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by

GORDON RAY YOUNG

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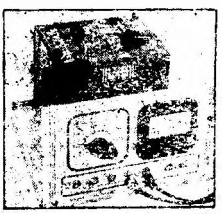

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LAMONT BUCHANAN

November 10th, 1947

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

The Story Tellers' Circle

A Theory Worked On and Out

WHEN we hear that a Gordon Young novel is on the way to our office, we think of Red Clark and mentally place a Western cover on the schedule. But this time it wasn't that way at all. We—and in turn our readers—made the acquaintance of Buchanan Sanborn (we couldn't find that he is any relation of our associate editor, though practically any editor has something of the sleuth in him from stalking authors), a private detective of parts. Sanborn had a theory, which we find is borne out by many tales not in the mystery-story category, that the least admirable motives should always be suspected in everyone around when there is any question of money to be inherited, borrowed, stolen, earned or even just counted. From that theory he proceeded in the case presented in the Young trial —"Crooked Shadows." One of Gordon Young's many activities in his earlier years was that of police reporter in Chicago in the days before gangsters, but not before hoodlums, so he has a good background for his story. He himself writes us:

"The first stories I sold were detective stories; I kept one character (Don Everhard) running for twenty years; they began long before I wrote sea stuff and Westerns. This 'Crooked Shadows' is my first detective story in ten years—which gives you some idea as to how long I have been knocking on editorial doors. At one time I knew a lot of crooks and I haven't any use for them, though they may be amusing at times they are untrustworthy at all times. By 'crook' I mean the professional hoodlum—not the fellow who through bad temper or accident or exuberance has had trouble with law.

"I had 'Crooked Shadows' read by an attorney to make sure that all the legal angles, as applying to California, were accurate. The homicide captain is a "murder man," I know, but not a policeman; he is an Inspector of the Sheriff's office. I met him some years ago when I walked into the office and said, 'I've got a dead man up at La Crescenta, and I don't know what to do with him.' He eyed me and asked, 'So?' When I explained that I was doing a detective story laid in the country, we became friends. And now I've done another detective story, and here it is in SHORT STORIES."

Gordon Ray Young

Incidentally, Mr. Young's question about what to do with the dead man reminded us of a discussion we listened in on not long ago. Several of the reading public were discussing murder mysteries and began pondering the question if one did commit murder, in the certain suburban community where we were gathered, how would one dispose of the body. One of the group—who was young, feminine and pensive—said, "I don't know, but our garbage col-

lector won't take oyster shells." This seemed a surprising and somewhat unconnected remark, but in the young lady's mind, not at all so. Her family, being fond of oysters, and with the non-cooperating attitude of the garbage collectors to cope with, were driven to making a bundle of them at intervals and dropping it into the sea or at least over a bridge somewhere. They had sometimes remarked that such a procedure if witnessed might seem suspicious, hence her comment on the disposal of any corpus delicti. It all added up in the long run.

Which has brought us quite a long way from the problems of Gordon Young's energetic and often harassed detective. But read "Crooked Shadows." It's a good story. You have our word for it.

Shop Talk Among the Painters—Sign, Not Landscape

YOU may remember that to the ship's engineer of a Kipling poem, "miscalling technicalities" was one of the very deadly sins, so you'll be interested in Lyndon Ripley's letter which is about his story, "Stick to Your Trade, Gunsel," in this issue. He says:

"Like many of the boys and girls who try to write for a living, I've done a lot of things prior to parking the *derriere* to keep the tripewriter clacking. I've been guilty of a bit of sign and billboard painting, hence the tale with a Southern Oregon setting, which I know a little about too.

"The sign business has its oddities, like any trade. In the story I mention the trick of wedging a pulley rope so it won't slip—then will, in emergency. Most swing-stage painters have to learn this, but good, for the preservation of their future.

"One time in San Diego I was working with a wineo on the roof edge of a hotel, five stories up, over the plaza, across from the U. S. Grant Hotel. This cross-country snapper's knees did a palsied jitterbug until he laid brush to the billboard tin, then he was as smooth as a Latin lover. Once when we lowered the stage, he didn't fix the rope securely in a lock loop wedge over the hook. I checked it in time, yelled to grab the rope. He did; otherwise—

"A real painter can tell in two seconds by the way a guy handles a brush whether or not he is a craftsman. The way he strokes his brush, dips his paint, cleans the bristles. Even stories painters tell have a turpentined flavor. A lot of them like their liquor straight and strong in order to cut lead poisoning. It's as good an excuse as any. But joking aside, painters as a group are swell pals, unselfish to a fault."

