically moved about on her dull household routine. She had written to his lawyers and the irate family, formally refusing to accept the bequest, and now she waited—waited.

The neighbors as they passed looked askance at the house that harbored so much obloquy, while miles away an express train pounded furiously down the banks of the Hudson river, like a bolt shot from the finger of Fate, bringing her husband nearer each moment.

# THE BLANK PAPER CLUE

by FRANK NICHOLLS

**A**LTHOUGH the town house of Franklin Bromley was closed, nothing seemed to be changed. The street lights shone upon the heavy oak door and played on the shuttered windows. More than a month ago the place had been locked up and the owner and servants had moved to Westchester for the summer.

A casual passer-by wouldn't have known, that just after midnight, two men, moving stealthily, had let themselves in through the back door with a skeleton key. They were still inside. Neither of them had struck a light. In the inky darkness they sat in a small room off the library, waiting tensely.

"I'm starving for a smoke." The husky, whispering voice, sounded ragged, on edge. "My nerves aren't up to this sort of thing."

The creaking of leather upholstery betrayed the position of the second man. "Can't take a chance. We might scare him away."

Once again there was silence, broken only by the faint whistle of their breath. The first man's breath was fluttery and irregular and contrasted sharply to the deep, even breathing of his companion.

"But isn't that all we want to do? Just scare him away," said the same fearful, complaining voice that had asked for the cigarette.

The other sighed softly. "I wish, Mr. Bromley," he said somewhat curtly, "you'd leave it to me. I'm better prepared to handle this sort of thing."

Skulking like an intruder in his own home, Franklin Bromley wasn't satisfied. "I could," he suggested doubtfully, "have asked the police to guard the place. That way, Hardy, there wouldn't have been the risk of facing a hardened criminal who..."

Hardy chuckled softly "The first thing the police would have been interested in knowing is how you knew someone was going to crack your wall safe. Could you have told them that Red Hardy—the man the newspapers refer to so charmingly as the underworld loan shark—called you by telephone at your summer place? Obligingly tipping you off?"

Bromley cleared his throat. "Well Franklin Bromley cleared his throat. "Well..."

"No, Mr. Bromley," the other broke in, cutting him short. "You couldn't have admitted that." With a trace of irony, he continued: "When men of

the upper crust get in jams, can't get money elsewhere, they're glad enough to come to me. But they don't brag about their dealings with Red Hardy!"

Bromley offered in a placating tone: "Mr. Hardy, I think it was mighty decent of you to meet me here, help guard—"

"Strictly business," the loan shark replied. "Just so you don't get the idea that I'm here for fun or out of the kindness of my heart, I'll try to give you my angle. In the first place, both you and I know that those famous pearls of your wife are in a safe place. In my vault. Security for the ten thousand I advanced you. Right?"

"Yes," the other readily acknowledged. "And I have the receipt you gave me that says, when I pay back the money with interest, you'll return the pearls."

Hardy grunted. "Since the pearls were in your wife's name you had no legal right to use them this way. I took a big risk when I accepted them as security for the loan. Especially when, as you say, you and your wife are on the brink of divorce. But I furnished you a good string of phonies with which to fool her until you could return the original string. It's those phonies, naturally, out there in the wall safe. Why—what's the matter?"

**B**ROMLEY'S breath had sucked in with a little gasp. His voice, when he spoke, was taut, trembling. "Did—did you hear something?"

Hardy replied testily: "I heard nothing. You listen to me, and I'll take care of this house-breaker when he comes. Now, as I was saying—"

Bromley wasn't satisfied. "Are you certain," he asked, "that you can handle that gun of mine? I've never

fired it—don't know why I ever purchased it. I—"

mitted miserably. "But, since they 'I'm a crack-shot," Hardy assured him. "Now get a grip on yourself man. Do you want me to continue, or—"

"Yes, I'm listening," said the other undertone: "I've got ways of finding tions tipped me off that a mug—Boney Martin—was fresh out of the Bighouse and planning a job on your house tonight, it set me wondering. Knowing you, I figured you must have neglected to put the phony pearls in a safe deposit box when you closed up this house and that—"

"Mary asked me to," Bromley admissions out. When one of my connec-were just imitations, I didn't think I apologetically. "It steadies me to hear you talk. It's awful sitting here, doing nothing. Now, what were you saying?"

Hardy gave a scornful grunt, and then resumed in a calm, unhurried needed to bother. I—"

"That's the sort of reasoning—" Hardy's words were cold with contempt—"that puts men like you in jams, where they have to yell for some one to come pull them out. Luckily, I saw in the paper something about that swanky reception that's coming off in a few days, and I figured that you and your wife would come into town to attend. I was right, wasn't I?"

"Yes, we'll—"

"And your wife'll want to wear her pearls, won't she?"

"I suppose she will."

"Well, then," said Hardy, politely venomous, "If Martin had lifted the phonies, wouldn't you have been in a pickle? There'd have been no time to provide another set of imitations. You'd have had to tell her the truth

or tell her they were stolen. Then I'd have had either her or the insurance company stirring up a mess looking for what I've got in my vault. That" he finished dryly, "would be bad for my business."

"I—I never thought of it that way," Bromley faltered. "I—"

"Ssst!"

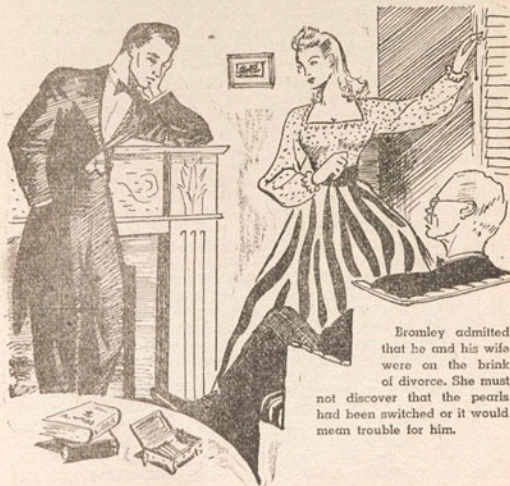
A metallic snap sounded at a window in the adjoining library. The shutters swung back. Against the moonlight outside a black figure was silhouetted. Another snap. And then the window sash moved slowly upward.

Hardy stalked out of his chair like a cat. On soundless feet he slipped to

the open library door. The prowler, now inside, clicked on a guarded flashlight beam, took bearings, then headed straight to the oil painting that screened the safe.

The money lender felt his client creep close to him, trembling. He laid a cautioning hand on Bromley's arm. The fool was gasping like a stranded fish. In his other hand Hardy grasped the automatic, safety off.

The prowler, by this time, was nimbly at work on the safe's combination. Three times — when the tumblers fell, no doubt—his breath hissed audibly. Then, with a sigh of satisfaction, he twisted the door latch. The safe was open.



Bromley admitted that he and his wife were on the brink of divorce. She must not discover that the pearls had been switched or it would mean trouble for him.

Hardy took a step forward, thumb-ed the wall switch. In the sudden blaze of light the safe-breaker whirled. He yelped surprise. His mouth, wide open, yawned chasmlike. His narrow, ratty face, already gray from prison pallor, bleached a shade whiter.

Hardy's gun barked sharply.

At the bridge of the thief's nose a third staring eye appeared. He slammed back against the wall, wilted slowly downward. It was a corpse that measured its length on the rug.

Bromley bleated: "You—you killed him!"

His own face was corpselike, except for loosely twitching lips. His hands, like live things cut loose from the body's control, fluttered aimlessly. He sagged against the door frame, limp, horror-stricken, staring at the calm, heavy-set man with the gun.

**H**ARDY'S thick features expressed nothing. A long moment he stood utterly still. Light beat down on the shiny bald crown of his head and what was left of thinning, bright-red hair. Then an inward smile puckered his lips just a trifle.

"You're slightly in error, Mr. Bromley," he announced, a self-satisfied smirk tugging at his mouth. "It was not I who killed this uninvited guest. It was you!"

Bromley, his slight figure still half supported by the wall, stared dumb-founded. "What's that? Are you—"

Smilingly, the money lender shook his head. "If you imply that this little event has unhinged my brains," he remarked easily, "you're quite wrong. In fact, I hired that thief to come here. No—" he held up a warning hand—"don't interrupt me, please."

As he spoke, Hardy thrust thick, competent fingers inside his coat, brought out a second automatic.

"This gun," he said, "is unregistered, can't be traced. It—"

Bromley staggered erect, arms thrust straight out before him. "You—" his voice was a gurgling trickle of sound—"you're going to kill me!"

Hardy shook his head reprovingly. "Bad reasoning again, Mr. Bromley." He pointed casually to the blood-splotted corpse across the room. "There's the man who's going to kill you. You found him attempting to rob you. You shot him and he shot you. Sort of a trigger two-step, don't you see?"

Bromley's skin was white as he bleated: "But why—why?"

"Forty grand," Hardy said craftily. "The pearls are worth fifty grand. I advanced you ten. If I keep them, dispose of them one by one, I make a forty grand profit. Not bad, eh?"

The other pulled himself up, like a boy who's found a bright answer. "You can't!" he threatened, with an attempt at bluster. "The receipt! It proves you have the pearls!"

The money lender laughed heartily. "The receipt, to be sure!" He stopped his mirth, said evenly: "Do you recall the writing of that receipt, Mr. Bromley? It was done secretly in this room the night I gave you ten grand and took the pearls. You sealed the paper in an envelope, then slipped it inside a ledger over there in your safe. Well—" again Hardy gave way to laughter — "if you'd opened that envelope a couple of hours later, you'd have found only a blank sheet of your own paper!"

Bromley gasped. "You switched the sheets?"

"Not at all," Hardy returned gloatingly. "My pen was full of disappearing ink. It's a trick I learned from a con man. In a couple of hours the writing fades away completely. I

know, because I tested it over and over before I tried it on you."

The terrified man slowly digested this. At last a glimmer of hope came into his pale eyes. "If the receipt's faded," he suggested, "why kill me? There'd be no proof that—"

"Pretty smart, comin' from you," Hardy conceded. "But here's the catch. With the naked eye you could see nothing on that paper. But if you turned it over to the police, as you would, they'd put it under the ultraviolet light. That would bring out the original message. But, with you dead, on the other hand, no one would ever think of testing a blank sheet of paper. As for the phony pearls, the cops can think whatever they please about them. They'll probably figure your wife for the fourflusher, but, whatever they think, there'll be nothing to connect me with the job."

The gun in his hand rose slowly, centered straight on the quaking man's heart.

"Wait!" Bromley babbled, stumbling forward. "Don't you see—"

He took one more step after the slug passed through his heart. Then he slid down, almost softly, on his face, lay there unmoving.

With machinelike swiftness, Red Hardy cleaned his own prints from the guns. Bromley's he placed carefully in his owner's lifeless hand. The other he clamped into the gnarled fist of Bonesy Martin. A moist cloth, which he'd brought for that purpose, removed any other prints he might have left on chair or light switch.

He wasn't afraid of being interrupted, caught in the act, for the safebreaker had thoughtfully closed the shutters after making his entrance. As for the shots, their sound wouldn't have reached to the next house. He moved swiftly because

everything, down to the last detail, was painstakingly planned, thoroughly rehearsed.

The back door locked automatically behind him. On foot he moved swiftly out of the neighborhood. Then, in a drugstore phone booth, he called the police, told them softly that he'd heard shots in Franklin Bromley's home. The name and address he gave for himself when asked were ready on the tip of his tongue.

ONCE WITHIN his solitary quarters and ready for bed, he felt curiously relaxed, pleasantly conscious of a smart job well done. He could even note, with mild disapproval, that his hair still seemed to be coming out, and could spend several minutes briskly massaging his scalp.

It wasn't until he'd crawled in bed that he thought of something that might have been improved. He hadn't intended to let Martin go so far as to get the safe door open. But, since he had, why, in heaven's name, hadn't he retrieved the phony pearls and the faked receipt? The only answer he could give himself was that he'd overplanned, had things down so fine he couldn't see and use an unexpected opportunity.

No harm done, of course. As a matter of fact, the receipt might no longer be in the safe, and it was the very possibility that it wasn't that had made this elaborate murder setup necessary. But just the same, he told himself disgustedly that he should've looked. . . .

He dreamed that a cop was playing a tattoo on his skull with a huge nightstick. He woke with a start, to hear a loud hammering on his door. When he opened it, two dicks from headquarters pushed in. They didn't have much to say, either while he

dressed or when they took him, protesting, back to Franklin Bromley's home.

The morgue wagon, loaded with a pair of wicker baskets, was just pulling away when they arrived. Inside the house, the place swarmed with police technicians, harness bulls, and an assortment of detectives from the precinct and from headquarters.

"Must be a big case," Red sneered, "if you had to call out the reserves."

Over and over he told himself: "Put on a bold front. They haven't got anything on you." Just the same, though, he kept asking himself what had made them come straight to him.

Lieutenant Melton, acting head of the homicide squad, drilled Hardy with cold, impersonal eyes, as if mildly interested in this insignificant insect that possessed the power of speech.

"Red Hardy," he rapped harshly, "do you confess here, or do we take you to the station and persuade you there?"

Raging inwardly at himself for letting his voice clog in his throat, the money lender croaked out: "Don't be silly! You—"

A technician, busy with a little tray of apparatus, began to dab warm paraffin on Hardy's right hand. The killer's face turned pasty. The nitrate test! He should've fired those guns after putting them in the corpses' hands. A bad slip but—

"What if I have fired a gun?" he snarled. "A dozen people saw me at a gun range yesterday. What's this all about?"

Melton's left eyebrow quirked upward. "So? You admit firing a gun recently?" He motioned to the man with the hot paraffin. "You won't have to go ahead, Zorn." He swung back to Hardy, an ominous, cold fire

in his eyes. "The stiff's we carted out of here hadn't fired guns—yet each had a gun in his hand. Know what that means?"

Hardy jerked his head. "Sure, some one framed 'em. But—" his voice rose to a vicious snarl—"don't try to pin it on me!"

Melton nodded to one of the dicks who'd been fiddling around with a little batch of the glassine envelopes used for preserving evidence. He was one of the fellows who'd brought Hardy here. Coming forward now, the dick carried one of the transparent containers.

"Look!"

Hardy bit hard on his lower lip. Inside the envelope were a few hairs. Red, bright-red, like his own. Could they prove—

"Suppose," he suggested slyly, "those hairs are from my head. What does it get you? I might've been here a hundred times—and still not been the one that—"

"Sure," Melton acknowledged. "But it establishes your presence on the scene of the murders. And we haven't shown you the clincher yet, the thing that establishes your motive. Take a squint at that!"

**H**ARDY jerked as his eyes caught sight of the slitted envelope to which the lieutenant pointed. At Melton's order, one of the fingerprint men, with a pair of forceps, gingerly removed the sheet of paper which had been refolded and put back in the envelope. The money lender felt his eyes straining out of his head, his heart thumping, as the fellow slowly spread out the sheet.

Relief was so sudden that he almost slumped to his knees. The sheet was blank!

He lifted questioning eyes to the

cold-visaged lieutenant. "What does it say?" he sneered. "I can't read it."

The homicide man's grim lips moved in a grudging smile. "It says," he replied, "that you're to return to Franklin Bromley his wife's pearls when he pays you what he borrowed on them. The lab will confirm it."

Nausea seemed about to turn Hardy's stomach wrong side out. This was sheer, black magic! Recovering from his momentary weakness, he made a quick, sideward lunge toward the harness bull who'd been standing nearby, a gaping spectator. He got his hand on the cop's holster, ripped the flap open, tugged at the gun.

"You won't take me alive!" he snarled, voice half-strangled.

The cop enfolded him in a crushing hug. Another cop was handy with bracelets. In an instant the killer stood helpless, twitching violently in his futile wrath.

"You weren't as cute with that falling ink as you thought, mug." Melton's hard, gray eyes came as near a twinkle as was possible for them. "When we found this paper in the safe, the ink was fresh as the day you wrote it. After we'd had it out a while, it began to disappear. One of

fully to a small, bespectacled technician—"knew the answer. He says the pigment used in that ink is an unstable chemical compound that oxidizes quickly in the presence of air and vanishes from the paper. But—" He paused, grinning, then said: "You tell him, Zorn."

The little technical expert beamed. "Well, you see," he explained importantly, preening before the trapped killer. "The ink needs air to make it the lab boys here—" he nodded gratefully. But this paper, before the ink could fade, was placed between the glazed pages of a heavy ledger in the safe there. Thus, since it was sealed away from the air, the ink couldn't fade—and stayed fresh till we took it out!"

While Hardy, glowering his hatred, turned this over in his mind, Melton winked at the dick who still held the glassine envelope of hair. The dick stepped forward, his homely face spread wide in a smile.

"Listen, killer," he said, "maybe the hot squat will cure your falling hair. We didn't find these samples on the murder scene. I picked them off your coat collar on our way over here in the squad car."

# yarns

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# BADLANDS PURGE

by  
MATTHEW  
NORTH



**P**ROBABLY, Bill Malop reflected, they would have forgotten by now, in his home town, that they had branded him "bad." Not that it mattered. Every so often, he liked to drift across the border line from Mexico, and see Pedras Negras.

He was close upon it now—could almost see the faint grayishness down the trail that must mark it.

But a few moments later, he knew that the grayishness was not Pedras Negras. He drew in slightly, and stood up in his stirrups. Then it could be seen that he was tall, not so slender and diminutive as the big black he bestrode seemed to make him, by comparison.

The grayishness was off the trail from the town.

His hand ran down the sleek neck of his mount. He gave a grunt. "Huh! There's no outfit up there. Thunder. Never was. Rocks, maybe, or maybe a squatter's place. And . . ." he added softly, "seems I remember they don't like squatters here. We'll go up—and maybe I can get some information about myself from somebody that wasn't bred not to like me!"

Bill Malop had not lived his twenty-five hard years without learning caution. It was why he was alive now, with only one bullet-mark on him.

This layout up ahead must be a squatter's place then—and squatters weren't liked in these ranges. Therefore, as he was not particularly liked either, he might be able to get wind here from what direction to look for trouble.

He turned Thunder's head, and in a moment horse and rider were streaking off over the lifting terrain to-

ward a spot where Bill Malop saw smoke. Dead smoke—not from a living fire.

It was not far under the hoofs of the giant stallion. Two miles, perhaps. Approaching, Pedras Negras now behind him, Bill could detect a wall of rock, a tree, drooping its head into a stream, and a shack—or what had once been a shack.

Bill pulled in and straightened in his stirrups. On a winding trail that clove to the hillside stood a lanky horse and a buckboard.

His hand dropped to one of his guns warily — something about the scene spoke of danger and awful desolation. The hand was on his gun, ready, when he called:

"Hi, there—anybody around?"

There was a stir. Then Bill's lips twisted bitterly. He had expected to be greeted upon his return to Pedras Negras with a gun—and he was!

**B**EHIND the rickety door of the lonely shack, there peered out the lean, hungry barrel and the black mouth of a long rifle. It was pointed at him, though not very steadily. That fact frightened him. He could handle people who knew what they were doing when they used a gun, but greenhorns baffled him.

He snapped out: "Hold up! Get your finger off that trigger, before you accidentally tighten it . . . And," he added, as the muzzle wavered, "be sure you want to shoot, you damned fool, before you point a gun! Got that? Bueno! Now if you've got anything against Bill Malop, once from this town, just now from Mexico—I guess you've got me!"

There came a gasp. The rifle muzzle lowered. Bill sat his saddle and made no move to draw. That, he knew, would have been suicide.