Lyndon Ripley

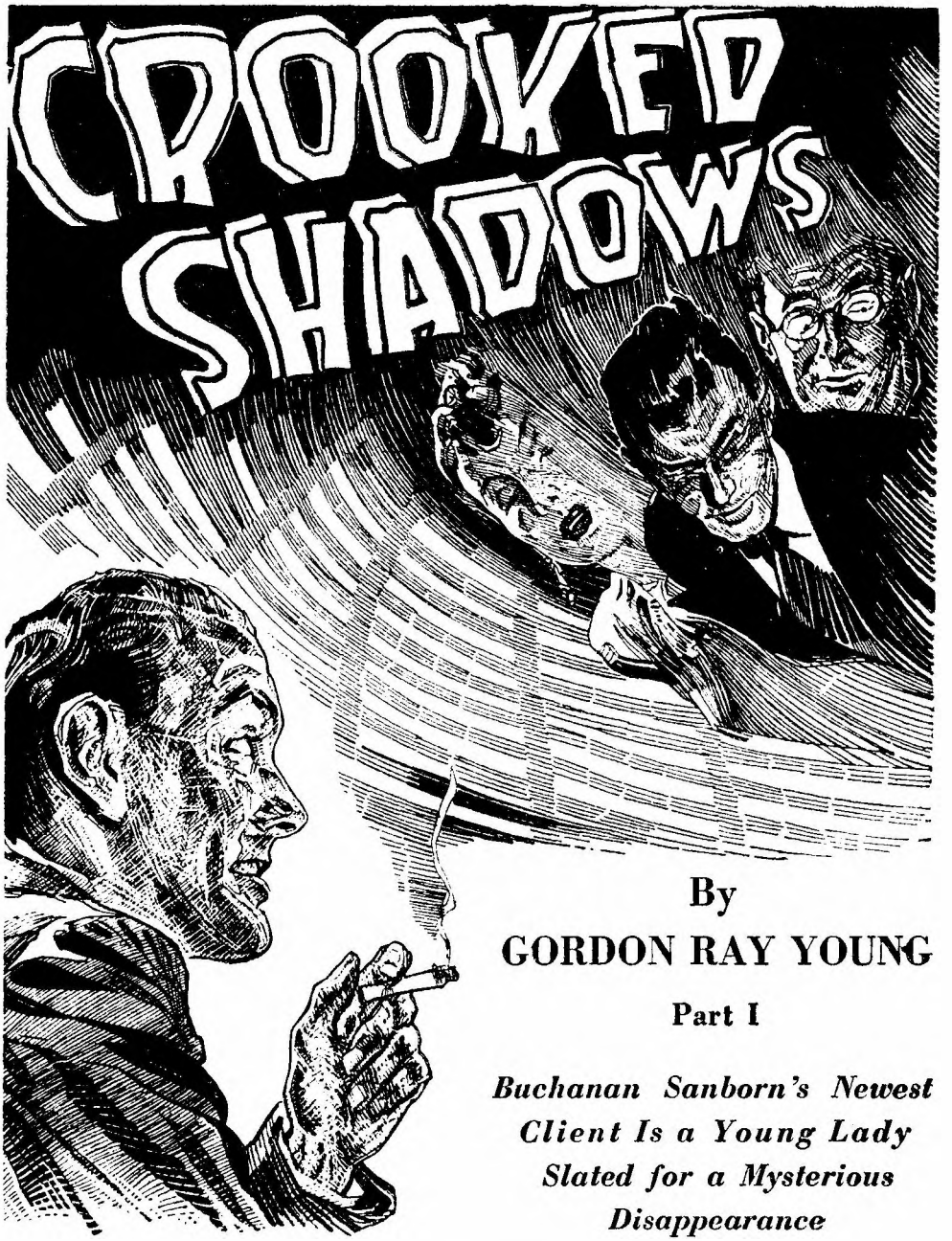
And speaking of technicalities, note our use of the Ripley information about "pounce and fill-in work" in our contents-page blurb. Wouldn't it be awful if we'd got it wrong?—ED.

Tripper

H. S. M. KEMP has written for us a lot of stories about the North—"Prospect on Squirrel Lake" is in this issue. Kemp, who lives in Saskatchewan, recently took a trip southward across the border, and some of his comments on his jaunt were very interesting. Such as:

"We got back from our three weeks in the States a day or so ago. Highlights of the trip were those clean Western towns—cow-towns in the red desert—the spotless service-stations, the marvelous roads and the friendliness of the people; the heat of the Southwest and an automobile engine that wasn't used to it; the Texas honeymoon couple who gave us a seven-mile shove into Shiprock, N. M., till we could get a new fuel-pump installed; the abysmal ignorance of the average American regarding Canada. In our schools the youngsters are taught more about the American Constitution and the ways of Congress than the U.S.A.-ers know themselves. And when it came to reading "Saskatchewan" on our license-plate, that knocked 'em flat. When we told one lady it was in Western Canada, she asked if we came down through Alaska! Even the folks in southern Montana didn't know that Saskatchewan was their neighbor on the other side of the international fence. But still and all, everyone was so darn nice to us that we can forgive them this; and we are looking forward to our fourth visit with them next year."

H. S. M. Kemp



By
GORDON RAY YOUNG

Part I

Buchanan Sanborn's Newest Client Is a Young Lady Slated for a Mysterious Disappearance

I

BUCHANAN SANBORN'S secretary told him, "A Margaret Burrinton to see you, Buck. Just a kid. When you pay me what I'm worth, I'll dress like that! She's scared—so be nice. Or try!"

The parts of a dismantled 7.63 mm Mauser littered Sanborn's desk; pulling firearms apart and putting them together was his form of solitaire. He didn't look up or say anything, and Sue turned to the slim man with an ex-prizefighter face and asked, "Mac, would you mind hitting him over the head or something? Wake him up!"

Joe McKay, leg man, and whatever else was needful in Sanborn's devious work as a

detective, grinned a little and shrugged. He felt that he knew things about Sue that she didn't know about herself because her loyalty to Sanborn was the kind you couldn't buy for the sixty-something a week he paid her.

Sanborn said, "The only Burrinton anybody would want to be nice to has been dead for years—and ought to have been in prison!" He looked steadily at Sue. "I know who this Burrinton girl is. Some years back I whitewashed her Uncle Theodore. He was mixed up here in Hollywood with a bad actor—one in skirts! I cleaned him up—and he never paid me in full. Show her in. Maybe I can get out of her enough to make up what the uncle owes."

Sanborn wiped gun oil from his fingers with an old towel and dropped it into a drawer as he stood up and stolidly appraised Margaret Burrinton. She was young, blond, a bit skinny, almost pretty and tensely tried to conceal her nervousness; but he noted favoringly that her thin immature face didn't have the sheep-shape which was characteristic of Burrintons.

She stared at him, not quite trustfully. He was thick-shouldered, being built like some of the wrestlers he worked out with at the Club; and, indifferent to clothes, he was now in rolled-up shirt sleeves, his fingers soiled by the gunsmithing. His hair was touseled and his face could be unreadable. Besides, his reputation wasn't good—not

with the District Attorney's men. They said he cut dark corners with the lights out.

She looked disappointed and her voice had a dry-mouth strain in asking, "*You* are Buchanan Sanborn?"

"I'm Sanborn." No smile; just a flat statement.

The girl didn't like that reply. It was without deference; he wasn't showing even courtesy.

McKay was across the room, looking from a window. She gave him a fault-finding stare, then asked Sanborn, "May we be alone?"

"Not yet. It sometimes helps to have McKay look over my shoulder." Sanborn indicated the chair beside his desk. It was purposefully uncomfortable: he didn't often care to have clients feel at ease, not at the beginning of an interview. The chair's high hard slick leather seat made most of them squirm to keep from sliding, and that took their minds off self-pity and the misinformation they had prepared.

The girl sat down stiffly and put her teeth edge to edge as her thin fingers clenched the bronze-colored gloves that she carried. "No one must ever know I've been here!"

He said, "We are used to that," and offered a cigarette.

She took the cigarette and leaned to the lighter he offered, but neglected to murmur thanks.

Sanborn dropped into his chair, leaned back and could see a petulant impulse working about in her tawny eyes, rather as if trying to make up her mind to jump from the chair and walk out, offended.

Then she tried, "It may interest you to know that I am the granddaughter of Jackson Burrinton!"

He said, "The old fish packer. He made dog food, too, and fertilizer."

She glared.

THIS granddaughter of Old Jack's was a multi-million heiress but had a taut underfed skinniness as if she didn't get all she wanted to eat; which couldn't be true, but there was something she didn't get and its hunger gleamed in her eyes.