---

Bill Malop was returning to the town that had branded him "bad" — returning to a hostile people who thought they had seen the last of the wanderer. Quick-on-the-trigger, hard-eyed, his twenty-five years had been crammed with action—now he wanted peace—but to get it he had to prove himself the hard way. Here's a fast-shooting tale of action that will

hold you to the end.

---

There was someone nervous behind that gun.

In the next second he knew he had been right. The gun dropped, and into his vision, framed oddly by wisps of smoke, appeared the figure of a woman!

Not a young woman—no beauty, this, except as time had left traces of a deeper loveliness upon her face. The hair, under a pitifully poor hat, was grayish; the eyes were tired. She stood in the doorway, and they looked at each other.

Then she smiled—and in her smile was some of the bitterness that Bill Malop himself felt.

"I reckon," she said "that it wouldn't do no good to try to get yuh anyway. You'd only be out of the way. And maybe if you live you could tell my son where I'm going."

Bill's eyes hardened. He slipped in one movement from his saddle and crossed to the woman. He said:

"You're—going? Where?"

"Oh, I can get there. I got relations in Dallas. I can go to them. Will you tell my son that I've gone to my sister's—in Dallas?"

There was an old bench beside the door. Bill's hand pulled it over. There was a courtesy about him that belied his hard eyes and stern mouth.

"Won't you sit down, Mrs.—"

"Vardon," she said, and sat down, looking at him as though for the first time . . . wonderingly.

He rolled a cigarette, sat down beside her; and as he was touching a match to the paper, he said.

"If I'm not too curious, I'd like to know just why you are going away—and why your son isn't going, too."

She looked at him for a moment. Then, her eyes misty, she answered him with a gesture of her slender but

coarsened hands—a hopeless, sweeping gesture that told Bill everything.

He looked at what was left of the shack. The side of it was burned, and at one place, it had been caved in. Most of the stuff from within, he saw now, had been loaded into the buckboard.

"No," she said, "my son—isn't going."

His eyes narrowed. "Why not?"

"He—he wants some return—for all . . . this." Again her hands moved. "They did it—killed my husband—burned the shack And now they'll frame a killing on my boy when he tries to strike back—or kill him for trying."

She paused and moved her hands weakly. "Why do they hate us so? What harm can we do them? Unless they just don't like—squatters."

"A lot of cowmen don't," he said deliberately, "but it's seldom they go after 'em that hard. Killed your husband—wiped out your spread—made your boy into a killer, or set him to get killed . . . And I'll bet you haven't even run a bill in Pedras Negras since you've been here!"

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## 2

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### SOUTHERN CROSS

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SHE shook her head. "No," she said. "We've grown some things, back there by the creek's turnin'. Flour and meat we bought in town. And paid for 'em, cash!"

He stood up, his eyes suddenly dangerous. "And yet they're dead set on your gettin' out!" he exclaimed. "When did all this start—the persecution, I mean?"

"Couple months ago," the woman answered wearily. "I remember, 'cause it was about a week after that

minin' man stopped here, with fever; and we let him stay—till he got back his health and could ride on again."

"Mining man," Malop snapped. "With fever? What's his name?"

"Tom Siddons Verrick. He's changed or they changed for him—the 'T.S.'—into 'Ten-Strike'."

"Yeah? And how long did you say you kept him?"

"Almost ten days. He said he was a minin' engineer."

Bill clipped: "If that's what second-rate prospectors are callin' themselves now, I reckon he was. I know him. And it all started right after he was here?"

"Jest about a week. Why?"

He looked down at her. He bent and took her hands. He smiled—a rare smile.

"You can be glad you didn't pull that trigger today, I think," he said. "That's if I live. You go 'long. This is no place for you. Go to Dallas. Got money?"

"Yes."

"Enough?"

"Plenty, to get there. And I'll be all right, there."

"All right. Maybe I'm talking strange lingo to you—but I've got hunches. Must've been a hunch to pull me off my trail, like it did, today. I'll promise you to get your son outa trouble. If I get to Pedras Negras soon enough, he won't have time to get in any!"

She arose. "You mean," she faltered, "that you'll try to—to help him?"

He smiled a little. I'll sure enough do everything I can. Now let's get yore buckbord fixed, and I'll drive you back aways along the trail."

Bill Malop had no idea where he was going to stay in Pedgras Negras. So, he stabled Thunder at the rear of the Southern Cross Saloon, over

which rooms might be had for overnight travellers. He was not certain, either, that he wanted rooms there. But he was certain that he wanted to go inside, and he did so.

He looked dark enough to be a Mexican, and he had a way of leaning against a bar-rail that made him seem less than the slender six-foot-two of him. He stood at the bar and ordered carefully, and no one seemed to notice that, after his first glass, he scarcely raised the liquor to his lips.

He listened.

Finally he asked the man in back of the bar where the owner might be, and—to make the question plausible—continued:

"I have just come here. Wondered if there were any jobs open for a wanderin' waddy."

The man looked at him in surprise. To conceal it, he laughed: "Sorry—thought you were Mex. What kind of a job?"

"Punching . . . Anything."

Warily, the other answered, "Straight punchin' jobs is few an' mighty far between. But there's room for men around here. Wait till the boss comes in. Here he is, now!"—as a tall, burly man entered, clad in flannel shirt, dark trousers stuck in boots, wide-brimmed sombrero and careless gun hung low.

THIS, then, Bill Malop knew, was Charley White, owner of the Southern Cross—and, probably, more. He was good looking, in a blustering, florid way, for a man of his years. His eyes were blue and almost mild.

White was not alone. He was with two men, oddly unlike, and they stood just inside the door, talking. Bill lounged over to them. He knew he was being observed when he came

up—more, he knew what they were observing most: the two guns just above his knees. They were silent.

Bill asked. "Are you White?"

White said he was, then, with a glance at the guns, added, good-naturedly: "Generally shortened to 'Hep'."

"Good!" Malop said. "I've just drifted from south of the line. Tought I heard someone down there say you'd be a good man to come to for a job."

White narrowed his eyes. "Just what kind of a job?"

"Any kind. Back of the bar, singing waiter, punchin' cows, line-rider, makin' brands or—changin' 'em—"

"Huh?"

Dan laughed. "No — I know you don't need any changed. Just thought I'd tell you if you needed somebody, I'm around."

"Yeah? Well, I might." White's eye flickered toward the two guns again. He said, pointing to the darker of the two men who had entered with him: "This here is Max Haskell; he owns the Tumblin'-V. And this,—to the shorter of the two men,—is an hombre name of Marin. We're all workin' together. What did you say yore name was?"

"I didn't say," replied Malop, with a smile. "As a matter of fact, I'd like not to have to give you my—right name. Not—on this side of the line, anyway. In Mexico, I was workin' along with Miguel Gerrardo."

"Oh!" White's eyebrows shot up meaningly. "My friend, Mike, eh? What's he doing, now?"

Malop laughed shortly. "He won't be any help to you, not for awhile, anyway. His 'army's' busted up — he's scurried to some rat-hole way south in Chihuahua."

White laughed. "So runnin' stolen beef and horses don't pay any more, eh? Well, if you can work along with me, bueno! We'll soon see. What do we call you?"

"Mind calling me what they called me down there? 'El Lobo Negro?'" He grinned. "Senor Lobo, for short."

The effect was instantaneous. "Lobo Negro!" swore White. "And worked with Mike Gerrardo!"

"Softer!" said Malop. "Can you call me Lobo? I look Mex—even your bartender thought I was."

White continued to stare; then he pointed to a table that was against the wall. "Come on over here," he said, low-voiced. "Come on, Max, Marin!"

They sat down. White called for a round of drinks. Under his hatbrim, his eyes shifted from Malop to a group at the bar. He said:

"If yo're recommended, you must know something about me. I reckon I can use you, all right. Now I want to point out to you those three men at the bar. You can see one of 'em's drunk. That one is the son of a dead squatter—name same as his father's—Dan Vardon. The dark, slim, hombre is 'Ten-Strike' Verrick — says he's a prospector. Anyway, he's on my payroll. So's the third one, Delano. Lon Delano's just a 'gun.' I'll introduce you afterwards."

Bill concealed his interest. Vardon was, as White had offered, slightly drunk. He was young, and his eyes were burning. He was burly, too, and he wore one gun, though his hands looked to be enough in themselves for anything he might encounter. Steve murmured:

"Is Vardon on your payroll — or list, too?"

## 3

## MURDER PLOT

THE other man laughed harshly. "I'll have to pay for him shortly — very shortly — I hope. Burying him!"

Bill's eyes narrowed. "How come?"

"He's in my way. He knows he is, too; and he come down here lookin' for trouble. He's got a little dinero, so I haven't chucked him out, yet. But I will . . . maybe tonight! Look! There's Ten-Strike, acting on my instructions, goading the kid into a fight with Max . . . I guess it's Max."

Haskell grinned wolfishly. "I wish he would succeed!"

"I don't!" snapped the boss. Neither does Cameron. And what Cameron and I say—goes! That kid's gonna be bumped by an outsider!" He turned, surveying Malop. "Maybe, at that, you could make yoreself useful to us—right away."

Malop smiled. "I gather," he said, "you want that boy removed. Why?"

"He's in my way. Cameron's way."

"Why?"

"I'm not tellin' everything at once. Maybe you can get him out of the way for me, if you want to try. There's money in it—plenty to go 'round!"

Bill considered. Slowly he said, "Maybe I could . . . !

He turned quickly. They all looked up, White angrily. The boss clamped his hand down across Haskell's wrist.

"Damn that Ten-Strike!" he swore. "The kid's drunk, and he's gonna go gunnin'—here—for you—!"

Haskell leaned back, smiling a cruel smile. The boy was looking in his direction. Malop sat silent, unmoving. The boss of the Southern Cross

lurched to his feet. He had courage, and in plenty. Hands away from the single gun he carried, he walked across to Dan Vardon and clipped one word:

"Out!"

Vardon stared, eyes red-rimmed. "Out—why? I—I got money! I'm spendin' it, ain't I?"

"And yo're lookin' for trouble, too! It's a-comin', son . . . but it's not goin' to be here. That's why I said—out!"

Vardon remained subdued. "Bueno!" he said. "Jest let me finishd my drink, will you—and pay?"

"Yeah. Finish—and don't bother to pay. You'll get all the trouble yo're lookin' for, like I said. It just ain't gonna start here, see? Though the sooner it gets to yuh, the better I'll like it!"

He turned his back brazenly, pushed Ten-Strike back against the bar-rail, and spoke to him low-voiced and angrily. No one heard what he said, but she shrugged as he turned away. Ten-Strike looked nt displeased. The man called Delano had said nothing but he moved a little away from the boy called Dan Vardon.

Bill was on his feet when White came back to the table. His drink was finished, and he was yawning.

"Rode a long way today, jefe," he smiled. "I'm hitting for the hay. Walk first, get air, see my horse is handled right. Then — what's that hotel across the way?"

"Rodeo. But you can bunk upstairs. I got some rooms up there."

"Thanks." Bill was thinking fast. In one of the rooms upstairs would young Vardon be domiciled; he was sure of that. It was certain that White wanted the boy finished off; and more certain that he wanted nothing to do with it — outwardly.

"I guess," he said, "I'll stay across there. Maybe move in here later. I've been hitting desert trails for a couple of days now, and that place looks nice and quiet. Man, I need sleep!"

He got up. Shaking hands gravely with White, then Haskell and Marin, he went out. At the door, he turned for a survey of the room. Delano and Verrick were still apart, each crouched over a glass on the bar. The boy Vardon was just finishing his, and turning to look around.

Bill Malop slipped out.

HE saw that Thunder had everything necessary to his comfort. He patted the giant black, lighted a cigarette, and moved from the stables in the rear of the Southern Cross.

The Rodeo was just a small and cheap hotel, two storied, one of the outflung shacks that lined the somnolent main street. Malop started for it—but not hurriedly. He knew that Vardon would not take long to finish that drink—wouldn't be allowed to.

Then he knew a man was emerging from the Southern Cross. He knew who it was, even before he glanced at the lurching figure. Dan Vardon.

Vardon was alone. When he passed Bill, at least, he was alone. But ten paces farther on, he was not. Malop had sufficient sense to wait. Then, as Dan Vardon lunched toward the pallid doorway of the Rodeo, two men hastened up. Malop's hand was on his gun.

But these were no killers. They wanted something else. Vardon had declared he had plenty of money—he had shown it. One of the men was the one pointed out to Bill as Delano: probably one of the lesser of the pack that White had to heel. The other Bill did not know.

They caught up with Dan Vardon a few yards from where Malop stood. They linked arms with him—or started to. Drunkenly, Delano cheered:

"We gonna take yuh home. Where—Rodeo?"

Vardon brought up short. He cursed thickly.

"Yuh cheap thugs! I'll get t' the hotel—an' without yore help! Now get off!"

"No!"—It was Delano who insisted. "Me an' Pete's seein' yuh there. Pals! Come on—vamosnos!" He started to lung forward and to pull the resisting captive.

It was then that Bill Malop slipped out of the shadows which had been concealing him. His hands were not near either of his guns. The three saw him at once, though he had approached as silently as a cat.

They pulled up.

Bill clipped: "Did you hombres happen to know that I'm working with the chief now?"

Delano stammered: "Maybe. But who are yuh?"

"Big enough to take orders. Which you're not. Now get back to the Southern Cross. You know what we want with this bird—we all do. It's not his dinero, anyhow. Now—vaya-se—go!"

He had pulled a bluff. It worked. The two men went off like coyotes. Bill watched them go. They disappeared into the barroom. No sound came. Bill stood, steadying the boy by his arm, until the street was quiet once more, and empty.

Then he turned to him. Simply, he said:

"You're Dan Vardon, aren't you?"

"Anybody'd know that — around here. But how did you happen to know?"

"You're right," replied Bill. "Any-

body would. Only I'm a stranger. I know who you are because I happen to be a friend of your mother's."

"My—mother—!"

"Yeah. You're drunk right now, and you need to sleep it off. Get over to the Rodeo. I'll come for you in the morning. I'm sleeping there, too . . . but later."

Vardon brought up. "Hombre," he asked—but still in a thickened voice—"jest why are you so interested in me?"

"I thought I made it clear to you that I'm not—not in you, particularly. For one thing, to avoid argument—here!" And a gun jammed into the youth's stomach. "Now, you've been flashing a big roll. Everybody saw it, tonight. That's what those two were after. I'm not, but I could take it if I wanted. Now, let's go across the street, and you get to bed."

HE slid the gun back into its holster. The boy blinked at him; and then Malop took his arm, followed him across the dusty way. They awakened a sleepy negro boy and booked two rooms. Then Bill turned to go. His companion demanded:

"Ain't you turnin' in?"

"Not yet. Things to do. I'll see you in the morning—I hope not before. I'll be in the next room to yours. Go to bed and sleep off that drunk."

He pushed young Vardon into his room, flipped the boy a gold coin, and told him to save Room 23.

No one saw him go out. If anyone had, he was prepared: He was simply going down to the stables to see that his horse was well cared for—that was enough answer.

But he did not go near the stables. Nor the Southern Cross. Instead, he hunched himself in the partial shadow of a half-abode, half-frame door-

way across from the Rodeo.

He watched. He was tired, but nevertheless, he watched until the light went off in the room occupied by Dan Vardon. Then he settled himself for a longer wait—though, drunk as the boy was, it might be supposed that he would tumble into slumber instantly.

He had counted on that. But so had some others, which was why he had not long to wait. It was scarcely more than twelve minutes before two men emerged from the Southern Cross.

One of the two men was Delano. The other Malop did not know, though he had seen him that night at the Southern Cross. He knew, too, what they were going for. They had slipped away from the boss, and were now returning. But the boss had never told them to kill young Vardon while he slept. That—whatever the game might be—would not be a part of it.

Bill waited and watched until the two men got to the door of the hotel. He watched until he had seen them enter and go upstairs. It was then that he moved.

Reconnoitering carefully, he was like a shadow as he stole across the street, then along the side of the buildings. He passed the Rodeo.

In the shadows beyond the flimsy hotel was a vacant space and in that space, a misshapen willow grew out onto the street. No one saw Bill when he slipped into the shadow of the willow. No one could have seen him afterward: he was entangled in its branches and growth.

He found a trunk—a long limb. It suited the height he wanted. The limb was precarious. He made it. At the end it sagged just below the half raised window of the boy he had left

inside the hotel.

His fingers found the window ledge before he let go the grip he had on the limb with his knees. Just in time, too. The branch swept upward without him, with a peculiar, swishing sound.

The ledge was wide, and he crouched there until he could hear, from within, the stealthy opening of a door. He could see nothing until the shaft of an outer light — obviously from the corridor—penetrated the room like a sliver for perhaps four seconds. Then all was dark again.

Malop could hear breathing . . . deep, healthy breathing. A snore. Whispers.

Under his finger he raised the window carefully for the inch or so it allowed. He regretted even the scant noise it made. Everything was quiet. Far down the street, the lights from the saloon blared an insolent challenge; that was all.

Then, suddenly, the lights within the chamber were flashed on. A curse came—a deep curse.

"Lay there, waddy—an' maybe yuh won't git hurt!"

**A** STARTLED exclamation came. A sound. Bill now knew that no one was bothering about him.

"Whud—whud 'yuh want—?"

"Jest the roll yo're packin'. That's all. Shove it!"

"Delano!—Luckner!—" It was Dan Vardon's voice. "Yuh—yo're stickin' me up?"

"Yeah," came the voice of Delano. "We got orders to make it light on yuh—for tonight. We jest want the roll."

Bill's foot had slid inside the window. Twin six-guns were in his hand. His second foot slid inside and his body followed with his voice.

"Sorry. You're not even going to get the roll—tonight!"

The two men whirled in unison. But two guns were too much for them. Corcoran's voice added:

"Reach for the ceiling!"

They obeyed.

But of the three in the room besides Bill Malop, Dan Vardon seemed to be the most surprised of all. He whirled, reaching automatically, though he had no gun. He was snarling. Malop smiled at him with narrow-slitted eyes.

"Bueno. Put your hands down, kid. Good. Now take the irons from those two cheap crooks."

Wonderingly, the boy dropped his hands. Wondering, too, the other two men watched, still keeping their hands up high, however.

Still dazed, the youth went to the holsters of the two who had interrupted his snoring. He threw the guns on his bed.

Bill said: "You're Delano, eh? Our chief pointed you out to me tonight. And your partner—?"

"Luckner," answered Delano, unwillingly; and Luckner gave him a baleful look.

Bill smiled. "It's all right, Luckner—I'd have found out, anyway. Now I'm going to let you go, but I'll keep your guns as souvenirs. And maybe I won't tell the chief. You know the orders about this kid, and you've disobeyed. Maybe I should tell, though. Knowing about what you've done tonight might bring me a shot in the back from some dark alley."

Delano spoke. He had been slightly drunk when he entered; now his head was clearing. "Whoever you are, waddy, yuh've got us. It's up to you. The chief'll have us handled, if you tell him. But if you let us go, and don't spill—I'm behind yuh from now

on."

"You, too?" Malop grinned at Luckner.

Luckner hastily answered: "Me, too—seguro! Hell, I don't know who's worse—you or the chief. But I'll take my chances. And say...jest who are you, waddy?"

Bill smiled easily. "Tonight," he said, "in the Southern Cross, I hear someone speak disrespectfully of Lobo Negro. Perhaps it was one of you; perhaps Senor Verrick. Anyhow, when you want to talk about Lobo Negro again, come to me!"