There wasn't a twinkle of jewelry but she had golden silk on her legs. Sue, who knew about clothes, said later that if those plain tawny shoes hadn't cost $50 she was a bad guesser; and that the simple little print dress with its subdued rich colors wasn't simple at all. The hat, a small topsy-turvy affair, with a bronze glint that didn't quite match her hair, was maybe $50 more. Bronze stripes were in the party-colored jacket, and her long purse had much the same kind of old gold leather that had been on some of the rare books that Buck recently recovered for a wealthy man.

She squirmed on the chair's hard slick seat, then irritably told Sanborn, "You aren't easy to talk to!"

"Maybe I am. Try it. Cut loose. Let's hear."

Her small jaws locked, then. "All right, I will!" It was as though she had decided to throw something breakable at his head. "I want to disappear! I don't want to be found, no matter what! I don't care what you do if you'll keep me away from them! And I can pay—any amount!"

Up went her chin in a high-headed tilt, but the slick seat of that chair wasn't suitable for posturing; she caught hold of an arm and reached for the floor with her toes to keep from sliding.

He asked, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two," she said, then faltered, "Almost."

"In that case, as far as I know, you have the right to go where you please, and if you want to pull down the blinds and lock the door, that's your business."

"Oh!" Her relief was like that of a gambler who had won at big odds.

"Married?"

"No!"

"Haven't shot anybody, or anything like that?"

"Don't be absurd!"

"And you haven't stolen anything?"

"Are you serious, asking things like that of me?"

"Serious! And you're not dodging a court order?"

Her pale fingers gripped the gloves as if trying to pull them apart. "No!"

"O.K., lady. But, of course, it will take money!"

Her "What do I care about money!" was snooty.

He told her, "Now it's your turn. What's this all about? Make me believe I ought to help you and I'll go the limit."

She jumped from the chair and was angry but not at him. Her face lost what prettiness it had and she looked tortured in saying, "I'm grown up but you can't know what it's like! I'm the same as a prisoner yet I can't have even a lock on my door because they want to come in and snoop! They're trying to prove I'm crazy so they can keep my money! I'm treated like a child—an imbecile child! They"—the repetitious "they" obviously referred to her family—"let me have clothes as you let a child have toys, and they tell me how happy I ought to be with such lovely things! But I can never go any place without some one of them hanging to me! I'm rich, so it would be dangerous, they say. They must be careful and protect me, they say. But it isn't that! They're afraid I'll get out from under their fingers and won't die. If I do—die, I mean—all my money will be split up between them. If I die or go crazy. That's what they want, all of them. And I'm frightened! I'm so haunted and afraid that I keep a light always burning when I go to bed. I tell you I'm afraid, and I do want to live and have fun!"

Her voice had reached the wire-edge of hysteria, and now she stared demandingly at Sanborn, but he remained as expressionless as a show-window mannikin.

She almost screamed, "You think it isn't true? Or maybe you think I haven't money! I've heard of you. For money you'll do anything!"

She jerked open the long purse and thrust it out, showing him. "Will that be enough for what I believe is called a retainer? Thirty-five thousand dollars!"

The purse was filled with sheaves of fresh bills such as banks sometimes give out to persons drawing large amounts.

Sanborn didn't bat an eye.

Miss Burrinton tossed the purse to his desk. "There! You keep me hid from them and if this isn't enough, there will be more!"

Sanborn said, "McKay, give Miss Burrinton a more comfortable chair."

Twenty minutes later Sue, with an air of demure efficiency, answered his buzzer.

"Dictation, Miss Carter."

Sue could have taken down the Barber of Seville's chatter without a pause, but twice she stopped and asked Mr. Sanborn to repeat, please, which was her way of telling him to think it over; what he said of the sedate and socially prominent Burrintons made her toes crinkle about the same as when she dreamed of sliding down a steep roof.

Sanborn stated that Margaret Burrinton, in deadly fear of her life from her guardian, Theodore Burrinton, and from other members of the Burrinton family and, being of legal age and in her sound mind, had come to him for protection, asking to be sheltered during such a period as she deemed necessary for her security.

Miss Burrinton sat in trance-like stiffness. McKay sidled glances at the heiress and was doubtful about the sound mind, and also the legal age.