There were three gasps. "You're—him—?"

Bill's white teeth gleamed against his burned face until he looked in truth a Mexican again. He shook his head.

"Figure—for yourselves. But I tell you now that if I am not, I am his best friend!"

**D**ELANO swore deeply. "Luckner! He is Lobo Negro!"

Bill only smiled. To the boy watching, he said: "Break open their guns. Extract the shells. Then give them back."

They all watched. Bill slid one gun into his holster, and with the free hand it left, he calmly rolled and lighted a cigarette. Over his shoulder, he ordered Dan Vardon to give back the empty guns to their owners.

The two slunk out afterward with wondering looks. Bill watched them re-enter the Southern Cross. When he turned from the window, he found Dan Vardon watching him with eyes full of meaning. The boy ran his hand through his hair. He moistened dry lips. Then he said:

"You—yo're Lobo Negro!"

Bill said mildly: "What if I am known by that name?"

"You are! Yo're him! And you — you put the irons on those buzzards—for me?"

Bill pointed to the bed; for himself, he chose a chair. "You're sober now, I think. Anyway, near it. You drink too much. But once before tonight you asked me why I was interested in you."

Vardon sat silent and Bill continued after a moment. "I was born in this town. They don't take to me here, but it doesn't bother me a trifle. I come back now and then when I feel like it. When I come back this time, I met your mother. She's a right nice little lady, Dan."

"Don't I know that—?" Hotly.

"You should. But you left her. I presume it was to come down here and get what you thought'd be justice—at the end of smoking guns. You may get it that way...but smoking guns are dangerous. Especially if you can't shoot 'em soberly. I met your mother. She's headed for Dallas, by the way—I told her I'd tell you. And I told her something else: I'll keep you out of trouble!"

"How?"

Bill smiled. "If you know anything about me, you know my name's bad around these parts. I found that out, tonight. I got a job. Know what it is?"

The boy shook his head.

Bill said, harshly: "To either kill you or 'frame' you for killing someone. That someone might be me. I don't like the idea of dying, so it's up to me to kill you. Then I get paid. Listening?"

Dan Vardon ran a hand in puzzled fashion across his forehead. "Then why in hell don't you kill me? And why do they want yuh to kill me?"

Malop mused, flipped gray ash on the soiled carpet. "The last, maybe

you can answer. The first—I told you I met your mother. Son, ever read *Ivanhoe*—or *Robin Hood*? No? n.Well, I carry a copy of both in my saddlebags. I like 'Ivanhoe' best. He had no business bein' what he was—just looking for trouble all the time, I suppose. But he got it...outa helping people who weren't as strong as he was. Read it, some time, I came to Pedras Negras outa curiosity; I stayed because I'm going to clear up a little matter. And, son, I kinda like your mother."

The youth sat stunned, mute.

"Tell me this, Vardon," Bill went on. "Why do Haskell and White and Company want your place? Is there gold on it maybe?"

Dan Vardon shot to his feet, wildly. "That's it! There must be gold there—somewhere!"

"Exactly. And you took care of this Ten-Strike Verrick—the tinhorn—in your shack, for a long time. Just afterwards, all the trouble started, didn't it?" The boy nodded; Bill went on: "So I developed the bright idea that maybe Ten-Strike found something there."

Bill stood up. "And come to think of it, maybe I'm not using my room here tonight. Maybe I'm heading towards your shack."

"Why?" quietly.

Bill said: "You're not stupid, Dan. There's something up there beside the three or four dollars worth of gold that can be panned out of that little creek. Dan, unless my hunch is wrong—and it'd be the first one that ever was—your dad built that hut on top of a gold mine!"

The boy cursed. "And that's why they wanted to get us outa there! He found gold—told others. Others backed him. Who, though — beside White?"

"That," said Bill, "is what we're going to find out. But first we're gonna see if the gold really is there—we may be wrong, you know!"

The youth's lips were harder now. Gone were the cobwebs that had clouded his brain. His eyes were hard, too.

He looked up and said: "I'm goin' with yuh."

"You can if yuh want, but it won't do you any good. One's as good as an army for a survey."

Dan repeated: "I'm goin' with yuh."

"Bueno! Let's saddle. We go now."

They went downstairs. Bill went to the rear of the Southern Cross and got Thunder. When he came out into the silent street, Dan Vardon was walking toward him, leading a pony.

They nodded, spoke in whispers; and the soft surface of the street deadened the sound of their mounts' hoofbeats as they headed upward and into the hills.

Once clear of the town, there was little need to hurry. They trotted their mounts most of the way. For a little they slept, and the horses rested. Dawn was near when they took up the trail again.

A little after eight o'clock, Dan Vardon pulled in restively. A low hill-ock was ahead; beyond it must lay a drop, and back of that the upper fronds of a cottonwood stood out against a sheer wall that grayed in the distance.

Bill nodded. Without a word, both men dismounted, and they tethered their mounts by a low stump in a little depression of the ground. They went on, toward the top of the rise; and as they approached this, they crouched lower and lower. At the top of the rise both flattened.

Bill parted gramma grass that

grew thickly here, and was able to get a good view of the cabin.

Where the stream wound under the cottonwood tree, he finally saw something move. It was the figure of a man, and the figure turned toward the open door of the shack some twenty-five yards away. The man was bearded; Bill had never seen him before. In his hand he held a tin basin. Disgustedly he looked into it, ran the tips of his fingers through its contents, then he let bright, clear water and some sediment spill back into the little stream.

Disgustedly, also, he threw down the pan and removed his booted feet from the water. He looked up. Then he called out to someone—as yet invisible—above him.

"That's that! This creek won't pan more'n two or two-fifty a day . . . And my back aches!"

There was a moment before any reply came. Then a second figure came into view—another man, vaguely familiar as having been with Delano the night before at the Southern Cross. He was not bearded, but he badly needed a shave; and even at that distance, his mouth was nothing but a cruel red scar amid a heavy growth of hair. He came around from the back of the shack, smiling, and he halted at the rickety doorway.

"And my back don't ache!" he roared. "Why should it? A little pick can get more in ten minutes than you could pan in ten years down there. Come on—let's shove along!"

"Hey, here's a surprise for yuh!"

As he spoke, something dark flashed through the early sunlight — a lump. Dark . . . and yet, when it caught a brief gleam of light, it glinted reddish gold.

The man at the creek's edge caught

the flying object. He stared down at it, looked for scarcely ten seconds. Then he looked up again. He swore.

"Gold!"

"An' plenty more where that come from! Ten-Strike wasn't lying, like I said all along It don't pay to lie to Cameron or Hep'!"

The man at the edge of the creek stared stupidly for a long time. Then he thrust the nugget in his pocket with a gesture at once jealous and avaricious, and came running up the slope. The two watching could even hear him pant:

"Let's got to the hosses — and vamosnos!"

Bill lay flat. To be certain, he put out one hand and grasped the wrist of his companion. The muscles of the latter surged, but he heeded the warning. They saw the two men vanish behind the cabin; then they saw the two reappear in a moment in the saddles, and with a wild whoop ride in the direction of the town.

It was only then that Bill sat up. His eyes were alight. He said slowly:

"Just what I was banking on! Surprise you, kid?"

Dan Vardon did not at once reply. He sat there, fists clenched into mammoth balls, eyes narrow and reddened in the center of their pupils, lips a scar of cruelty and hate. Slowly he said:

"So that's why they got—the ol' man . . . and drove me to wantin' to kill! . . . and drove ma out!" He looked up. "Wantin' t' kill! By God, they've succeeded. Let's get along!"

Bill laid a hand on his arm. "Steady son! Remember, we ain't proved anything—yet. Jest you and me know about this—and my say-so isn't much around these parts. Curt Cameron, I understand, is a big bird

in the bank down there. No doubt he's got some sort of mortgage on that place. And it's abandoned, now, except for you. We've got to lay claim, pronto."

The boy started to go toward his horse. But he brought up short when Bill's two hands clamped down on his arms.

"Wait a minute!" commanded Bill. "Is there a marshal in town?"

"Yeah. Charley Cunningham, the sheriff, is on Cameron's and Hep's payroll; but the marshal seems to be square. Carse's his name."

"Well, there's your law. We'll get the goods, present it, prove it—and when we have to — shoot it out! You'll get plenty of shootin', ranny, if you're around me!"

"Yeah. But how are we gonna get these goods?"

Malop smiled. "Maybe you've forgotten that I rate going onto White's payroll. My first job, I gathered, was to get you. We both know why, now. But don't you suppose, with my reputation — I can get close enough to Hep and Cameron for the goods?"

"Yeah... I s'pose. But what do I do? Pray! Don't ask me to do that—except to get within gunshot of one of those hombres!"

"Which would land you in jail — and prove nothing."

The kid set his lips tight.

"What's orders, then?"

"You hole up in some draw near town. I'll ride by and see where it is. Hep told me to talk to him. I'll go back and do that little thing. Afterward I'll get to Cameron—he's the chief, no matter who Hep or Haskell may be. He owns the Triple-C and the O-Bar-O, isn't that it?"

"Yeah. Not forgettin' the bank."

"I'm not forgetting that. I'll get what evidence I can and work from

there."

"And yore first job'll be—to get me!"

"Yeah. And I'll report I've done it."

"S'pose they ask for proof?"

"That'll be hard—but we've got to work fast. We've got to get all this over in about two days."

"Yeah. But I'm in on the end, ain't I?"

"If I can manage it, you are. But you're taking orders now, son. Remember, if you start to work on your own, it'll likely spoil everything I'm doing—and maybe kill both of us."

"That wouldn't be nice, would it? Bueno!" smiled Vardon. "I'm takin' orders. Ride me down to some place where I can be waitin' for yuh, and I'll pray that I don't have to wait too long."

They got to their horses. As they swung into their saddles, Bill grinned:

"If it's a long wait, kid... it'll be a mighty long one—for both of us. Here's 'Ivanhoe'. Read it—but in daylight. No fires at night, remember, where you're holing up."

They rode off — sombrely now. Work lay ahead. Swift, desperate work, that meant the lives of men—and possibly more. The freedom of a people—a forgotten people, perhaps—nestled in this forgotten corner of the world.

That night Bill Malop had his first view of the power behind all the trouble in that county. He walked into the Southern Cross, after leaving Vardon, in search of White. Hep was there. So was Curtis Cameron.

Curt Cameron was short and stocky. He smoked cigars incessantly—o' rechewed them—and he was handsome in a middle-aged way, with lines in his face that showed strength,

for good or evil.

Hep brought Bill over to the table when Bill entered. Cameron was there: the boss of the Southern Cross told Bill that Cameron had waited to meet him. Haskell was also there. The latter Bill most decidedly did not like.

Cameron ordered a drink, sat back, regarding his new recruit. They had the drink. Then Cameron said:

"Hep's been speaking about you," in a voice that was sort of a growl. "But maybe we better not talk here. Let's go to my place." He got up, abruptly.

The others hastened to their feet—Bill with alacrity. Cameron's silver rang on the table, and they went out.

He owned a big house at the edge of town. They rode out there, all of them. The house was surrounded by a high wall, and the big gate to it was heavy and barred. A Mexican scurried to open it when Cameron clanged the knocker, which caused a hollow gong from somewhere far beyond them. They went in... along a smooth path that wound between the trunks of stately royal palms, cactus, and spiked bayonet.

**T**HE path led for a full thirty yards before they came to the door which was partially open, revealing a wide hallway and stone steps that wound somewhere upward, bathed all in a yellow light from sconces on the walls.

A door opened on their right; there was a room beyond. They did not pause. Instead, Cameron flourished his guests up the stairway, stopping to order drinks sent up to a room upstairs. Hep led the way; he seemed to know it.

Up and still upward they went, passing another floor that was more

than the height of a single floor. Still Hep led on, and the stone staircase became winding and narrower. At the top of it, just as they reached there, a light appeared in a wall sconce.

There was a door. Hep opened it, flashed on a light, and flourished them in again.

"This is the tower room," he said, in a low voice. "Very few people get up here."

Cameron came in. He pointed to chairs. He took a deep leather cushioned one for himself. To Bill he said:

"I understand you once lived here. How does this part of the world look to you now?"

Steve smiled. He said: "What do you want me to say? I'd say it looks like anybody's — anybody strong enough to take it and keep it."

Cameron smiled a grave smile, and he nodded. "You're right," he said. "And there is somebody. Me!"

"I gathered that," Bill said quietly. "That's why, I think, things 've been happening. I think I know why you wanted the Vardons off their squatter's place. Gold?"

"How'd you know?"

"Guessed. Was it right?"

"Yes. But they still retain claim to it—taxes paid, and everything. Mrs. Vardon's cleared out—we made it too tough for her. The kid's no good: we'll take care of him. Old man's dead. So now there only remains one legal title holder to the property."

"The kid — and he's nothing to worry about."

"No, but he's game! He'll fight: I've got an idea he senses something's up."

"And so you want him out of the way?"

"Exactly."

Bill smiled. He said: "I'm no cheap

'gun,' Cameron. How do I know you'll play with me—or even can play with me—if I come through?"

"Reasonable," stated Cameron, and heaved to his feet. "Look here!" He gestured to the farther end of the room.

Bill followed him there. The others waited. In the corner there was a huge desk made of solid mahogany. Its value, Bill guessed, was beyond price. But it was unquestionably strong. Cameron turned a key, but then, replacing the key in his pocket, clicked on some switch alongside the desk.

The upper doors swung open, and a desk top came down. Inside, there were books. Cameron took out one.

He flipped it open casually. His finger came down in the same way. He smiled.

"Who is that? Oh, it's you, Hep!"—as though he were surprised. "That account there, though, is not all money I've given just to you. This here... Remember when we had the wounded trying—I want to get it into hands that'll know what to do with it."

Rio bank held up—my bank, and our lad got away with some sixty thousand, gold? Insure gold, though!" Cameron chuckled. "You collected it all, and then paid them off—for me. I still think you paid 'em too much. They knew they hadn't much to fear."

"They're paid, anyhow," grunted White. "That's over. We got the gold, and we collected on the other end."

"Yes, we did. But we'll pass that over." He flipped the book again. Under "V" his finger stopped halfway down a page. "That's paid to Ten-Strike—only a little. The rest, now we've proved his story—he gets. I deal square." He turned to Bill.

"Understand?"

BILL nodded. He knew that he wanted that book. There were two others—long, thin ledgers, just like it—stowed away in that big desk. He strove to keep the gleam from his eyes.

Cameron put the book back, casually. The lock snapped. The drinks came. They all sat down.

"Now," he said, "You've seen something. This I call my tower room: there's only one entrance, and we came up that. Over there—" he pointed to the shadows where there was a dark shape—"there is a Hotchkiss machine gun. To get at that desk, anybody's got to get the man behind that gun—and there'll be one there, if it's ever necessary! But I'm not afraid, Bill. Not at all! This patch of the world is going to be my little kingdom—in a few days."

Bill nodded. "What are you waiting for?" he asked.

Cameron considered. "I'm waiting to get Dan Vardon out of the way," he said. "That fool of a father of his sat on top of the richest gold ledge in this country, and didn't know it. That's why I'm inclined to like Ten-Strike. Well, we've got the father. Now we've got to get Dan Vardon. I can buy the property at public auction after that's done. The sheriff—Cunningham—he belongs to me!"

Bill's eyes narrowed. "And you want me to get Vardon."

"That's it. Do you want a share, or outright pay?"

"I'll take a share," said Bill very slowly, "after it's all over. I kinda figure of settling around here."

Cameron laughed. He raised his glass. The others followed suit.

"That's straight talking! And wise, too. Because, my boy, playing along

with me—you can't lose!"

Bill grinned. "Unless I happen to get in the way of some lead!"

"That," smiled Cameron, downing his drink, "is entirely in your hands. I know your reputation. Go find Vardon. Get him! If you don't get him, and he gets you I still win! I'll have Sheriff Cunningham get him for murder."

"Yeah," sighed Bill, "you're right. You'll win!"

"And," laughed Cameron, "here's success to you—which is success to us all."

"Just make it me, if you don't mind," smiled Bill. "I'll probably need it." He got up.

Before he got to the door, he took one final glance over the room.

They went out. Haskell, White and Bill went back to the Southern Cross for a last drink. That night Bill stayed in a room over the bar. He figured he was safe—for tonight.

Elliot Carse was the marshal for Pedras Negras and the district. He had an office at the far end of the town's long main street. However, though Bill intended going to him that following day, he waited until dusk before he saddled Thunder.

Then, aware that he must be under observation, he rode directly out of town. It was only after night had fallen that he returned. The street was empty; so stabling his horse farther up, he kept to the shadows of the low buildings and reached Carse's little office without being observed.

He liked Carse. Liked him, even when Carse, hearing his true name, became distant. Carse was not tall, not heavy. His face was hatchet-shaped, with a beak for a nose. Across the nose was the scar from what probably a knife wound. But he

had gray, level eyes and a strong chin and mouth.

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## 4

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### DEPUTY MARSHALL

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CARSE said: "Sit down. Though I don't know why you've come about anything—to me."

Malop smiled. "You've been peeking!" he chided. "Been hearing things about me, sir?"

"Plenty! But I've got nothing on you—here. You must 've played hell across the line, though."

"That goes both ways. If I played hell, I had to play it. Figure it out for yourself, Mr. Carse. Does anybody except a born killer or a maniac shoot unless he has to?"

"I've never heard you did. But that gang you tied up with down below there—they're bad!"

"Most of 'em are dead now. The rest are scattered. I've had to shoot for my own life. I intend to again—pronto! That is why I've come to you tonight!"

"Why!"

"Why?... I suppose you know there's crooked work going on in your district?"

Carse's lips twitched. "From what I've heard of you, Malop, may I ask why you're not in on it?"

Bill shot back: "I am!"

That brought Carse bolt upright in his chair. He was stunned for the moment. Then he smiled.

He said: "And so you came here to confess, eh?"

"Maybe. Something, anyway." He jerked forward, and his eyes from wary amusement, became hard. "Because of the reputation I've managed to contract—which you seem to like, I've been approached by the crowd

that aims at control of this part of the country. I'm to get plenty dinero for my part in what's coming off very soon. Double-crossing? No — I'm playing my own game, if you like that!"

"Why?"

Bill's face softened a trifle. "I don't know. I just came back to look over the country which bred me. It's a habit of mine. And then I met a nice lady... Mrs. Vardon!"

Carse stared. He sat forward.

"I happened to find out about that whole affair—I know why her husband was shot and she persecuted, and why they want me to kill Dan Vardon."

"Why?" Carse was listening now; no doubt of that.

"Because their poor squatter's cabin is sitting on top of a placer mine that's probably the richest in this part of the world!"

"And they—this crowd—want to buy it?"

"Not much! They're not going to waste money buying it! That's why the Vardons are out — that's why they want me either to kill young Dan or get killed trying. Either way, they win. If he should happen to get me, the sheriff's owned by them and he'll see that Vardon hangs for my murder. If they can buy that claim from the sheriff's auction for less than nothing!"

"Now I've got the kid hidden in a draw outside of town. I'm going out there, then return and say I've killed the kid. Which is where you come in."

"How?"

Bill now had the situation in hand; he knew it. He leaned back comfortably and rolled and lighted a cigarette.

"I've been at their place. I've seen

their books, their payoffs. I didn't want money in advance for killing Dan Vardon—said I'd play along and take a share of the gold."

Carse sat back. His eyes were narrowed. "And you didn't go to the sheriff..."

"No. He's on their payroll. You're not."

The marshal sat quiet a moment. Then he said: "Whose crowd is this?"

"Curt Cameron's." Bill replied without hesitation.

"No," the marshal said narrowly, "I'm not on his payroll."

"Now what I want is the evidence that's in Cameron's Tower room. And when I get it—even if I'm mortally wounded trying—I want to get it into hands that'll know what to do with it."

CARSE stood up. His eyes were keen and his face was very grave. He said:

"When is this coming off?"

"Tonight looks like it has to be the showdown."

"And you want me to—?"

"Be at Cameron's tonight. And give me a marshal's badge!"

Carse went to his desk, still perfectly grave, opened it, and turning, he flung a glittering seal on its top. He walked the three paces to where Bill was still standing with his eyes blazing. Placing his hand on the younger man's shoulder, he said quietly:

"You're now a deputy marshal. And I'll be there tonight."

Bill picked up the glittering badge, gazed at it, shoved it into his pocket.

The marshal opened the door and saw that the street was clear. Then he put out his hand.

"Vaya con Dios!—Go with God!"

Bill went out and got to his horse.

Then he streaked out of Pedras Negras as though he were being pursued, striking for the spot where he had left young Dan Vardon.

A half hour later he branched off the trail and rode across country. The moon was coming up, and it flooded field and highway. The trees stood out like painted things against a background of blue wash.

He had not much time to admire it, with the cool wind in his face, the breath of sage tingling in his nostrils. He brought up sharply at the glint of a rifle barrel, levelled at his breast. A cold voice came from behind it:

"Better reach, pardner!"

He reached. It was instinct. But his lips smiled.

"Bill Malop!" he announced. "Anybody out gunning for me around here?"

**A**N VARDON stepped out into the open, gun atrail. He looked a trifle sheepish, but at the same time, happy.

"It's all right—I jest didn't want to be takin' any chances," he said. "There's been riders through these hills most of the afternoon. I was hoping you'd come."

Bill slipped from Thunder's saddle. He smiled.

"All right," he said. "Read 'Ivanhoe'?"

"Yep. Maybe I savvy what you've been tryin' to tell me now." There was a strange misty flame in his eye for a moment. Then he said: "What's up?"

Bill rolled a cigarette, guarded the match carefully when he lighted it, and sat down.

"I'm out here with orders to kill  
"And then what—?"

you," he said.

"To report back and say it's safe to

claim your dad's mine. Oh, and I forgot—to get paid!"

Eagerly Dan Vardon leaned forward. "Tell it to me!" he commanded. Then he listened, while Malop told him the whole story.

Dan sat brooding for awhile. Once he looked up, ready to shout out; then he brought up sharply. Bill Malop smiled at him, and said:

"You were about to say, 'Let's go!'—weren't you? It's a good idea, but it's not yet time. I'm going back there—alone!—and tell 'em I've got you."

"Yes? And then?"

"Then they probably won't believe me. They'll send out to see whether or not I've told the truth. Maybe send one of 'em. You can be here. If you're so hungry for blood, I'll leave him to you. But be damned sure it isn't me that you get, if I have to come back!"

"I see. That'll be one or two of 'em off our hands. Then I can ride in?"

"You sure can. And by that time . . . I've got a hunch that I'll probably be needing you very badly!" He paused, flipped away his cigarette. "Got it?" He rose.

Vardon nodded.

"Good! Then I'll ride back and tell 'em I've killed you."

"They'll like to hear that."

"Yah." Malop swung into his saddle. "Adios!"

A swift handclasp, and Bill was off. Dan Vardon gazed after him and he muttered:

"Yeah, Ivanhoe, maybe. But with twin six-guns!"

Bill's return to Pedras Negras was unheralded. He passed the Southern Cross, and did not pause there. From the dusty street, it appeared to be deserted within. Perhaps White was there; but Bill preferred to press on,

until he came to the house of Curt Cameron.

He drew down the ancient knocker as he had seen his host do the night before; a gong reverberated through the still air as from a far off cavern. Shuffling feet...then a lock was dropped and the same Mexican permitted him to enter.

"Senor Cameron awaits," the servant said, in Spanish.

"Alone?" murmured Bill, easily.

"For now, si." The man led the way into the house and they followed the winding, turreted steps upward to the Tower chamber.

Its door was partially open. Cameron sat in apparent idleness, his granite-hewn face toward it. One hand hung from the arm of the furniture; Bill could guess what is contained. He went in.

The door closed behind him. Cameron was alone. Bill's eyes shot from his host toward the covered Hotchkiss in the darker corner, then to the massive chest-desk containing the things he wanted.

CAMERON stared at him, waiting. Bill came forward, with an attempt to appear nervous. At last, when he had made his host wait sufficiently long, he said:

"Got a drink? Aguardiente?"

"Si." Cameron reached out a free hand and rang. "He will know what I want," he continued. "Sit down."

Bill sat. He was playing for time. He waited until he got the drink; then he downed it swiftly, and when the door had closed, he asked: "Any others coming?"

"Maybe." And then: "I'm waiting."

Bill laughed nervously. "Hell, you don't expect me to be cheerful, do you? If you want to know it—the job is done!"

"You mean," asked Cameron steadily, without moving, "you've killed Vardon?"

Bill nodded. "He's dead," he lied. "Now, do you want anything else?"

Cameron said: "Not much." He smiled. "Only...proof!"

"Proof? What did you want me to do—scalp him? I tell you he's dead!"

"We'll find out. Not that I doubt you. In a few minutes, some others will be here. They'll ride out to see. Want to ride with 'em?"

"Hell, no! Who's coming?"

"Haskell, Delano. Probably Hep." As he spoke, Bill started to move. He was alone now—he might take his chance and win. But he was too late; he hoped his host hadn't seen that movement. Below, a gong clanged, and there was a slight stir.

They waited. Cameron was watching him. There came a knock on the door; it opened, and Haskell, White and Delano came in. They halted inside the door, first looking to Cameron, than at once to Bill.

"Well...?" drawled White.

Cameron's lips twitched; he lifted a finger. "Lobo Negro says it's all finished."

Haskell sneered. "Lobo Negro says so, eh?"

Bill broke in. "Yeah, he does."

Haskell sneered: "What's the proof?"

Bill's eyes lighted. From the first he had not liked the owner of the Tumbling-V. He smiled:

"Maybe it'll need proof," he said. "Suppose Cameron deputizes you—and maybe Delano, too, if you're afraid to go alone—to go out there and check?" He was thinking of Dan Vardon, fingers on triggers, waiting for just something like this.

Cameron said: "Sounds reasonable, Lon—if you're as dubious as I'm a

mind to be. Get going!"

Haskell bit off a hot reply. It was a tribute to the power of Cameron, the way Haskell said, "Okay. I'll go."

A moment later Bill laughed and said: "Where's Ten-Strike? I thought this was to be a party. I need one!"

Curt Cameron rang again, and with some new drinks—which he servant hastened upward knowingly — Ten-Strike came in.

"Now we're all near the end of the trail. Here's to it!"

HEY drank. Then Cameron gave a resume of the situation for Ten-Strike. The latter looked curiously at Bill Malop.

They talked. Minutes dragged. But Bill was watchful. He came to know all their plans; he came to know just what that magnificent mahogany desk-secretary contained — already he thought he knew how to open it. If he didn't—well, it could be blown open.

His mind raced while the others talked. From time to time, he flashed a fixed smile. He knew he was being watched covertly—knew, too, that Curt Cameron was enjoying the watching.

Cameron was inherently cruel. He knew that the man would enjoy Haskell coming back with news that Dan Vardon was not dead, and not found—or the opposite. He held all the cards.

Bill knew he was surrounded by four of the deadliest men in the country. It would be too bad if Haskell came back alive!

They waited a long time, drinking from time to time. All the while, Cameron's eyes were fixed coolly on Bill's face. That showed nothing; and Bill could drink with the rest. And from time to time, Cameron drew

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out his big watch. He would look at it and then at the Hotchkiss in the corner; then, smiling amusedly, he would survey the faces grouped in the big, high-ceilinged and dim-lit chamber.

Aguardiente unloosened their tongues. They were on edge, anyway. They grew garrulous, all but Cameron, who still sat with that same fixed and cruel smile on his face, as though all those in his Tower room were there for his amusement only. They were, up to now.

Haskell had not returned, and it was nearly time. They all had another drink—Bill included—and he scarcely sipped his. They grew boastful now. They talked—but not Cameron!—of what they had done in this patch of country—of what they were going to do. Cameron smiled.

He could afford to, thought Bill. They were all his puppets, and danced when he pulled the strings.

Then, at long last, Cameron heaved to his feet. They all looked at him, and no one spoke. For himself, he looked only at Bill. He pulled out his watch, thrust it back into his pocket.

"Haskell's not returned," he said simply. "He won't — now! Come through!"

Bill looked up, tense. His left hand, in his pocket, clutched the deputy marshal's badge that he had won. And he did not want to lose it!

"Why don't you wait?" he said. "You're not condemning me just because he hasn't got back, are you? Man, can't you see that Haskell and I hate each other's guts, that he'd stay away if he knew it would condemn me?"

Cameron considered. "There's reason in that," he said. "We'll wait...

five minutes!"

Bill settled back. All around him, from the shadows, white faces were peering. Five minutes! Cameron sat down. His word was law, here. If he had said the word, they would have been at Bill's throat by now.

By this time, he was certain, Lon Haskell was dead. Once over the sights of Dan Vardon's gun, he would die—and he had easily reached Vardon spread by now. So Haskell would not return. Bill wished that they had sent Delano along, too.

Five minutes . . . !

They ticked on One...two...

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## 5

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### SHOWDOWN

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THERE was not much talking now. They all seemed to be waiting for some sound from outside. Everyone knew it was coming. For no reason—but they knew it. All but Bill—he knew no sound would come, and the seconds ticked on.

"Four of 'em gone," Cameron announced, glancing at his watch. He looked from that to the machine gun. Then to Delano, who nodded vaguely—rather fearfully.

Cameron looked then to Bill. He smiled his cruel smile. "Want to come through, now?" he purred. "It'll be easier."

Malop swore. "I thought you were a big man, Cameron," he said. "I tell you—!"

"And that's five minutes!" broke in Cameron, as he returned the watch to his pocket. "Now come through!"

Bill cursed. "I'll come through with nothing! Come and get me!" he snarled.

Then he sprang to his feet, and in

an instant, his two guns had leapt to his hands. Cameron was not fearful, outwardly. He glanced again at the machine gun. Bill said, steadily:

"You'll all sit still until I have a chance! Vardon is dead, I'm telling you! Cameron, you're figuring on getting rid of me so you won't have to pay me off!"

Cameron laughed. But it was not healthy laughter.

"Put away them irons, son," he said. "Don't yuh realize yuh haven't got a chance — here? You're one against four!"

Bill croaked hoarsely: "I didn't come here to be killed like a rat! Come on! Who's reachin' for a gun first?"

No one moved. They all knew they were up against a desperate man. To Delano, Bill snapped:

"You — you double-crossing rat— get the cover off that machine gun— and get it off fast!"

Delano started. Halfway to the gun, he halted, looked at his chief fearfully. But Cameron had no time to waste on him: he was looking at Bill. Delano stripped off the gun.

"Now move away from it!"

Delano obeyed. Bill sidled his way around the walls, warily, until he was behind the gun. He had a range of the room from behind it, though he knew he could never get it into operation. But at least that couldn't harm him now, and it afforded him partial cover.

Crouching behind it, Bill smiled, though his eyes were not smiling: "Now we'll wait till things happen!"

The instant he said that, he knew it had been the wrong speech. It was a warning! By that, they knew he was hoping against hope for something to happen.

It did!

Bill could not see Cameron's eyes, for the big boss had his back toward him. But White could. And White reared from his seat with a bellow, upsetting the table which stood alongside him—and his single action .45 was splitting the room in a roar.

Three shots went wild. The fourth never came. White staggered backward to the wall with two shots embedded in his shoulder. His gun dropped; he slumped against the wall with a moan of pain, and blood streamed down his sleeve in quick gushes. His entire shoulder and collar-bone had been fractured with hot lead. His six-gun dropped and his eyes closed.

But Bill had no time for pity, even though he knew that White was probably the gamest of his enemies.

**D**ELANO let out a yell and wildly in a panic—he started to charge across the room. He brought up half-way across, clutching at his stomach, sprawled—gun outstretched.

Bill Malop crouched. He points his gun at the outline that Cameron's head made.

"The next shot," he said steadily, "is for your brain—in the back, Cameron. Go on—order it!"

Cameron opened his lips; but Bill couldn't see. It was a command to Ten-Strike. Bill was not watching the tin-horn prospector. He did not see the command. That was why he felt a stinging pain across his upper shoulder, burning like a hot iron brand—and it staggered him against the wall behind the machine gun.

Feet were running up the stairs. By this time more of Cameron's henchmen, no doubt, had been aroused. Bill blinked his eyes and was conscious of a dizziness. Ten-Strike fired

once more, and lead ripped along Bill's left forearm.

The whole world was swimming now. Bill was conscious of just one thing: he wanted to get Curt Cameron, and so wipe a blot off the world that he knew. But he was weak. He could hardly bring his hurt left arm up, and the gun in his hand would not become steady.

Ten-Strike had taken to cover. Bill broke from his. He wavered toward where he thought Ten-Strike was. Then the room was plunged into utter darkness!

Instinct alone made him leap from the spot here he had last been. The instinct was true. Lead smashed and tore into the wall behind where he had last stood. He was flattened on the thick carpet.

For tense, unending seconds, no sound came...not even the sound of breathing. Then a shot spattered; it went wild—and Bill returned it, aiming at flash of it.

Ten-Strike had forgot to move. He moaned once, he gasped, and then he lay quite still.

Bill did not dare breathe. That Cameron had a gun—perhaps two—he well knew. And he also knew that Cameron, too, was waiting to find the meaning of the sounds on the stairs. Cameron was sure...he could be sure — here!

And Bill felt his strength going. He found, by cautious experiment, that he had been hit more than once. His forehead was streaked: ah! that was what caused that sickish sensation and the dizziness. And the blood was flowing freely from his arm. He closed his eyes. He wanted to sleep...forever.

Then, suddenly, the door burst open. There were no lights in the

corridor, nor on the staircase. No one could be seen.

And then — then, only, waiting, praying in that awful darkness, Bill knew he could give way to that sickishness and sleep. He heard the voice of Elliot Carse.

"The light are goin' up! Anybody in this room that's still alive — stay without moving or get drilled — pronto!" Then: "Go ahead, Dan!"

Dan Vardon!

The light flashed. But Bill scarcely saw them. His head was pillowed on his wounded arm, and it hurt; but it is doubtful if he knew. He wanted to sleep.

Vaguely, as through an awful, reeking fog, he heard his name. He knew, too, that he was being shaken. The lights burned his eyes, when he at last managed to open them. Squinting, he looked up into the face of Dan Vardon.

"Got here, Kid — good work," he husked. Then, thickly, "All the evidence is over there—in that mahogany thing. Get me a drink an' let me go to sleep!"

He did not hear Carse's voice: "And they told me he was an outlaw . . .!"

But later—much later—after he had got his drink, he heard Dan Vardon's voice:

"Not so strange, at that! Say, did you hombres ever read 'Ivanhoe'? No? Well, it'd be a lesson—"

And then Carse, bending over Bill, swore.

"Lookit his fist. He's got hold of that thing as though he'd never give it up. And if I have any say, he can keep on hanging onto it!"

"What?"

"A deputy marshal's badge!"

—THE END—

# THE RESCUE

BY DEREK SINCLAIR

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1

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## DISASTER

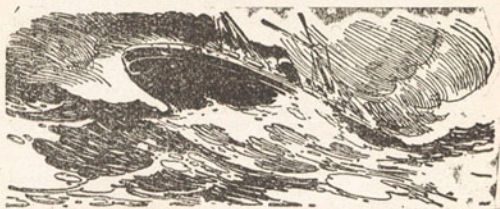
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**"W**E'VE HIT something, Sir!" shrilled Kellan, the young second officer. "I saw no lights! No lights at all!"

Martin Dyke, captain of the three thousand ton cargo ship, S.S. Morrison, scrambled to his feet. He heard

shouts from the bridge above him; and fainter, but even more disturbing, cries from the forecastle. He caught up his shabby greatcoat from the hook, and ran out into the passage. In an instant he was up in the wheelhouse.

Martin Dyke, grim-faced, nodded. He stared ahead into complete opacity. His eyes gave him no inkling of what had happened. There was no



land to be struck some two hundred miles west of his position.

"Keep her going ahead dead slow, Mr. Kellan," he instructed the officer. "We've got to jam our stem into whatever we've struck in case we've holed somebody."

The second mate, brought back from the edge of panic by a definite command, leaped toward the engine telegraph.

Again Captain Dyke nodded. He was a dark-haired, tall, impressive looking man, forty-five years old. A born commander.

MEN WERE pouring from the forecabin on to the well deck. The iron walls of their quarters had been crumpled by something unknown, out of the blackness ahead. Driven by blind instinct, they ran aft and came up the ladders towards the two boats that rested in chocks on the bridge deck.

"Calm 'em down," Mat Dyke said. "No guns."

He turned to find Morest, his morose, elderly chief mate at his elbow.

"Go forward, Mr. Morest," Dyke said to the silent officer. "Try to find out something."

"Aye, aye, sir," replied the old mate, with no more than dreary obedience in his voice.

Captain Dyke directed another glance forward at the black void of the night. He gave vent to something like a grunt and turned toward the frightened mob who threw themselves at the starboard bridge boat. He did not oppose the rush; he sidestepped it carefully.

He did, however, utter a few curt decisive orders that gradually

straightened out the sailor's confused efforts to rip off the cover and get the boat lifted and swung out on the davits. They obeyed him, for his words posed no barrier to their panicky desires. He gradually worked them into the routine of preparing a boat for lowering. But when the boat was out on the davits, he did not give the command to lower. He called two of the most frightened men by name. He gave fast, sure commands.

Martin Dyke deluged the crew with sharp, individual orders. He quieted the younger officers. When his orders ceased to flow, the shamefaced seamen shuffled their feet nervously and stood by.

Captain Dyke laid hold of the shoulder of the carpenter and sent him to sound the bells and bilges forward. He dispatched the Second with several men to bring out any injured still in the forecabin.

"Go back to the radio, Mr. Vines, and see that Sparks sends no messages out," Captain Dyke instructed.

The Third bounded away to execute the order.

In eight minutes the master had a fair idea of what had happened. The mate reported that the thing they had hit was apparently the forward end of a capsized and deserted wooden schooner.

As Captain Dyke had guessed, the Morrison's bow plates had been crumpled by the impact, and she was taking in water at a dangerous rate. The collision bulkhead was pierced. A fireman had been killed in his bunk and three others severely injured. The derelict continued to crash and work against the bows.

## 2

THE RAMAY

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ONLY a few of the black gang in the engine room had joined the rush to the boats. Malloy, the chief engineer had gone below in his night-shirt and seen to that. He now reported that the pumps were busy.

The carpenter came back to inform the master shakily of the swiftly filling hold forward.

Captain Dyke sent orders to Sparks to broadcast a call for immediate assistance. Then he spoke to the chief and second mates.

"We've got to get clear of the derelict," he said. "We've ridden up on her a bit, but our stem's not buried solidly enough to keep any water out of us."