Sue returned to her office to type the statement. McKay drummed noiselessly on the sill and looked down on Hollywood Boulevard. Miss Burrinton was smoking her own cigarettes now, one after another. Her fingers weren't steady. She looked toward Sanborn and asked with a little girl's wistfulness, "Do you think I am crazy?"

He had a foot on a corner of his desk and his hands were locked behind his head. "Why should I?"

She said, "They have doctors that come to see me and call me names that have 'neurosis' in them, and I scream at the doctors and want to claw their faces!"

"Which is just how they want you to act."

"But they make me mad and I don't care! Do you want to know how I got out of the house today? Uncle and Mrs. Theodore went to the beach and—" her face brightened almost into laughter—"I sent my maid, who is nothing but a guard on an errand, then I locked the housekeeper in the linen closet and the butler in the cellar! Aunt Isbel and Gracia—they live next door—were downtown shopping. They are guards too—at least Isbel is. And here I am!"

THE bright look on her face changed to dreaminess as she said, "I have never in my life walked a street alone. And I want to, especially at night—in the dark! I want to talk to people I have never seen and may never see again!" She was earnestly unabashed with, "I want to sit by some nice looking boy whose name I don't know and just hold hands and talk. I want to go to

nightclubs and dance with strangers and laugh. I love Hawaiian music.

"I can see life all about me but I can't touch it!" Her hand went out gropingly to illustrate. "I am like a child looking through a candy store window and mustn't go in." She leaned toward Sanborn and coaxed, "Will you let me? Just once, for a little while, by myself?"

Sanborn's reply was slow and reasoning. "Young lady, you are going to make a big splash when you drop from sight. No night-club life for you, or candy stores, not till we all come up for air. You are in for a mysterious disappearance—with headlines! I've explained all that, and you've said 'Yes,' but it's not too late to change your mind. What do you say?"

She shook her head, not changing her mind, but murmured pensively, "Still a prisoner!"

Sue came with her notary seal, recording ledger and the typed statement, which Miss Burrinton signed. Sue then took the seal from its leather case, affixed the seal, signed it and made an entry in her ledger.

Sanborn folded the affidavit into an envelope and stuck it into a coat pocket. It was only a little past mid-afternoon but he told Sue, "We'll shut up shop for the day. Take Miss Burrinton into the next room and get acquainted. Wait here with her till I come back. Come along, Mac."

Then he turned to Miss Burrinton and told her, "We'll make it as much fun as we can."

Sue followed the men into the front office. She closed the heavy door behind her, then scooted on ahead and got before the hall door, backing against it to bar the way, and snapped, "Do you know what you're doing?"

"No, Red. But I'll figure it out as we go along. Your job is to watch her close. I took thirty thousand dollars out of that purse and left the rest so she wouldn't think she had been robbed. We'll get that later!"

"And where," Sue demanded, "do you think she—a prisoner, as she calls herself—could get all that money?"

Sanborn said, "I hope you noticed that I was careful not to ask. She might have told me she'd stolen it!"

Sue said, "She's no more twenty-one than I'm fifty-three."

He shrugged. "I'm under no obligation to disbelieve a client's sworn statement."

"Thin ice!" Sue told him. "Some day you'll break through."

The phone rang.

"I'm not in," Sanborn said, and, followed by McKay, bolted from the room.

The party on the phone was an old client with trouble, and Sue listened sympathetically.

When she returned to Sanborn's office it was empty. She rushed into what was called the "Guest Room," that being a large and comfortable hideaway where clients were sometimes stowed even overnight. That too was empty.

II

PRESENTLY the phone whirred.

A woman asked for Mr. Sanborn, a woman who perceptibly felt herself above secretarial persons. She stated with domineering precision, "This is extremely urgent. Contact Mr. Sanborn as soon as possible and instruct him to telephone Mr. Theodore Burrinton. The number is Axter 2329. Let there be as little delay as possible." The phone clicked off.

Sue's hands were cold, her forehead hot. She thought, *That crazy girl has gone home and told them about being here! Buck's in for it—taking all that money from her!*

Sue paced back and forth, then dropped into Buck's swivel chair, sitting on her legs. It was mid-summer, but *I'm frozen!* she thought and took the bottle of whiskey from Buck's desk. He seldom touched the stuff except by way of offering it to visitors who were ready to collapse. She mixed much water with the drink.

It was dark when Sanborn came in with bundles under his arm.

Sue went toward him, stopped some feet away, braced herself.

"Buck, that Burrinton ducked out of here as soon as you left. I didn't know where to reach you."