The mate wagged his head in shaky agreement.

"I'm going to reverse the engine and swing her stern into the sea. If we can't drag clear of the wreckage under power we'll try something else. Mr. Kellan, you break out storm canvas and have a gang standing by to lower a sail over the bows. Try to get it tight against the twisted plates so it will suck in with the water. We've got to plug her somehow."

Martin Dyke, with a word to the helmsman, gripped the handle of the engine telegraph. Slowly the Morrison swung her stern around, rolling wildly in the trough. Then as the stern came into the wind she resumed her pitching. But the derelict still clung to the bow of the steamer when she went into reverse. There was little buoyancy left in the water logged derelict, but there was still strength in her wire shrouds and stubborn timbers.

Twelve minutes later the first mate returned from the radio deck.

"Sparks has an answer from the freighter, Ramay, sir," he reported. "She wants our exact position."

"The Ramay!" The wrinkles on the face of old Morest deepened until they seemed like creases in the skull. "Did you say the Ramay?"

"That's the ship," Vines replied, staring with wonder at the aroused chief officer.

Morest spat over the side of the ship.

"That's Raven then—Captain Grolley Raven, the blasted, fourflushing hero! Lord help you!"

Captain Dyke looked searchingly at his elderly mate. Morest was not usually either so talkative or so emotional. The angry mate required no questioning. He spoke in a flood of bitter words.

"He lost my ship for me. We were on fire, a bunker fire, but we could have saved her. But the Ramay, on this same Atlantic run, sighted our smoke. Raven was mate then and he was in charge of the lifeboat she lowered. The sea was rough. He came alongside and yelled to our crew to jump while they had a chance. The decks were hot and the smoke was pretty bad. The wind was kicking up a rising sea.

"They left us like rats, damn them! There was nothing I could do with the few officers who stuck. So we had to abandon. Raven got his picture in the papers for his bravery in taking off men in a small boat in a rough sea."

He jerked his grizzled head and his yellow teeth showed in a snarl.

"His picture in the papers, but I lost my ship, lost her because he played the hero."

Captain Dyke continued to chew his pipestem. His eyes examined the embittered ex-shipmaster before him with thoughtful attention.

"Give yourself time to fill a pipe, Mr. Morest," he advised gruffly.

**I**N THE chart-room of the modern, oil-burning ship, Ramay, Captain Raven bent over the charts. He laid a straight, well-kept finger upon the vicinity of latitude 27 degrees, 10 minutes N; longitude 82 degrees, 5 minutes W.

"A bit of luck for us, Mull," he said cheerfully. "We can reach them in four hours. We'll advise the New York office at once that we're running our best. You can imagine the headlines yourself."

Captain Raven shifted his gold-laced cap a trifle on the side of his head and grinned at his mate. His voice became confidential.

"I got command over the heads of a lot of hungry, grouchy old senior mates by saving life at sea. You can too, Mull. This line knows the value of publicity."

"And if you got command of a freighter that way, sir, you can certainly make 'em give you a mail boat for saving more life at sea."

Captain Raven nodded approvingly at his mate's acute remark.

"I might please 'em on a mail-boat," admitted Captain Raven, closing his right eye just enough to be jocular while still maintaining proper discipline.

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### 3

#### MUTINY

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**W**HEN DAWN came the S.S. Morrison was still afloat. She was unpleasantly low in the water for-

ward, for the derelict bumping under her, gave her little support and much battering.

The red dawn, together with the weather news that the radio had picked up, was not reassuring to Captain Dyke. Although they were given no inkling of the prediction of another northwesterly blow, the older seamen of the Morrison did not like that rosy, breezy dawn either. But they were too busy to spend their time in the observation of cloud effects.

Captain Dyke was fighting hard to free his crumpled bow from the submerged tangle of wreckage that pounded ceaselessly against the ship. Not until she was clear could they get more than the roughest sort of patch around her broken plates.

There were no ballast tanks to empty, for the Morrison had a good cargo under her hatches. It was just a toss-up whether the next bulkhead aft in the old ship would hold against the pressure of that slowly rising water, and the repeated shocks of wreckage under the forefront.

Though the ship, when whole, had not been troubled by the heavy swell, she now laboured with ominous sluggishness. But her propeller had not been lifted out of the sea by the submerging bow; she could still keep her stern to the swell.

Their nerve shattered by the sudden crumpling of their quarters, the men of the Morrison nevertheless worked well and hard under the eye of Martin Dyke. The boats on either side of the deck house were now well provisioned, with the plugs fitted. The Captain paid no more heed to these boats than if they were mere ornaments.

Out of the air had come encouragement from the coast guard cutter,

Huron, which had picked up the Morrison's call. She was many hours further away than the Ramay, but was cutting that distance under forced draft.

About the end of the morning watch, the black smoke of the Ramay showed over the edge of the troubled northeastern horizon. She was coming fast. The red-eyed, weary men of the Morrison gave a yell when she was sighted. She grew swiftly in size and finally swung around in a safe position about two hundred yards windward of them.

One of the Ramay's boats hit the



The black smoke of the Ramay showed on the troubled horizon.

water with business-like precision. The men in it knew what they were about.

The wind was coming out of the northwest now, a choppy breeze, rising in puffs. Already it had built up the swell which came from the same quarter and put a hissing feathery crest on the huge combers. But there was still no raging fury about the

sea. Not yet too rough to launch a boat.

Somewhere below the water line the derelict clutched the Morrison with the steel shrouds of her stumpy foremast or with some other stubborn tantacle. Captain Dyke took some of the punishment out of the battering by stemming slowly, stern foremost, into the weather; but he could not break that hellish grip. Now fingering his pipe he looked from his own racked, sluggish craft to the trim ship that rode those mountainous swells like a sea-gull.

Martin Dyke had filled his pipe but he had not lit it. His strong even teeth were tight on it's stem, but his face was placid. His eyes travelled from one man to another on the busy forward deck. He looked them all over. The men were stopping now to watch the boat.

Captain Dyke went into the radio shack and wrote out a message to Captain Raven of the Ramay.

GOOD CHANCE TO SAVE SHIP  
STOP CAN YOU STAND BY  
FEW HOURS UNTIL CUTTER  
REACHES ME.

The answer from the Ramay came back before the life boat had pulled down the cresting seas to the Morrison.

YOUR SHIP PLAINLY SINKING  
STOP IMPOSSIBLE TO STAND  
BY STOP FALL OF BAROMET-  
ER INDICATES FULL GALE  
ON WAY STOP STRONGLY  
ADVISE YOU ABANDON AT  
ONCE TO SAVE THE LIVES  
OF YOUR CREW.

Captain Dyke soberly put this literary message in his pocket.

The lifeboat of the Ramay was now pulling up quickly. The boat swung in swift motion from crest to hollow

of the heavy swell.

"Make it lively," roared Mr. Mull. "If you're coming take it on the jump."

Captain Dyke descended from the bridge and gave instructions for the three wounded men to be lowered in a boatswain's chair. When his orders had been executed, a sailor, unbidden, dropped a Jacob's ladder over the bulwark and let it's length roll. Captain Dyke leaned against the ladder, looking down into the boat.

"We're sticking it until the cutter gets here," Dyke called down to Mull. "Your skipper will have a big hand in saving our ship if he'll stand by."

There was a growl of complaint from some of the men on the Morrison. Then came another call for haste from the Ramay's mate. The boatswain, a stocky Swede, took a step forward to confront the Captain.

"The carpenter says she's still taking water faster than the pumps will throw it back, sir," he said slowly. "And there's a blow coming too."

"We're going to stick and earn our salt, men," said Captain Dyke to the hesitant group. "It's just a matter of hard work and seamanship to ride out a breeze of wind and get her to port. She's old but stout. There have been ships making port after they've been cut in two. There's nothing wrong with her engine."

"We've earned our salt chipping the rust off this old tub," the boatswain flared. "We don't have to sink with her too."

He flung a leg over the rail defiantly.

With a quick movement Master Dyke laid hold of the man by the scruff of his neck and the seat of his pants. In one powerful heave he lifted him onto the ladder.

"Into the coward's boat with you, damn you, sir. If there are any more of your ilk aboard, let them leave now. In they go with you."

Before anyone could take up this challenge, the red-faced boatswain had flung himself back over the rail onto the deck. He whirled towards Captain Dyke and shook a frenzied, dirty fist in his face.

"Damn, sir. I'll stay for the fun of seeing you drown. I'm no coward."

Cursing, the boatswain stamped forward. The men followed him. Captain Dyke himself cast off the sea painter that held the boat to the ship's side.

"I'm asking your master to stand by. Sheer off."

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#### 4

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#### ON WITH THE JOB

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WORK on the Morrison went on. Though it was no shipyard job, the shattered bows of the ship were reinforced with ropes and timbers, down as far as the wreck would permit. At the risk of his life, Mr. Kelan swung over the bow on the end of a spar, and cast a running bowline of heavy Manila rope over the capstain of the timber laden derelict. With infinite labor they worked the eye splice of a hawser down over the drum of the capstain, then brought this line back outboard along the starboard side of the ship and around a bit to the wire of a cargo winch. The anchor windlass, forward on the twisted deck plates, was useless.

The winch, chattering mightily, dragged the slim, barnacle studded wreckage a scant foot across the shattered stem of the Morrison, but could not haul it clear.

They brought the line around the

port side of the ship and tried again. Again the wreckage shifted, then held immovable.

And then, suddenly with a groan, the stubborn, rotted timbers of the old, wrecked schooner parted. The deck and side quickly disintegrated. Timbers filled the water alongside, as as the sailing ship's solid sustaining cargo broke into its original pieces.

The men cheered hoarsely. The clutching incubus was releasing its hold on the Morrison. A long steel shroud, red with rust, thrust up suddenly into view; then it whipped down under the surface.

Steadily the waterlogged remnants of the schooner drifted downwards. Still moving dead slow astern into the weather, the Morrison widened the gap. As Captain Dyke waited to hear whether the bucked plates had opened wider in the bows of the ship, he was handed another radiogram from the Ramay.

WILL PUT LINE ABOARD  
YOU WITH GUN STOP DESIRE  
MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO  
SAVE LIVES DESPITE YOUR  
ATTITUDE.—RAVEN.

"Send him this," Dyke told the Third. "Request you stand by. Have broken away from hulk. Keep clear."

Captain Dyke beckoned to the Third when he returned from the radio cabin.

"As soon as that ship shoots a line over us with a projectile, Mr. Vines, I want you to cut it away," he said crisply. "Watch her. She won't shoot until she's steamed to windward of us."

Mr. Vines nodded belligerently and pulled an old fashioned sheath knife out of its worn leather guard.

Captain Dyke walked out into the starboard wing of the bridge. The

aching hollow in the small of his back seemed to be getting deeper. The hardening wind chilled him through all his clothes — chilled his bones through his flesh. He gazed intently across the timber-strewn water at the Ramay.

The ship had picked up her boat and was now heading almost directly for the Morrison. Captain Dyke's weary eyes narrowed as he noted her coarse. The contrast between the safety so plainly offered by that magnificent, high-powered ship as she swept towards them and the danger so evident on the low rusty deck of his own riven craft would be deadly disheartening to his exhausted men.

Suddenly he spread his elbows on the bridge rail and supported his head with his hand to get a steadier look at the Ramay. Plunging through the tops of the heavy seas, she was driving on with disregard for the scattered wreckage from the Morrison's bow. But there were greater menaces than these mere balks of timber in those waters. Though the forward end of the schooner was breaking up, sizable parts of the derelict, barely showing their slimy green bulk in the surface, still hung together.

After one more glance at the Ramay, Captain Dyke ran to the lanyard of the whistle and jerked it. Two short and one long blasts, the warning to a vessel standing into danger. Then he rushed out onto the bridge again.

The Ramay was in trouble. She was turning sharply to starboard. Along her side, just aft of amidships, there was sliding up into view a long, submerged section of the wreck. That weed-covered shell-encrusted piece of wreckage looked like a sea monster,

lifting its snout toward the bright buff superstructure of the ship. Her very turn to avoid it, had thrust the ship's quarters against the water-logged mass, and now it ground inexorably along the plates toward her stern.

Captain Dyke uttered a groan.

"Put her over, for God's sake man. Shove her over."

## 5

### DYKE'S REVENGE

THE THING happened.

The wreckage scraping aft, brought up hard against rudder and propeller. The Ramay suddenly ceased to turn. She rose high on the ridge of the swell, and Dyke saw how strongly that heavy mass of timbers had crashed against the screw, and rudder of the ship.

In another instant the wreckage had dragged past, but with it went the rudder of the Ramay. As the ship wavered, and slid nose first, off the broad backed sea, Captain Dyke perceived that the blades of the Ramay's swift turning propeller had been sheared away too, by contact with the submerged timber.

For a moment longer he stared out across the mountainous swells, but she did not recover.

From the foredeck of the Morrison, Mr. Morest came running toward the bridge, his cracked old voice upraised.

"We've got 'im. Don't you see. We've got 'im. He'll be swept. He can't launch a boat in that list Damn it. Give me a boat and a crew. I'll take the sneaking hero off!"

Mr. Kellan had followed the mate up the bridge ladder. He stood waiting eagerly for the master's words,

with his eyes turned towards the wallowing freighter.

Sparks shot out of his shack. He rushed to the Captain with a scrawl in his hand. It was an incoherent call for rescue from the Ramay.

CARGOE SHIFTED ON BEAM  
ENDS STOP IMPOSSIBLE TO  
LAUNCH BOAT REQUIRE  
HELP.

"Raven wants to be rescued," screamed Morest, his hands claws in the air. "The Lord has delivered him unto me!"

"Mr. Morest, I shall be forced to confine you to your room," snapped Captain Dyke, his eyes hard and grim, his strong fingers steadying Morest's shoulders. "This is no children's squabble. Go forward."

Mr. Kellan's eyes slid from Morest's pathetic deflated figure to the Ramay.

"No boat, sir?" he asked.

"No boat," confirmed Captain Dyke. "It's no steadying experience to carry away propeller and rudder all in about sixty seconds. Give the man leeway to fix and trim the cargo. It's almost sinking him." He pointed a stubby finger toward the crumpled bow of the Morrison. "There's your job, Mister, if you're interested in saving human life. Dirty, hard work. Get on with it, the wind is stiffening fast."

Mr. Kellan descended to the bow. The Captain leaned over the bridge rail and hailed his third mate.

"Mr. Vines, break out a rocket and fit a stick to it."

Captain Dyke turned her to slow ahead. Gingerly the Morrison edged, through the heavy sea, over to the side of the Ramay. Captain Dyke gave the other ship two chances to take a line. One line tied to a life-

buoy, he slung overboard. It soon became evident that the buoy would drift down forward of the Ramay's bows.

But meanwhile, Vines had prepared one of the ship's distress rockets. The end of a ball of marlin was made fast to its stick. The rest of the light line was flaked out on a clear bit of deck.

From his corner of the bridge Captain Dyke intently eyed the frothing gap between the two ships. This rocket must close that gap. It must not miss or fall short. He waited a few tense agonizing moments, then he nodded to the tensely waiting third mate.

The rocket hurled skyward with a roar. The life line leaped after it in swift snake-like coils. The rocket was curving, dropping. It fell into the sea beyond the Ramay. A thread now joined the two ships.

A man on the Ramay darted toward the line. Three strides away from it he slipped on the wet slanting deck. A wave roaring up that slope engulfed him and dragged downwards. Another sea flung him up on the deck, but his clutching hand clutched nothing he could grasp. Even if those two surges had left life in him, he was beyond human help.

Another man on that sloping deck ran as recklessly toward the line. He seized it and got back to safety.

At a word from Dyke every man on the Morrison's deck did his bit in paying out that line. A heavier line was bent on to a hawser. The master himself stood by the engine telegraph. With occasional movements of the small brass handle he kept the gap between the two ships.

FOUR TIMES the deck of the Ramay was swept by a curling sea. Only the height of the fore-castle head saved the toiling men who had brought the line forward and now were hauling in. There was no steam in the windlass to help them. They were drenched and battered but they held their place on the deck.

It was a slow job. Many minutes passed and many waves pounded before the stout manilla was at last hauled in through a hawshole. They made it fast around the drum of her windlass. Swiftly they rigged springs to ease the strain.

A man with a gold-braided cap on the side of his head had come down to the deck to direct the work of the crew.

Captain Dyke grunted.

"He's caught his breath," he muttered to himself.

When the hawser had been secured on the Morrison's fore deck, the Captain gave a long look toward the helpless Ramay. She looked alright. Slowly the Morrison surged astern. Almost imperceptibly the bow of the big freighter behind them was pulled to windward. It was a long ticklish job. The Ramay's nose gradually came around. The Morrison was little more than a sea anchor but she served.

In twenty minutes the Ramay was no longer reeling helplessly in the trough. Her head was in the weather.

That day and that night there was no rest for any man on either ship. The battle with the gale and the sea

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was fairly joined. On the Morrison men fought against the lashing sea that threatened to fill her. The Ramay's battle was between the holds and under the deck.

From the cutter, Huron, came the news that they had been compelled by the heavy seas to slow down.

"Can hold out," Captain Dyke replied.

By midnight the wind had eased but the sea was worse. When the first grey light came over the black water, the seas, though still tremendous, had lost some of their furious weight. Pumps ground on and on.

The peril was melting slowly and undramatically away.

The Huron came up over the horizon a little after eight o'clock that morning. She was cutting through more seas than she leaped over. Captain Dyke saw her first. He was standing young Vine's watch for him. Captain Dyke alone on the bridge was sensing the state of his ship. He was listening to the thump of her engines and the gush of her pumps, feeling her vibrations under every sea, watching her low bow and studying the dip and lift of her hard-pressed hawser.

The cutter circled once around that strange sight, a small freighter with a crumpled and patched nose, down by the head and stern in the weather, towing behind her an imposing ship with a bad list and no propeller.

It was plain that the master of the cutter was in some doubt as to where his duty lay; but the Morrison plunging valorously over the swells soon enlightened her.

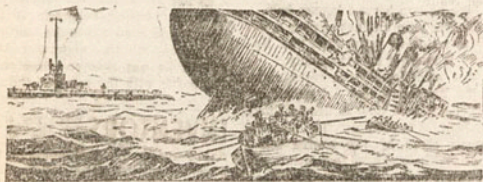
REQUIRE NO ASSISTANCE  
NOW STOP PUMPS HOLDING  
LEAK STOP EXPECT TO  
MAKE PORT OF REFUGE UN-  
DER OWN POWER STOP CAN  
YOU RELIEVE US OF TOW.

Having sent that message and received an assent from the Huron, Captain Dyke thought of something else.

"Tell Captain Raven that we'll be standing by until the Huron tows him to port," he said, with studied casualness, to the operator.

Slowly he turned to the bridge. He hooked his elbows over the rail and looked at the Ramay. There was a big grin on the Captain's face, which was unusual.

—THE END—



# *Tales of the North West Mounted Police*

BY BLAINE ARNOLD

**I**N THE YEAR 1873, 150 men were sent to the plains of Manitoba, and thus began the first step in organizing and building what is perhaps the best known law enforcement body in the world: The Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Today, the red-coated figure of the R.C.M.P. constable is still a familiar sight in the wheat country of Western Canada, while in the East only rare glimpses are caught of him in uniform.

It is also true that the R.C.M.P. have, to a large extent, locked up the stable and turned to the less romantic garage for their mounts. This has not prevented the enlarging of old legends surrounding their activities, or the building up of new ones.

Little did that small band of 150 men realize when they gazed at the vast unending stretches of plain that was Manitoba, that they had taken the first step in the direction of immortality.

By the following year the force was 300 strong and was growing rapidly. During the fight of Metis for land, Louis Riel, their leader, was faced with a force 1,000 strong.

At that time the force was known as the Northwest Mounted Police, and although since that time the name

has been changed, the duties of the police are much the same.

There was a time when Mounties were called upon to cope with Sitting Bull, the now famed Indian chief. At that time Sitting Bull, (it was just after the killing of Custer) had become a more or less orderly tenant of Her Majesty the Queen. With 900 lodges he camped at Wood Mountain, just over the border from Montana. An arrow's flight from his tepee was the Northwest Mounted Police post. One morning the police discovered six dead Saultaux Indians. They had been killed and scalped in the most approved Sioux fashion. Each tribe had a trade-mark of its own in the way of taking scalps: some were broad, some long, some round, some elliptical, some more or less square. These Indians had been scalped according to the Sioux design. Also, a seventh Saultaux, a mere lad and still alive, had seen the thing done. The police buried the six dead warriors and took the live one with them to their post. Sitting Bull's reputation was not founded on modesty, and with his usual audacity he came, accompanied by four minor chiefs and a number of warriors, and made a demand for the seventh Saultaux, the boy.

cow. The first slight irregularity was the fact that the cow belonged to someone else. Therefore a sergeant of the police accompanied by a guide rode forth to bring Almighty Voice before a Magistrate. As they rode along they heard the report of a gun. They turned from the trail and came suddenly upon an Indian. He had just killed a prairie chicken. "Tell him I've come to arrest him for killing cattle," said the sergeant to the guide.

"Tell him if he advances I'll kill him!" said Almighty Voice.

Sergeant Colbrook rode quietly forward. The guide covered the Indian with his carbine, but the sergeant made him put it down again. "We have no authority to kill," he said. "We've come to arrest only. Tell him to lay down his arms," he added, as he rode steadily forward.

A few paces more and there came another warning from the Indian at bay. The sergeant, according to his

code, had no choice. He could not retire; he had no authority to shoot the Indian; his orders were simply to arrest him, even if it cost him his life—and it did. Another pace, and the fire belched from the muzzle of the Cree's gun, and Sergeant Colbrook fell, shot through the heart. The guide's code was not so high. He could re-fire, and he did, very fast.

Almighty Voice fled into the hills, but eventually, after a hunt that is a story in itself, was brought to justice and paid the penalty for his crime.

Such were some of the episodes that made up the early life of the force now known throughout the world as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

And, now, although there are no Sitting Bull's or Almighty Voice's to contend with, the R.C.M.P. still carries on keeping order in the West.

—THE END—



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# DECISION FOR GUNPLAY

By LAWSON JAMES

BEEN looking for you all evenin'." That was all Allan Hale said when he found Joan Frost at the hard-times dance; but the tall Texan's gray eyes told her that he would ask her to marry him.

"And now that you've found me?" Joan challenged. She rippled to her feet, smoothed out her calico skirt, so that it settled and hid all but a glimpse of the only silk stocking in Palo Pinto. Her lovely legs were made of silk.

Fiddles squealed, and the tin piano tinkled joyously. With all guns checked at the door, there hadn't been a fight that evening.

"Supposin'," Hale suggested, "we set this one out. Gosh, honey, I was afraid you weren't never showing up!"

She ignored the implied query. There was no use killing that smile by telling him Wad Dexter had asked her to marry him; Hale would hear soon enough. She caught his arm, and though she knew better, she let him take her out to the moonlit plaza.

Joan thought a good deal of the thin-faced young Texan. She liked his alert gray eyes, amiable and shrewd and keen; there was a thrill in the

big hands that fumbled as though afraid of damaging her slim fingers. But he was poor as Job's turkey, and his bride would never wear silk stockings. Dexter's, however, would.

The ghost of a frown marred Joan's white and gold beauty; then it faded, leaving her face all smooth and lovely again. The moon coaxed silver glints from the pale gilt of her hair; it outlined the contour of her cheek, and the graceful curve of her throat. No harm in letting him kiss her, just this last time.

"Gosh, honey, you're gorgeous!" He had her close in his arms, and he kissed her again, crushed her breathless.

Joan was slipping and she knew it. Her futile little hands were wasted against his broad chest and she gasped, "Oh, don't—Allan—you mustn't."

"I been plumb wild about you," he persisted, "ever since I was knee-high to a jackrabbit. And you've been giving me reasons for thinking—"

**S**HE HAD to be sensible; she could not let this hawkfaced fellow sweep her off her feet. "Allan—I've got to think this over—what ever would we live on?"

That practical challenge made

Hale's pulse race all the faster. She had as good as made an admission. His answer was triumphant: "I done figured that out! Cows are worth three dollars for hide and tallow around here, when you can sell them. But in New Mexico, the gov'ment's paying eight cents a pound, on the hoof, for the reservation Injuns to eat. I wrote to the commissary officer and found out. So I'm driving a herd across the Llano Estacado, and—"

"But you can't! Why, that's suicide!" She looked up, wide-eyed.

By way of argument, he gathered her back into his arms, kissed her mouth and the hollow of her throat. Before she quite knew what had happened, Joan was saying yes.

But that ecstatic moment had a harsh ending. Boots crunched in the walk, and a man snarled, "Git your paws offen that gal!"

Wad Dexter loomed up, tall and broad. His rugged face was all angles. Joan leaped to her feet. Hale demanded, "What you mean, snooping that-away."

"Snooping?" The older man's voice was bitter. "I could hear the two of you lallygagging! Plumb acrost the plaza!"

Joan nervously patted her disheveled hair into place. That reminder whipped Dexter to fury. He made a half turn, reached for his gun, and growled, "Fill your hands!"

Hale, however, was already in action. One hand snaked out, catching Dexter's wrist. Simultaneously, his hard fist hammered home. The older man's gun chunked to the ground; he stood there, stunned and weaving on his feet. Hale said, "Wad, yo're a mite hot headed. My shootin' iron's checked at the dance. If you want to

wait till I can get it, we'll settle his. Ain't never had any hard words with you, and I can't understand you butting in like this."

"Why—" He choked. "Dang your hide, Joan jest promised to marry me, this evening, afore the dance. And now I catch you kissing her!"

"She done finished promising me," Hale countered. "One of us is crazy!"

Joan stood there, white and thin lipped. Finally she said, "He's right, Wad."

"Git your smoke pole," Dexter growled. "The light's good."

Joan interposed, "Quit this foolishness! I won't be the prize of a gun fight!"

"I can see your point," Wad admitted, very slowly. "Mebbe Hale can, too. But Palo Pinto ain't big enough from now on for him and me."

"He's right," Hale told her. "Me, I ain't leaving."

She licked her dry lips, then cried, "Oh, you stubborn fools; bent on killing!"

"He was a-hugging you," Dexter reminded her. "Talking you outen your wits."

Joan flared, "Before Heaven, I'll never look at either of you again, if you fight. If you idiots think your manhood has to have a battle, I'll give you something that'll be harder to finish than any lead slinging."

Hale and Dexter eyed her, then each other. She went on, "Break a trail across the Llano Estacado. Take a herd to Fort Sumner and sell it to the army. Whoever gets there first, I'll marry him."

Dexter smiled very bleakly, "Shucks, that's as bad as unraveling lead!"

She shook her head, and once more her eyes and smile were splendid in

the moon. "No, not the same. I'll belong to a man the whole town will be proud of. I'm sorry for what happened tonight, Wad. I must have cared more for Allan than I realized, or he'd never had swept me off my feet. But if I hadn't cared for you, I'd never had said I'd marry you. And I'm not selling out to the highest bidder. This is just a way out for the three of us."

The fiddles in the dance hall squealed crazily as the two men measured each other. Finally Dexter said, "I'll see that proposition, perviding it's a mixed herd we race."

That made the problem more difficult; but Hale grinned, extended his hand and said, "It's a bet, Wad. Yo're a hard hombre, but nobody ever said you ain't square."

**O**XEN DREW the monstrous chuck wagon that Hale had stocked for the six hundred mile march to Fort Sumner. His sixteen cowhands had a remuda of nearly sixty horses; enough with careful management, to have fresh mounts when the real push began, across the hundred mile strip of desert between Texas and New Mexico.

Days passed. The dusty plain unrolled monotonously ahead of the point. The rivals were neck and neck. Weary riders galloped back and forth, checking the stronger cattle, who were prone to hasten toward some far-off waterhole they scented; others, always under Hale's keen eye, prodded the laggards, keeping the bawling brutes in close march order, sometimes letting them fan out to graze, again closing in to force them forward.

Finally they reached the banks of the Concho. As Hale approached the

chuck wagon, Dobie Lane, the gray-haired segundo, came loping up. "I been making a pasear, Allan. Dexter got to water a heap of us."

Hale shrugged, rolled a brown-paper cigarette. "He ain't got to Fort Sumner yet! Race don't start till we leave the Concho. See that our waddies get some shut-eye, and load up the chuck wagon with water."

The setting sun made a hell glamour of the Llano Estacado. Dancing heat waves mocked Hale. One of the alkali lakes in the waste ahead could finish the herd, and so could a stampede. But he laughed in the desert's teeth, then mounted a fresh horse to take him for an inspection of the critters.

The drive began before dawn, but soon the long line was out in furnace heat and brown barrenness. The burning wind dried perspiration before it could drop. Alkali dust reddened Hale's eyes and bit his nostrils! It caked the lather on his horse as he rode far to the front.

From now on, he could trust no one, not even keen-eyed Dobie. Thirst was already making the herd restless.

Thus he had to scout out the sunken salt lakes and direct the march toward the windward side, lest the cattle scent the water and rush toward it and death.

Hale's head was spinning from the glare and heat that evening, when the sun sank into the flat expanse. His lips were cracked, and his cheeks stung from the hot blast that burned worse than direct rays. His men were silent, and their shoulders sagged. And the weaker cattle were already suffering.

"Keep 'em moving," he croaked.

"Y'ain't beddin' 'em down?" Dobie demanded.

"Bed, no! They'll be runnin' back to the river!"

There was no sleep except what could be stolen in the saddle. The men were too busy keeping the weaker cattle from being trampled by the stronger.

THE SECOND day was worse. The thirst-crazed beasts fought and milled. The haggard men were ready to fly at each other's throats. And on the third day, Dobie came up, gaunt and red-eyed. "Dexter's resting his critters," he thickly muttered, gesturing toward the flank. "Dang it, yo're going to kill these cows, drivin' 'em on. Some are gittin' blind from thirst."

"That's his business." Hale reined in. "There's a box canyon, quite a piece ahead. That there's the place to rest. Wheah they kain't run. You jaspers are too dang burned out to handle a stampede. So are his'n, an' if he don't know it, that's his bad luck. Keep 'em moving, Dobie!"

Peril was just beginning; this of all times was the critical period. Hale had to wear the steers to the sluggishness of complete exhaustion; yet the ultimate approach to the banks of the Pecos, now close at hand, might start them off in a mad stampede.

All night long the animals bawled and milled in the box canyon. Coffee strong enough to corrode a saddle kept the man awake. Hale, at the end of his endurance, wondered how Joan was faring. Joan and Palo Pinto seemed fantasies of another age. Sometimes, in the moon's ghostly pal-lor, her white loveliness mocked him.

He cursed her with thick lips. Then he was ashamed, when he remembered her quick wits had kept his hands

free from blood.

At dawn the herd crawled out. Whether any would live to reach the Pecos was an open question. Dexter had maintained his lead; though a small one, it might give him victory. Fear gripped Hale. Then his jaw set, and he tried to lick the dust from his lips. He squinted into the dancing heat waves, trying to see the first sign of the verdure that fringed the Pecos.

He rode ahead, then halted and plucked a hair from his grullo. This he dropped, watched the direction the scarcely perceptible breeze blew it. No tellin' ghow far, in that stagnant air, the half dead beasts could scent a salt lake!

It could not be far. Already the ground was breaking up, rising; the deadly flatness was definitely behind them, and so was the desert.

"What in tunket!" Hale peered through dust caked lashes. Far ahead was a horse drawn wagon. It was going in the general direction of the herd, though at the moment, cutting across its route. He focused the glasses he had used in scouting out sunken lakes, and waited for a moment for the heat devils to subside.

A bearded man was driving a sleek team. A black-haired girl sat beside him.

"Couple of pilgrims," he muttered, noting the household goods that projected from the loaded wagon.

He shook his head. A lone man and a girl had apparently come from a quarter so infested with renegades that no trail herd would dare venture into it. Ahead, Hale could now catch the first far off green of the Pecos. But nowhere on the horizon did he see the dust of Dexter's herd.

Far to the left, one of his men was

waving, yelling; at that distance, a thin croaking sound. Then the bawling of the approaching herd blotted the sound. Hale galloped toward the rider. It was Dobie, and his dusty lips could not shape his words.

"What in blazes?" demanded Hale, shaking his shoulder.

"Look-ee thar! Over yonder! We won—Wad's critters—piling into that there lake you steered clear of!"

Looking back, he caught glimpses of the rout that was swallowed by the gleaming salt water and the billowing dust that swirled after. Frantic yells, pistol shots, the cries of men and cattle. Hale croak, "Keep our'n moving! If the wind changes agin us, ours'll run."

Then he saw what his own herd was doing. They had scented the green vegetation along the Pecos, though it was still far out of sight. A long black line galloped from the low hanging dust that blanketed the laggards.

"Dobie!" Hale yelled. "Turn 'em, fer Pete's sake, turn 'em! Lookit them pilgrims right acrost their path!"

Then Hale forgot the race. The pilgrim, aware now of his peril, was whipping his horses. The beasts gallantly responded, but the increasing front of the stampeding cattle made it more hopeless every moment.

Hale quirted the grullo. The drumming of hoofs drowned his yells. But the disciplined cow hands knew what to do; Dobie was in action.

With pistol and riata ends they tried to turn the frantic beasts. Hale's mount stretched out in a desperate effort.

They were making it! Hale whirled, shot down a steer, beat another and deflected him. Then the crazily rocking wagon capsized as the driver

tried to avoid a gulley that gaped in his path. The girl was flung clear of the wheels.

The team wheeled, dragging wagon and driver. Baggage scattered. The lightened load was enveloped in a dust cloud. Then the stampede crashed through. Hale groaned, quirted his mustang toward the girl who lay sprawled on the baking earth.

The herd had shifted. Hale halted, scooped her from the ground. She was half conscious; her skirt and blouse were tattered, and bruised flesh peeped through the rents. But her heart was beating. He could feel the throb of it against him as he supported her with his crooked arm.

The crash and rush sickened Hale.

The dust thinned. The bearded man had been thrown in time to fall clear of the crazed herd. Hale dismounted.

The pilgrim was dead; his neck had been broken. But the dark-haired girl in Hale's arms would live to accuse him.

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## 2

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### WHERE IS WAD?

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**B**Y DINT of luck and hard riding, Hale's men saved most of the herd that had bolted for the Pecos. Now the critters were grazing in the canebrakes along the stream. And Hale, anxiously regarding the dazed girl who stirred and moaned on the improvised bunk in the chuck wagon, learned what it was that had happened to Dexter's cattle.

"Wind musta fooled him." Dobie, the segundo, scratched his shaggy gray head. "Wad never made dumb mistakes. Anyways, he had bad enough luck at the salt lake. Reckon

he didn't lose many more critters'n we did, but fighting 'em away from the pizen water dang wore his men out, and it probably done as much for his cows. Jedging from what I seen, back yonder."

"He's heading for the river now?"

"Sartin, he is. Them as kin stand on their hoofs."

Hale gestured for Dobie to tone down his bull voice. The old fellow apologized. "Shucks, I jest ain't usta women with a trail herd. Purty as pitcher, even with her fo'head banded up a bit. Gosh, you done found suthing!"

"Shut up, you polecat!" Hale came to the door of the wagon.

"Whut in tarnation?" Dobie was puzzled. "I jest finished tellin' you we as good as won the bet, and yo're settin' here, lookin' like you'd lost your last friend on earth. Y'ain't ailing, air yuh?"

"This poor gal's dad — I reckon that's what he was—got kilt in the stampede," Hale explained. "Makes me feel sort of low, my critters doing it."

Dobie shook his head. "Tain't your fault if pilgrims leaves their brains to home when they head west. He was dang lucky—"

And then a feminine voice cut in, "Oh, you dirty tramp! Don't you dare talk that way about my father!"

The lovely stranger was on her feet, but uncertain of her balance. One hand caught at the door jamb for support; the other pulled together the torn blouse that in spite of her precautions revealed glimpses of white skin.

"Uh—uh—ma'am, that old horn toad jest mis-spoke hisself," Hale fumbled, "and me, I feel lower'nall git-out!"

She blinked away the tears that beaded her long lashes, defiantly lifted her head. "Pilgrim indeed! My father was Major Burdick—"

"The Injun fighter?" Hale was awed, and Dobie tugged at his white mustache. He managed to gulp, "Tarnation, Mis' Burdick—I'm po'-ful sorry—only, a feller gets ornery, driving cattle acrost that dang Llano."

"And you, too—you, I mean!" Aileen Burdick turned her dark eyes on Hale. "You've won a bet, you young fool! Tormenting men and cattle in that awful plain. I hope you enjoy your winnings! I hope—"

Then she choked, turned back to the pallet on the floor, and dropped face down. Hale helplessly watched the quiver of her shoulders, then hesitantly approached and knelt beside her. Dobie said in a hoarse whisper, "Mebbee I beter git her a shot of red likker—she's all busted up."

"Vamoose!" Commanded Hale sharply.

**F**OR THE first time in his life, a chuck wagon seemed on uncouth and repulsive place. Those grimy old blankets were not fit for a creature as lovely as Aileen. Abruptly, she sat up, dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. Hale, thoroughly on the defensive, said to her, "M'am, I wasn't doing a smart aleck trick, driving a herd acrost the Llano. Honest it was business."

"You won your bet, though?" Bitterly.

"Not yet. Not till I get 'em to Fort Sumner. And it wasn't a bet."

"That horrible man said it was."

Hale leaned closer, lowered his voice. "I wouldn't tell you this, only I owe myself the chance of not seeming a trifling cuss. But—it's account of a lady in Palo Pinto."

Aileen speculatively regarded him. A few blinks cleared her eyes. She was still shocked by her father's death, but she was rapidly getting herself in hand.

"You mean, this race was to decide who'd marry the girl in Palo Pinto?"

He nodded. "But don't tell no one. It'd sound—"

She smiled, and with enough femi-

which he intended to stock with cattle. And I was going to join Captain Winkler, my fiancé. He's the post quartermaster at Sumner."

For a moment Hale envied the captain. He abruptly resumed, "Ah—uh, Mis' Burdick—concernin' your late father—"

"Dad," she gravely replied, "fought the Indians. I know he'd rather be



"Reach fer it, Wad. Yuh lousy skunk!"

nine malice to make Hale squirm. He gulped, then said, "M'am, this herd's going on to Fort Sumner, and you can ride in the wagon. We'll either carry your father, or bury him as fittin'ly as we can, out here."

Aileen answered, "I couldn't very well refuse your offer, Mr. Hale. Father and I were bound for Sumner. He had just bought some range,

buried out in the open. A graveyard would cramp him, terribly."