"Why didn't you use a club? Anything!"

"I didn't see her go. She got out through the other room while I was on the phone. But worst of all, Theodore Burrinton wants you to call him right away! Here's the number."

Sanborn's "Does, eh?" sounded drowsy,

and he spilled his bundles into a chair from which they scattered to the floor.

"And you know what that means!"

"How do I know?"

Sue said, "She's gone home and told about being here and what she's signed and the money you took from her."

"Could be." He tossed his coat toward a chair and stood at the window behind the desk, looking down into the lights of Hollywood Boulevard.

She came near and her voice was a half whisper. "Buck, I'm scared!"

Her words very slowly seemed to get through to his thoughts, then he looked at her. "Scared, hm?" She nodded. He grinned, "So'm I, Red. And bad!"

"Then do something!"

He seemed to be studying the pieces of the dismantled Mauser on his desk as he asked, "How would you like to live with relatives who aren't any longer wealthy, but would get control of seven million if you went crazy? Would get it all if you died?"

Sue shuddered. "Terrible!"

"That's why I'm scared—if she has gone home."

He pulled down the windows and lowered the venetian blinds, then crossed the room and swung a closet door wide. Revolvers and pistols of many kinds were racked there in niches covered with green baize, and a bullet trap was against the closet's back wall.

He switched on the trap's indirect light, and after that he selected a short-barrelled Woodsman and returned behind the desk. Without being asked, Sue turned out some of the room's lights and stood ready to poke fingertips into her ears.

As he was putting .22 long rifles into the pistol's magazines he asked, "So you think the Burrinton kid handed me the sucker's medal?"

"You've got the doublecross, all right!"

Buck pushed home the magazine, released the slide, then aimed slowly, fired. Sue's fingers were in her ears. The report of even a .22 confined to the room made her head ring, and sometimes he fired heavier guns.

BUCK peered to see where the bullet struck on the signing target, then said: "I think she is flighty, fantastic, off balance, but a long way from crazy or even stupid. There's a difference between being reckless and being stupid, though you can break your neck either way."

He began firing rapidly. She hated this target practice in the office, and thought it bad enough on the range where he sometimes took her and McKay.

After five rapid-fire shots he locked the slide back, laid the gun on the desk and was crossing the room toward the closet when he asked, "Know what, Red?"

She snapped, "Of course, I don't! Do you?"

He bent to the target then took a gauge from its tray on the shelf and measured one shot that didn't quite make the nine-ring. Sanborn said, "Rotten!" He returned to the desk and picked up the pistol.

Sue asked crossly, "Do I know what?"

He let go with another string of rapid-fire; the bang-bang-bang-bang-bang! had a rhythmic rapidity, as if controlled by a metronome, but the jar of the reports made Sue's teeth ache.

"That kid's smart, Red. She put one over on me. Twenty-one, hell! I've just found out she won't be even eighteen for four months. Some gal!"

"And I tried to tell you she was just a kid."

He had gone to the closet and was studying the bull. All five weren't in the ten-ring but none outside the nine, and the nine was only a half-inch across.

Sanborn began cleaning the pistol, having no faith at all in the ammunition makers' claim that their stuff was non-corrosive. As he worked he told Sue, "I knew she wasn't twenty-one, but I did think she was eighteen and so took a chance."

"Eighteen?" Sue asked caustically. "Nobody's of age until twenty-one in California!"

"You're right," he admitted indifferently. "But I could—and would!—fix it up for the little fool if she had been born only four months sooner."

"Something clever and brilliant?" Sue asked angrily, but there wasn't any response at all. "Well, she lied, so you can drop it. Return the money and—"

"All I ever return to anybody is a sock on the jaw!"

He slipped a worn shoulder-holster's strap across his back, snapped the ends around his belt, like suspenders, then removed a .45 National Match from its rack and put a bullet into the chamber before he partially inserted a full magazine, and when he had released the slide he thrust the magazine home.

He left the hammer cocked, flipped on the safety and poked the pistol into the holster that was slung under his arm and flat against his side.

Sue said, "And oh, no! She's not evading a court order in running away with Theodore Burrinton still her guardian."

"He used to be. I am now!"

Sue flung herself into a chair and glared. "I oughtn't to care. You treat me like a child with evasions and half truths. And I worry, damn it! For sixty-five dollars a week I fret about you like—like I loved you! I don't, thank God! I wish I weren't loyal. I wish I didn't give a damn. I wish I could phone and type and file and forget all about you after five o'clock. I used to think, 'Oh, how wonderful to be the secretary of Buchanan Sanborn. So exciting and mysterious! But working for you is like being on a roller coaster that's about to jump the track.' "

When she ran out of breath he said, "Get Uncle Theodore on the phone, Red. Let's see if he's as much stuffed-shirt as ever."

AFTER some delay a full pompous voice bumbled, "Hello? Hello? Sanborn? Hello?"

"What's all the row out at your house?"

"Sanborn, my niece has disappeared and I want you to—"

"The police work for nothing."

Theodore Burrinton said, "I can't have such publicity about my niece!"

"Why not?"

"She's absolutely demented, Sanborn! Locking people in closets and stealing money! Thirty-five thousand dollars, Sanborn!"

"Whose money?"

"Why—uh—er—money I had in my safe, Sanborn, to meet certain—uh—obligations, sir. And," Mr. Burrinton continued in aggrieved perplexity, "you are not very responsive to my—my—difficulties, Sanborn."

"Don't worry. I'll get around to them. But this money, was it out of her trust?"

"She's a minor, sir! Mere child! She's not permitted to handle money and this was a sum that had been set aside for a matter of cash negotiation and—"

Sanborn broke in with, "What do the police say?"

"I can't entrust the police with—"

"Why not? Smart boys, the cops. I know!"

"The publicity, Sanborn! And after all, Margaret may return any hour. I won't have the newspapers blaring that my little niece has imprisoned members of this household and stolen from me. Do you think, sir, that I want it known to all the world that she is deficient mentally? Understand? Her mind, you know!"

"No, I didn't know."

Burrinton continued to speak as though her age was from ten to twelve, and not a very bright ten to twelve, being definitely subnormal, sullen, mean-tempered; a girl who wouldn't respond to kindness, and for some time now she had been under the observation of psychiatrists. "And, Sanborn, I need your help and advice. I remember—uh, gratefully!—how successful you were a few years ago in a certain—ah, delicate matter."

"I remember, too. You didn't pay me!"

Burrinton sputtered and coughed uncomfortably.

Any misunderstanding could be rectified, and this was an emergency in which the whole family would have great trust in Sanborn's resourcefulness and judgment.

He said that, in fact, his other niece who served as his secretary had insisted upon having Sanborn though—uh—she was uninformed as to the service he had already rendered some—uh—years ago. Could Sanborn come to the house right away?

As soon as Sanborn dropped the receiver Sue turned on him. "Taking money from both sides!"

"Counter-espionage!" Sanborn said, then aimed a forefinger at the phone. "Red, there's a half-dozen people near the other end of this thing hoping that the next time they see her she'll be under a sheet on a slab! But—you heard—psychiatrists and all!

"They're trying to drive her nuts so the doctors won't be lying when they say she's crazy."

"Now," Sue protested, "you know that she *did* steal the money! What are you going to do about that?"

"I don't know anything of the kind. I know only that Uncle Theodore has said so, and I know him! Doesn't want to go to the police? He's afraid they'll find her before she's had her throat cut."

"That's your job—find her."

Sue snapped thumb and finger. "Just like that! This is a big town, in case you hadn't heard."

"Mac will go with you. It won't be so hard to pick up somebody who has begged me to let her get into a cocktail bar all by herself, just for once, and who loves Hawaiian music. Try the best-known joints first. She'll be in one of them if you move fast; that is, if you get there before some stranger she's been holding hands with says, 'Let's go look at etchings!' "

"What a joy it is to work for you!" Sue said, looking into a compact's mirror.

"I'm going to Burrinton's. Then I'll come back here. You can reach me one place or the other." He pointed to the scattered bundles. "Clothes I bought for her. Disguise. If you want to be working for me this time tomorrow, find her."

III

SANBORN'S taxi rolled uphill from Los Feliz, turned into a wide curving drive with the headlights probing the dark shadows of thick shrubs and trimmed palms; and the palms' crowns were very like huge spiders in the sky and busily weaving the night wind into webs.

Sanborn overpaid the driver and said, "Wait."

A plump and solemn butler opened the door. "You are expected, Mr. Sanborn. This way, please." His eyes had the look of a dead fish's as they reproached Sanborn's rumpled brown suit and the lack of a hat.

Sanborn entered the library with the feeling of walking in on a stage where the cast were amateurs. The room was long, high and arched with curious fret work. The Burrinton money had come out of fish, fertilizer, dog food and soap.