Her gallant effort at a whimsical smile made Hale blink a little. He laid an awkward hand on her shoulder, and stuttered, "M'am—I feel rotten about this—I wisht that lady in Palo Pinto was in—"

Aileen looked up, laid a soft hand on his arm. "And you must forgive

me for that outburst. Now, if you can find anything of my baggage, I might get cleaned up."

THEY buried Major Burdick that evening. At dawn, the herd pulled away from the Pecos. Wad Dexter, however, had not yet rounded up his scattered cows; and his losses had been much heavier.

Ahead was the rolling range of New Mexico. Hale, halting on a crest to survey the long line of cattle filing through a pass, regarded the country with gleaming eyes. Aileen, on a horse, was beside him. She said, "Alan, you've as good as won. I'm very glad you have."

His glance shifted, and for a moment he watched the breeze playing with the dark curls that shadowed her ears, and, skillfully arranged, concealed the bruises on her cheek and forehead. "I wasn't thinking of winning, just then. I was admirin' this scrumptious range. And no cows exceptin' what's driven in from Mexico, for the Injuns."

After the second day's march from the Pecos, Hale left Dobie in charge of the herd. Having decisively beaten Dexter, there was nothing left to do but hasten ahead and submit a bid for the government beef contract. And Aileen was eager to reach her destination.

She said to Hale, "Because of father's death, the wedding will be postponed awhile. So I ought to hurry along and let Warren—Captain Winkler—know what happened."

"Last minute upsets," Hale admitted, a bit thoughtfully, "do sort of disconcert a fellow. I'd shore hate to be the one to be getting such news!"

They had halted to view the back-trail; a precautionary habit, rather than from any chance of seeing the

herd, now miles out of sight. They had been riding boot to boot, and Aileen for the moment was nearer to Hale than she had been since that fatal day when he had carried her to camp.

The contact of her knee strangely stirred him. Her vibrant presence, the growing amiability of her regard, and now that speculative little smile in response to sincere admiration.

Perhaps it was the way that the breeze played with her silken blouse; it might have been the ripple of her dark curls, the way she instinctively swayed toward him, a little, in resting in the saddle. But whatever the beginning, it ended in an instant when all rules were discarded. His arm closed about her, and though he felt her momentary tension; she had already yielded to the encircling pressure.

She was warm and fragrant and young lips knew no laws. Her stray ringlets brushed his cheek, and a soft arm slipped about his neck. The thrill of that moment of response shook Hale, and he could feel the sudden hammering of her heart. Belatedly, she protested, "Whatever are we doing—please don't—"

Then, simultaneously, they broke, regarded each other with a wonder that Hale saw reflected in her dark eyes. He blurted, "Honest, Aileen—I jest couldn't help it—I'm a skunk—"

"Please don't apologize. I — I'm afraid I didn't try to stop you."

THEY RODE on in silence until, as if to make amends, Aileen brightly chattered about the handsome captain. "Warren'll be ever so grateful to you. If it hadn't been for you, I'd have been trampled by the stampede. It wasn't your fault, and you did your best to save us."

"Yo're mighty generous," he answered. Then, irrelevantly, "No matter where I go, there's things I ain't ever forgetting."

The next day they reached Fort Sumner. Captain Winkler was almost as tall as Hale; somewhat older, and imposing in his gold braid. They met at post headquarters, soon after Aileen had been consigned to the army friends, whose guest she would be until the formality of a military wedding would not be unfittingly close to her father's death.

"Ah...Mr. Hale." Winkler twisted a black mustache to a finer degree of waxed perfection. "Your bid, of course. But there are others. However, I'm sure we can give you a quick decision."

"Others?" Dismay lengthened Hale's face. "Why, I wrote the commandin' officer, and he said he was buyin' beef."

"My dear Mr. Hale," answered the very superior captain, "if you'd carefully read the colonel's reply, you'd have noticed that he said that all government purchases are on a competitive basis. There would have to be at least one other bidder, you know." But he prolonged the dismissal long enough to add, "Miss Burdick told me of your kindness. I assure you I am as grateful as she is. Good day, Mr. Hale."

As he passed the sentry who stiffly paraded in front of headquarters, Hale pondered, "I wonder why that gent don't like me, a-tall. Gosh, Aileen's too...uh...smart a gal to say too much. And too blamed-nice fo' a jasper like Winkler!"

Hale rode back to meet Dobie and the herd. The old segundo, when he had heard of the interview at Sumner, said to his chief, "Don't like this

bidding proposition, a-tall!"

"Shucks," Hale shrugged. "That's jest gov'ment red tape."

Dobie stubbornly shook his head. "Look-ee here, son! Whar in tunket is they any other critters to sell? Why is the price so high, onless they ain't any other herd? Who's bidding agin us?"

"Cap'n Winkler," said Hale, "didn't say."

Dobie snorted, spat at a horn toad. "Whar'd whoever is bidding get his critters?"

Hale rubbed his nose for a moment, then looked up, eyes narrowed. "Dobie, yo're purty smart. You keep a close guard. If anyone stole our beef, it'd be easy fo' him o underbid!"

Hale was worried by the time the herd reached Sumner. Winning the race was one thing; unless he sold his cattle, it would be an empty victory. Couldn't dress Joan in rawhide and feed her on beef! The unexpected presence of "local" cattle had him worried. He remembered now how Aileen had mentioned her father's plan for stocking a range with Colorado cows...obviously, he had believed that none were available in New Mexico.

LATER that day, Hale went to the commissary to buy supplies from the post sutler. Those brought from Palo Pinto had been exhausted. The Indians who stalked about the barn-like building were uncommonly sour. And when he saw the provisions for which he had paid good money, Hale did not blame them.

The flour was full of weevils; the dried peaches were wormy, and the bacon was condemned army-issue that reeked to the high heavens. Hale approached the pudgy, pige-eyed trader, Herb Ordway. "Listen, you blasted

Injun robber, you kain't sell me swill like this! By Heaven, no wonder it takes an army to keep 'em in place!"

"Sorry, Mistah Hale," the sutler said, rubbing his fat hands together. "If y'all don't like these vittles, yuh kin eat your herd, I reckon."

"If this warn't a gov'ment reservation," Hale hotly retorted, "I'd take yuh to pieces, yuh Injun-swindler! If I ever ketch yuh away from here—"

The sutler hooked his thumbs in his belt, looked up at the tall Texan. He drawled, "I take it yo're threatenin' me, air yuh?"

Hale could take rotten provisions, but mockery was too much. He knocked the sutler, end for end, over a pile of sacked beans. Ordway grunted, cursed, and when he cleared the heap, he jerked a gun from his pocket. Hale ducked as the blast shook the commissary. He could not risk the use of his own weapon; that would finish him as a beef contractor, he was certain.

The Indians scattered. Before Ordway fairly knew he had missed, Hale's plug of tobacco smacked him between the eyes. As the sutler yelled and blinked, Hale landed on him. "You ornery horn toad, you will drag a gun on me, will you?"

He plucked the gun from Ordway's fist, and flung it into a corner. Before he could jerk the fellow to his feet, spurs jingled, and a siern voice roared, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen — what's this—quit it, at once! Do you hear!"

Captain Winkler and the commanding officer had entered the commissary. The two enemies glared at each other. The colonel frowned. The captain said, "Hale, that's no way to act. Just because your bid was re-

jected.

"What?"

"Didn't the orderly find you?"

"No." Hale's heart was in his boots.

Winkler curtly continued, "Then you know now. Mr. Ordway's bid was lower."

"Whose critters is he going to deliver?" Hale challenged. "If he figures on stealing my herd, I'll shoot the gizzard outen him or his beef thieves. I'm warning ya'll. You too, colonel! I expected honorable treatment when I asked about a market for Texas cattle and you said—"

"My good man," the colonel cut in, "you knew that all government purchases are awarded to the lowest bidder."

"How in blazes kin he underbid six cents on the hoof?"

"That," Winkler frigidly said, "is up to Mr. Ordway. You'll have ample chance to sell if he defaults. Good day, Mr. Hale."

Hale stalked out. He rounded up the pack horses and with his two cowpunchers rode back to camp. When he saw Dobie, and told him what had happened, the old fellow growled, "I done told yuh! It's crooked work—" Then he checked himself, as though frozen by a new thought. "By thunder! I bet it's Wad Dexter, undercutting yuh!"

"Wad? Why—blast it, Dobie — why'd Wad do that? He's square, anyway."

"Listen, bub! I heard whisperings about you and him and Joan—you listen, you young squirt, I'll discuss that lady all I dang please, even ef yuh air my boss! Why wouldn't Wad Dexter sink yuh by giving away cattle that's his'n? He run the race fair, but this yere's suthin' else, and they allows that anything goes when a

purty gal's concerned."

"I see . . ." Hale stroke his jaw. "The dirty skunk! I kain't go back till my critters is sold, but he can, having enough money to face a loss!" Dobie snorted "Dang right. Whut's more, whar is Wad? Last we seen, he was having trouble of his own. He must of crossed the Pecos, but nary hide nor hair since then."

Hale frowned and said, "I shore hate to think of Joan tying up with a sneak like that. But if you asks me, it's that gol dang sutler, Ordway."

He gulped his cofee, wolfed his beans, and saddled up his favorite grullo. Dobie demanded, "Whar y'all going?"

"I'm taking me a pasear," Hale yelled from the saddle, "to find some things. Mainly, if Wad Dexter and Ordway and them officers are in cahoots to sting me!"

### 3

#### A WARNING

**A**S HALE again approached Fort Sumner's 'dobe walls, he shaped his plan. Thieves would have to keep in close touch with each other; and to avoid any outward signs of conspiracy, Ordway would meet his accomplices somewhere off the post.

So, on foot, he mingled with the renegade whites, Mexicans, and half breeds who occupied the sorry sprawl of shacks and 'dobes some distance from the fort. Hale's immediate purpose was to glean some gossip as to Ordway's habits; but he presently saw that chance had offered him a shortcut.

The sutler was driving a buckboard down the rutted strip that was the main street of the shack colony. Hale

backed into a saloon; though its presence near an Indian reservation was illegal, everyone but the commanding officer seemed to know of its existence. Outwardly, it was an eating house, but the reek of tequila drowned the tang of Mexican cookery.

A bleary-eyed Mexican wench brought Hale a shot of forty rod, and without question. He gulped the drink, all the while peering through the unglazed window and down the sun reddened street. Ordway laboriously clambered from the buckboard. He waddled into the patch of shadow between two 'dobes. Hale did not leave his place in the corner. It was still too bright outside.

A full bosomed girl with gold teeth and a hip-sway too pronounced even to be interesting was heading for Hale. She draped herself against him, and fairly smothering him with a gust of dense perfume.

"You buy me a dreenk, senior?"

Hale jerked a thumb at the unoccupied bench, and answered in Spanish, "Listen, chiquita, I won't have time. My good friend—" He gestured vaguely toward the street — "The sutler. Senior Ordway. He is calling on a lady friend. Afterward, he is to see me. On business, you understand?"

His ready Spanish and his merry eye intrigued her. She gulped the drink, which the bleary-eyed girl had brought, then sniffed contemptuously. "That putanero of an Ordway! He has no sweetheart here. But forgive me—he is your friend, no?"

"Well, just in the matter of business. But you're mistaken. A nice looking gal did wave at me from the place he just went into?"

The girl shook her head. "Unless he went to some new place. Never

has he played here. And I tell you. There is another Tejano looking for him. Older than you."

She ended by describing Wad Dexter, and concluded, "Maybe you know him, too?"

"Seguramente! But if not to the lovely lady, who waved? Where did Ordway go?"

Hale maintained his chance companion's interest by promises of future attention. And he added "Maybe it will be early when I have seen him."

She took the hint as he intended her to; and carefully corrected Hale's mistaken ideas by telling him where Ordway usually stopped.

**B**EFORE it was dark enough to risk a still hunt, Hale was rouge smeared, and somewhat breathless. Finally, he twisted clear of the high pressure entertained and set out into the reeking shadows of the colony.

Ordway's team was still waiting at the hitching post.

It took Hale only a few minutes to find the place where Ordway met friends he did not care to receive on the reservation.

A drunken brawl made him take cover. He did not wish to be conspicuous, so close to his goal. He lost some minutes in waiting for the riot to subside; then, ducking down a cross alley, he set a new course toward the house.

By the time he arrived, it was quite dark. No horses were tethered in view, but that proved nothing at all. Hale cautiously circled the 'dobe, before getting into position to listen in. Wad Dexter's probable presence was in itself highly significant.

Inside, subdued voices mumbled. The thick walls made hopelessly confused sounds. Hale crept toward a

window which a murky light outlined. But halfway to his goal, a yell and the blast of a .45 stirred the house. Several slugs zinged through the window; glass spattered, and woodwork crashed.

Hale ducked, cursing the fight that had robbed him of his chance to check up. A man lurched head first out of the window. Others burst out through the door. Vengeful gun fire laced the uproar. One of the fugitives, seeing Hale lurking, wheeled, pulled down with his Colt.

Hale had no time to parley. As slugs kicked up dirt about him, he cut loose. The fellow dropped, and his toes for an instant beat a tattoo on the dry earth. Hoofs hammered in the further shadows. A man inside the house came pounding toward the door. He shouted, "Yuh — dirty! Come back an' I'll blow the—guts outen the passel of yuh—"

Wham! Barrump! He was hosing the fugitives who tore down the alley. No mistaking that voice. Wad Dexter was on the job. As Hale saw it, the meeting had ended with thieves falling out. He hurdled the fellow who lay groaning in the alley, and stretched long legs to round the corner. Half a dozen bounds brought him alongside his rival.

"Reach fer it, Wad, yuh lousy skunk!" Hale growled, jamming his Colt against the ribs of the man who challenged heaven and earth to return and fight.

Dexter's hands rose. He gulped and cursed between his teeth. But when Hale ordered him to move straight ahead, Dexter said, "What in tunket this mean, huh? Blast yore hide, git that gun offen me! Ain't it enough me gittin' my critters stole, 'thout you hornin' in?"

**H**IS SUSPRISE and indignation rang true. The settlement was a-roaring. Hale had to decide fast. He risked it all on his original estimate of his rival. "Let's go, Wad! Where's your hoss? Mine's—"

"Shake a hock, yuh jughaid!" Dexter led the way, and despite his broad shouldered bulk, he reached out like an antelope.

As he piled into the saddle, Hale snatched a latigo strap and said, "Scratch him, Wad! I got long legs. Head over yonder!"

For a while, Hale could readily enough keep up with the controlled gallop of the mustang. In a few moments, he was forking his own horse. As they rode on, he demanded, "Wad, what in blazes busted loose?"

"Lookit my head—and the rest of me," Dexter said, gesturing.

"Gosh, you been hurt," said Hale, now noticing the bandages that swathed the vengeful rider. "How come?"

Dexter explained, "I lost a lot of critters at that pizen lake you was lucky enough to dodge. Saving the rest purty nigh tuckered us out, and when we reached the river, we got a mite careless. And we got bush-whacked. The hull passel of steers run off, and my hands gunned out, expecting me and Smoky Higgins."

"Where's Smokey?"

"Pore devil's hid out. I reckon he'll pull through, but being as there wan't much I could do for him, I left some grub and water and when I could amble around a bit on my two hoofs, I located one of our hosses and trailed the thieves."

"You blamed fool," reproached Hale, "why didn't you look for me?"

"I didn't want the trail to get cold. Another thing, by the time I got clost

enough to palaver with you, I was mighty certain someone from Fort Sumner was messed up in this dirt. One of the hosses shot down in the row had a army brand on it!"

Hale whistled softly. "So you allowed if you showed up around there, someone might be worried enough to smoke you out from behind?"

"Correct. Or else me showing up would warn 'em I escaped."

"Listen, Wad. Was there a pot-bellied cuss in that 'dobe you shot up? With pig-eyes?"

Dexter's laugh was iron. "There was. He was the fust one I pulled down on. I snuck into the house and when I heard Pig-Eye and the rest of 'em wondering what to do with your critters, now'at they'd grabbed mine, I went hawg-wild and come out shooting." He cursed bitterly, then added, "Only, I missed some of the skunks."

"Where they got your critters?" Hale demanded.

Dexter gave him the details as they rode toward Hale's camp. The young Texan said, "Wad, you and me had hard words, back home. But now it sort of behooves us to stick together. I'm helping you get your cattle back, right smart!"

"By Heaven, Allan!" Dexter thrust out his hand. "Yo're a white man and a gent."

Hale did not see any need of explaining too many details; such as, for instance, that the recapture of Dexter's cattle would force the crooked contractors out of the bidding. Thus, helping his rival, Hale would at the same time redeem himself from ruin.

**S**OON AFTER the war council had convened to listen to Dexter's story, an orderly came trotting into

camp.

"Colonel Riggs presents his compliments," the soldier droned, "and requests that you move your herd from the limits of the reservations, since your bid has been rejected and you will not deliver your cattle."

The lout recited it parrot-like. Hale said, "Tell the colonel we'll get them off as quick as we can, but we'll shoot the gizzards outen anyone trying to stampede our critters. Is that clear?"

The orderly allowed it was. He nearly fell over himself getting on his horse.

Hale said, "It's working out. Some-one objects to have honest beef competing with stolen meat. This here's the first move to cut this herd, a trick they can't pull right under the colonel's nose."

SOME HOURS after the council had broken up, Hale kicked aside his blankets. Dobie had gone with Wad to get the wounded cowpuncher. The others were snoring; except, of course, those on guard. But Hale was uneasy.

A man on horseback is conspicuous. Lurkers can pick him off, then start a stampede. Hale heard the droning song of the herd guards, the jingling spurs of the wrangler. All alert, those boys. Best not let them know he was checking on them. Hale moved on.

Then, suddenly, indefinable perceptions blended to tell him someone was coming near, and stealthily. He crouched under cover, and in a moment heard muted hoof beats. The horse was guided by an uncertain rider. The mount had been sweating; the shift of breeze gave Hale a clear scent.

Small chills needled Hale's skin. He loosened his Colt. The beast hadn't

whinnied, though near to the remuda. The precaution of stealth; a spy, reconnoitering before a raid?

Hale's hand slipped from his gun. Mustn't shoot the sneak. Nail him, quietly. Quirt him till he told who sent him.

Shadow distorted the shape of horse and rider. Hale launched himself. Too late, the mustang sensed the attack; his plunge was wasted. It merely helped Hale drag the rider from the saddle. "Why not hallo the camp, yuh skunk?"

It had all happened too quickly for him to react to his last instant sensations. He said what had for moments been on his lips. But he had a girl in his arms; a shapely creature whose resistance was not quite enough to overcome the sweet softness of her.

"Gosh, m'am," he gasped, "I didn't know it was a lady."

He already knew from that close, complete contact how beautifully she was formed. "Let go," she demanded, voice fearless and determined. "You fool—"

"Aileen!" he gasped.

"You, Allan!" She clung to him as he helped her to her feet, and for a moment was close and breathlessly pressed to him. "I came to warn you—"

"Orderly done told me. I guess you heard and snuck away?"

"Yes. Someone's influenced the colonel by quoting regulations! But I came to tell you that you can Winter herd your cattle on my range land, up on the Pintada. Wait for Spring, and better luck. Those contractors can't underbid you every time!"

He laughed bitterly. "Honey, I can't never underbid thieves! Ordway's stolen critters can go for five

bucks a head and he'll make money, but I'd lose my shirt!"

"Stolen? Heavens—do you mean—can you prove that?" She was aghast.

"Pretty near!" But he gave her no details. "Now, that spread of yourn?"

"Dad picked it because it was easy to protect a herd against thieves," she went on. "I hate to see you lose, after such a grave attempt. And since I won't by warrying Warren for some time, the range is still all mine. Good luck."

She had now very gently edged from his arms, as though belatedly remembering she was another man's fiancée. Hale recaptured her, so deftly that she could not evade him. She said, "I've got to hurry back. You know—what people think! And you're forgetting—Joan—"

"I reckon I did," he muttered, releasing her. Then he helped her to her horse, and watched her vanish in the gloom. He said to the silence, "She makes a fellow forget things."

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## 4

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### TOUCH AND GO

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WHEN DOBIE and Dexter returned with the wounded cowpuncher, Hale said "Wad, tell me again where you reckon your critters are hidden out. And tell me slow-like."

Dexter repeated his findings. When Hale heard the end of the recital, he said, "We're cornered. Moving my herd'll take most of the men I can spare. You and me have to play this alone, with mebbe one-two punchers to ride with us. That army order turns out an ace instead of a kick."

"What yuh mean?" demanded Do-

bie.

Hale explained, "You drive the herd toward the Pintada, where I aim to Winter them. That'll make it look like we're busy tending our own affairs. And no one's suspecting there's a rustler hunt going on."

Dexter, however, was puzzled. "Hell's bells, Allan! Why in tunket yuh sending your critters to the Pintada? Didn't I jest tell yuh that's whar mine' hidden out?"

Hale's mile was cryptic. "I understood yuh. I jest didn't explain why I picked on the Pintada. Git going, Dobie. Yo're in charge. Dusty and Mills, y'all track along, and fill yore belt loops!"

The four riders silently left camp, and with Dexter's query still unanswered, only Hale knew that the stolen cattle were in the box canyon that Aileen Burdick had offered him as a Winter haven.

They rode day and night. Hale and his party reined in their weary mustangs some twenty hours after their departure from Sumner. "Give 'em a breathing spell," he ordered, "and y'all could do with a bit of shaking down. It ain't far, now."

"Where in blazes yuh think yo're going?" demanded Dexter, seeing Hale dismount, hand the reins to Dusty, and take a fresh horse.

"Bit of scouting," was the answer. "We kain't camp here long. We got to hit quick or back down."

"Right as rain. But I'm going too. They're my critters, ain't they?"

"Wad," said Hale, "y'ain't going. Yo're staying with Dusty and Mills. I got more in this pot than you have and not speaking of beef, neither."

"Yo're crazy," grumbled Dexter.

"Wad, if I should fall offen my hoss, Dusty and Mills need you to

help 'em finish my job. Now shut up and sit tight."

**T**HE FORMATION of the ground guided Allan Hale as clearly as though he had had daylight and a map. Before the sun had set, he had already sized up the terrain, and the location of the box canyon.

Hale dismounted some distance from its narrow mouth. The entrance was guarded; he learned that from the glow of a cigarette.

From inside came the subdued sound of a herd bedded down. Hale noted the murmur of running water, and the odor of grass. Somewhere, a spring must be feeding this branch of the Pintada.

Hale set out to make a partial circuit of the canyon rim. He wanted to be sure whether there was or was not an entrance, which, while impossible for a herd, might be used by a raiding party.

Presently he regretted having taken his Winchester carbine with him. It was more a handicap than he had anticipated. There was no moon, so he had to appraise the situation by sound and smell, and the contour of the ground he covered.

There was an entrance! Accustomed now to the gloom, he could just discern the pitch of the rocky drop. It would be tough going, charging down; the clatter of horse and man would arouse the camp before the attack could close in. That would pull the teeth of any surprise.

Hale shook his head. Then, suddenly, he brightened. "Like takin' candy from a baby!"

The very obstacle, he now realized, was suited for strategy. Now he had to get his men, nor was there any time to lose. Thus Hale made his first slip, through haste and the assump-

tion that this approach was too far from the rustler camp to be guarded.

A man growled from the gloom, "Uh—hey, Sleepy! What yuh doin' thar?"

The fellow popped up from behind a boulder only a yard or two distant, and a little below. He had been dozing.

The young Tejano deliberately stumbled. Instead of answering, he let out a wrathful mutter that the clatter of sliding rock would disguise. The sentry chuckled at the clumsiness of his supposed fellow.

Hale fumbled his attempt at recovery, and landed nearly athwart the watcher's legs. He had played his part too naturally to escape a few numbing bruises.

"Uh — say — whar'd yuh — whut fer tuh totin' a rifle—why, yuh son of a—"

The carbin was a dead giveaway. It clinched the oddity of "Sleepy's" approach from above.

Though Hale's effort was quick and desperate, all it served was to throw him clear of a pistol blast that echoed across the canyon. Hale fired from the ground, and it was good.

**H**ELL WAS popping down below. The dead man's relief was even now clambering up the grade. This must be Sleepy, firing as he came. Hale groaned from futile rage. There was no hope for a second attempt!

Hale's fury kept him from flight. Sleepy's slugs zinged from the rocks. Far below, a light flared up. Men were yelling, turning out of their blankets.

Hale shouldered a boulder. The raking fire ceased; there was one wild yell, then the cumulative clatter of rocks carried down with Sleepy. Breathless, Hale snatched his car-

bine.

He levered one shot after another at the shapes silhouetted by the smouldering coals of the campfire. Dawn was graying. Hale had waited too long. If he retreated now, he'd be skylined, and pursuit from the canyon mouth would cut him off before he would be able to get to his horse.

Sniper's fire searched the thick shadows of his position. Hale blazed away, and gained enough respite to retreat, despite the slugs that screamed about him. But each move toward the canyon lip brought him closer to doom. The treacherous gray was thinning, thinning every instant.

Cool and deliberate, Hale tickled the trigger. The carbine's hot barrel spat a true shot. A man leaped up, toppled face forward. But he could no longer reload. Only his Colts were left.

Hale yelled his defiance. "Come and get me, you——!"

But they did not. Nor did Hale repeat his challenge. He exhaled a long sigh, and slumped flat. Then he understood.

The men who fanned out and raced into the canyon from its mouth, were not rustler reinforcements. Their blazing guns swept the camp. Horses from the remuda charged insanely through the early haze. The entire pack, intent on nailing Hale, had been taken from the rear.

Those who could were leaving on foot. There was no time to mount up. Dexter and Dusty and Mills had come to town. They saw Hale, yelled as he scrambled down the slope, lacing the fugitives with lead.

When the show ended, Hale's grim rival said, "Yuh ornery squirt, did yuh reckon we'd not foller? I lowed

dawn'd ketch us off guard. So we was close to hand when—yuh jug-haid, yuh musta been crazy, starting a fracas all alone!"

"If you figure I done it a purpose, yo're loco! I was fixing to go back and have you coyotes wait fer me to raise ructions at one end, then ride in, like you actually done. It jest happened a mite sooner'n I wanted."

Dexter, accompanying him around the canyon, allowed that there was plenty of room for his recovered herd, and Hale's critters as well. "Mebbe," he said, "I could talk Mis' Aileen into lettin' me rent this here piece of range around the canyon."

"What fur?" Hale sharply regarded him.

"I ain't going back to Palo Pinto," Dexter said, sombre and a bit sullen. "If you and me hung around home too long, we'd tangle."

Hale finally announced that after getting some rest, he'd ride back to Sumner to see how the crooked contractors liked bidding against him. Dexter chuckled sourly, and wished him good luck.

Plainly, it rankled, having been outraced by a kid. Hale was sorry for his rival. But it was a cinch, right from the start, that one of them faced a diet of crow meat!

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## 5

### QUICKSAND

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ON HIS way to Fort Sumner, Hale met his own herd, which was heading toward the Pintada. He paused only long enough to give Doble the lay of the land, and warn him against laying himself open to strategy such as had routed the rustlers.

As he gulped his coffee, he con-

cluded. "Keep 'em going! And this time, I'm fixing them skunks. Now they ain't got stolen cows to underbid me, and by God, I'm raising the ante. They could of got my herd fer six cents on the hoof, and now they'll pay twelve."

"Dang tootin'," chuckled Dobie. "The inspector general's at Sumner, and the Injuns gets their beef on time, whether or no!"

But once at the fort, Hale learned that it would not be quite as simple as all that. Captain Winkler grimaced as though an evil smell had blown into his office when Hale handed him a new bid. "I have to accept your proposal, of course," he said, "but take a little friendly advice from me."

His eyes, however, were not friendly. Hale grinned, pushed back his hat. "Well?"

"The commanding officer is investigating the strange death of Mr. Ordway, the sutler. A Mexican woman says you were looking for him. Shortly afterward, a riot broke out."

"Huh! So I kilt him, did I?" But behind his confidence, Hale was worried.

"You threatened him, the first day you met, a few weeks ago." The captain's smile was bleak, but his eyes gleamed. Triumph made his fingers tremble a little when he twisted his black mustache. "Now, Mr. Hale, I do not say that you could be convicted. But you are under suspicion. And the crime was committed on a military reservation. Federal territory, that is. You would be under the jurisdiction of a Federal court, if you were arrested."

"Very friendly on your part, captain!" Hale still smiled; he could do nothing else, seeing that this threat

could finish him more certainly than any rustlers. "But yo're a liar, suh! You never were any friend of mine."

The captain swallowed that; a civilian could not say anything that a gentleman was bound to take up. Winkler admitted, "True enough. I spoke out of mere fairness. Personally, I never did think much of you. Killing Major Burdick—my fiancé's father—in a race for the favor of some woman in Texas!"

Hale reddened at the sneer. One man, however, could not fight an army. He blurted, "If Miss Aileen told you, I'm sure surprised."

"So you did tell Miss Burdick? But she did not tell me. It's quite commonly known, all about that girl in Palo Pinto. You'd better go back to her, while you can. Good afternoon, Mr. Hale."

Winkler picked up his pen, and reached for the documents on his desk. Hale took the bid and stalked out. He was embarrassed because of the slip he had made. No wonder Winkler had no use for him; he had been nursing a grudge on Aileen's account.

**H**ALE'S FIRST thought was to mail the bid, so that it could not officially be ignored. But that threat of arrest; was it bona fide, or a purely personal play to scare him out of New Mexico? Aileen, generous and fair minded, might have dropped remarks that rang sour to a jealous officer.

He went to the settlement outside the post. There he ate, downed a couple drinks, and mulled it over. Aileen was his only friend. She knew the army, her father having been an officer. They weren't all Winklers!

That evening, he met her at the quarters of her hostess. Aileen wore

a soft, shimmering gown that made her lovelier than he had ever seen her; but her dark eyes were somber, and she gave him not chance to ask her opinion on anything.

"Allan," she said, drawing him to her side in the shadows of the porch, "I'm so glad you're here. I've wracked my silly brains, wondering how to get in touch with you! Warren bitterly resents you. I think he knows I went out that night to warn you, and and particularly you, because of us he's fearfully jealous. Of everyone, came all the way from the Pecos together."

"The dirty skunk!" He was on his feet, but she caught his hand.

"That's not your quarrel," she said. Her fingers nervously opened, then closed on his arm. She leaned close, pillowed her head against his shoulder. There was a catch in her voice when she said, "I'm glad I know him the way he is! We had a bitter half hour of it. But no matter. What I wanted to say was that your bid's going to be rejected, regardless. A contractor has left for the Pintada to buy Dexter's herd. Warren is behind all this. Because of the friendly things I said about you. He as good as admitted it, during our flare up."

"You'll be stranded here, with cattle you can't sell for months. I'm terribly sorry I ever was so silly as to have a good word for you."

"Honey," he retorted, "I ain't! I'm riding hell-bent. Dexter's sour, and if he can sink me by selling, that's outside the bet and it's his right. But I'm seeing him first."

"There's a short cut," she said. Then, after giving him directions, she concluded, "But watch the quicksands. And if you fail—if you should slip—but you won't, Allan!"

She raised gleaming eyes. In the gloom, her upturned face was the vague, white shadow of all beauty. Hale wondered for a long moment why he had ever raced death across the desert to win the girl in Palo Pinto. He hardly knew what to say; he could not articulate, for a moment, so he drew her to his arms. "Honey," he fumbled.

This time Aileen had no qualms. She tiptoed, and her mouth reached up for his kiss. That small fact dizzied him.

Inside the house, footsteps echoed; someone of the family was coming to the front. Aileen whispered, "I'll try to persuade Captain Winkler out of his prejudice. Hurry, now! And good luck!"

IT WAS not until after he was on his way that Hale realized how well organized the opposition was. He lost little time in getting to Fort Sumner, yet the crooked contractor, whoever he was, had learned of the successful raid and had made a final move to get him out of the running.

He pushed his horse to the limit. His one chance was that the contractor was not expecting pursuit, and thus would not be pressing on at top speed. Hale's brief halts were to spare his mount rather than himself.

Late the next day, he saw far off dust. A buckboard was jouncing and swaying over the rough trail. Hale grinned. "Them gents craves the comforts of home! Kain't live outen their saddle bags!"

He stopped and unlimbered his glasses. A party of four occupied the wagon. They had rifles. The trail was leading toward the pass beyond which lay the first shallow river crossing. Hale frowned, scratched

his head; the country ahead was such as to make him either hang back, and lose precious time, or else press on and face rifle fire in the open.

In view of the organized opposition, there was little chance that the men ahead would fail to recognize him. Worst of all, three of them had saddle mounts at the tail gate of the buckboard. Those fresh beasts could easily outrace Hale's weary grullo.

A flash blinded him for an instant. Someone in the buckboard was training glasses on the backtrail. That was a dead giveaway, which identified the party beyond any doubt. His haste had warned them.

Once the wagon dipped below the crest, Hale went into action. He at least had the advantage of being a little more familiar with the trail than his rivals. Thus, when the quartet ahead turned back for another scrutiny to the rear, Hale was not in sight. He was heading up a savage ascent that took all the valiant grullo had; but the main trail was likewise getting worse, which made it bad for a wagon.

Presently, Hale was over the hump. From cover he watched the cattle buyers. They had halted, and were running the wagon off the road. Every sign indicated that they were preparing an ambush. Just ahead was the river crossing, a shallow but treacherous bottom. Hale weighed his chances. With a worn out mount it would be touch and go.

The sun was sinking. Red rays lanced the gathering shadows when he completed the loop that circled the ambush. Stealth had succeeded, and his grullo had profited somewhat from the deliberate descent. On the other hand, the cattle buyers knew

now that their victim must have gotten wind of the trap.

They were emerging from cover. Instead of preparing to camp, they gave every indication of pressing on across the stream, and striking a deal with Dexter while they could.

The ford was bad, but long unused crossings, upstream, told Hale that worse quicksands lay in wait. His only chance was to use one of these dangerous approaches. He dismounted, cut his blankets to pieces. These he wadded about the grullo's hoofs. "Try snowshoes instead of boss-shoes," he grimly told the mustang.

Chopping brush was slow work. He had to avoid betraying noise, yet he was working against time. But, warned against the peril, he had one advantage; and he made the ticklish crossing, leading the trembling grullo.

Once, the treacherous sand, despite the wadded hoofs, sucked the beast in up to the hocks. Hale with difficulty quieted the horse's panic. He and his mount were equally in a lather before the leg was freed, and the opposite bank gained.

He was grinning when he mounted up and charged down stream. The failing light helped him. And the time was just right. The buyers were at the river brink, sizing up the bottom. Hale shouted, "Watch it, gents, or yuh'll bog down!"

It was the mockery that identified him. A shot, fired in vain wrath, smacked through the brush that half shielded Hale. He whipped his carbine into line, pumped lead at his half visible rivals. He heard them shouting, "If he kin make it, by gravey, so kin we! Git along! Git going!"

The volley that stopped when Hale wheeled out of line was prolonged by the crack of whips, the shouts of the driver as he lashed the horses forward. Then came the sound Hale waited for: splashing, kicking, and the mutual recrimination of the men whose wagon had bogged down.

The young Tejano yelled derisively, booted the grullo, and plunged on. Before they could extricate even a saddle mount, pursuit would be futile. He had goaded them to recklessness, and he had won.

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## 6

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### "I'M STAYIN'!"

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WHEN HE REACHED the canyon, he waved Dobie aside, and beckoned to Dexter. The burly cattleman was full of questions, but Hale ignored them. He said, "Wad, name a fair price for your herd. I'll buy it on the hoof."

Dexter shook his head. "I like this country. I'm staying."

Hale could not shake him. There was a lot of Dexter's contention to the effect that a man would be crazy to sell out a mixed herd which he could use as the start for stocking a New Mexico range. "Gosh, Allan," he persisted, "I got money to back me, from Palo Pinto. I can dig in, here or on some other range, and get next year's business, and the next, too. I can run critters to Colorado from here."

Hale had to guard his tongue. Dexter was surly, and justifiably so, from one point of view. He had lost to a kid. Thus Hale could not reveal his real reason for wanting the herd.

From sheer spite, Dexter would refuse to sell. Perhaps he already sus-

pected, and thus had developed a sudden love of New Mexico!

Hale shrugged, and Dobie's gesture and pointed look stilled him. He walked away without another word. When he reached the segundo's side, Dobie said, "Play him easy, son. Wad's all right. Only, he's jest busted up, feeling like a fool, account you fust beat him, then saved his critters."

"You jughead," flared Hale, "I ain't got time to persuade him. Blast his hide, he'll sell when them buyers back there get outen the quicksands!"

Dobie cursed colorfully. "If I was given to bushwhacking, I'd give 'em some of their own medicine!"

Hale shook his head. "Got no proof of their intent. They can claim when I hollered at 'em, someone got shaky and shot. We're in wrong on general principles, around here, being from Texas."

Dobie said, "Son, yo're too tired to think straight. Git some sleep, and work on that pig-headed Wad tomorrow."

Hale followed his wise counsel. But the following day's sales talk was no more successful. The only relief Hale got was when the sun began setting, and no buyers hailed the camp in the canyon. Nor did the riders who brought the cattle in to be bedded down report any approaching party.

"Exceptin'," amended one of the cowpunchers, "I seen a saddle tramp lopin' along, thataway—"

Hale didn't care and did not listen to the rest. One saddle tramp!

After supper, he again approached Dexter. He said, "Wad, here's my note, signed and witnessed by Dobie. Secured by my herd, and yourn if you turn 'em over to me. I'm gambling I can sell the quartermaster if

I got a corner on all the beef in this neck of the woods. Them's my cards, Wad—and blast your hide, I know it was a fluke, but I helped yuh get your critters back. You owe me suth-in in consideration."

"Rub that in!" flared Dexter, kicking over his coffee as he rose. "You won the race, clean. You helped me, like any honest cattle man helps another one against thieves. I'd sell to you, Allan. Only fer one reason."

"What's that, Wad?"

The big Texan reddened, fidgeted. Then he blurted out, "You made a fool outen me. I kain't go back to Palo Pinto. And face the laughs. Ain't

my fault if you're busted and cornered. Ain't my fault if you got to go back to Joan poorer'n you was when you tricked her into making us that fool proposition!"

Hale had won the girl in Palo Pinto, and she would not back down. Maybe Joan was a bit flighty, and vain, but she was sound at heart, and too proud to welch on a bet. But Wad's stubbornness was bearing strange fruit; it was reminding Hale of something that had day by day become dimmer and more distant; reminding him that he himself wanted to stay in New Mexico.

(Continued next month)



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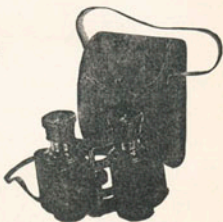
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