Theodore Burrinton rose with a highball in his hand and advanced quickly as toward a friend who had returned from the wars.

"Ah, Sanborn!" A pompous fellow with a belly and a full but unresonant voice; he groped for his tortoise-rimmed glasses which dangled from a black ribbon and set them on his nose before he offered his soft hand.

He passed Sanborn around. Mrs. Theodore possessed a large bosom and wore a tight girdle, also a short skirt probably because for a woman of her weight and age she had well-shaped legs. Her face was that of a big fat and not smart child, while her blue eyes were as colorless as faded denim, and she smiled with a tight mouth in saying, "I have met Mr. Sanborn before."

Her sister-in-law, Mrs. Gregory Burrinton, known to the family as Isbel, was also on the worst side of forty, but gaudily tried to deny it as if her skinniness might be mistaken for youth. She was gypsy-dark with tinted eyelids that seemed tempted to wink, and the long nails looked blood-smeared. Her heavy jewelry was as bright as polished brass, and the dark satin blouse had an intricate design of colored embroidery that went whorls over her thin breasts. Isbel's voice was soft, rapid, even pleasant, her eyes were black and cat-watchful, and she offered the tips of her fingers to Sanborn

and gave a secret fluttery squeeze that was like a furtive promise.

Uncle Gregory had the Burrinton sheep-face. He was younger than Theodore, and somewhat shorter but also fat and more gray. His shoes were noticeably old, perhaps to ease bunions, and he looked stupidly fuddled as he gulped his drink before he shook hands. "We're worried, sir! Uh, worried!"

Then a thin-faced youth flipped up a hand and said, "Hi, Buck!" though he knew Sanborn only by sight. Theodore, Jr., was a night-prowler in hot-spots, moving, or trying to move, with the picture crowd; wherever there were girls and noise he thought it fun.

"Now when Sanborn declined a drink, he said derisively, "You spoil my illusions. All hard-boiled dicks are supposed to lap it up!"

THEODORE put his own glass on the library table where it would leave a ring. He drew a handkerchief, wiped his palms, then his forehead and shook his head as he gazed sorrowfully at his toes. "Just a child, Sanborn—poor little Margaret!"

"Damn' near eighteen!" said Teddy.

Mrs. Theodore's voice had the favoring tolerance that condones while it corrects. "Don't interrupt father, please, Teddy."

Teddy subsided sullenly into a tall chair, slid down, crossed his legs and appeared to be resting on the back of his neck while his father explained that, irrespective of Margaret's actual age, she was merely a child, so retarded, subnormal. His voice was funereal. "The poor irresponsible girl is certain to do something that will bring her—and us!—into disgrace, and we are helpless."

All heads nodded as if cued; all but Gregory's, and he was pondering the empty depth of the tall glass in his hand.

Now again, and abruptly, Sanborn asked, "Why don't you tell the police?"

Silence came during which Mrs. Theodore assumed a shocked expression. Isbel, laid down her long cigarette holder and faintly shook her head as if Mr. Sanborn weren't really as discerning as she had thought.

Theodore took up his glass and let a piece of ice slide into his dry mouth. After that he cleared his throat. "Sanborn, think of the scandal!"

Teddy chirped shrilly, "Yeah, but think of the thirty-five grand!"

"Money isn't everything!" said his mother with the sound of having just found the statement among the Ten Commandments.

Isbel leaned forward to explain in a vivacious intimate manner, "But, Mr. Sanborn, you don't understand the child. She may be merely on a shopping tour. She has no conception of money. Her mind is so retarded! I wouldn't be surprised if she returned any minute with all sorts of deliveries to follow! Picture our embarrassment if we had reported her disappearance to the police—and newspapers!"

"Exactly!" said Mrs. Theodore, drawing a deep sigh against the girdle.

Sanborn asked why so much money happened to be in the house, and each of them, excepting Gregory, put in some laudatory word about how Mr. Theodore devoted nearly all of his time to the great responsibility of managing the trust and had his office here at home; and he had accumulated funds to be able to provide cash in a certain business transaction—and so forth.

Sanborn said, "Then, as a matter of fact, it was really her own money?"

THEY all looked a little shocked, even Gregory; and Theodore took a deep breath and, rather as if making a public speech, informed Sanborn that, as long as the trust and guardianship were in force, Margaret had no more right than anyone else to lay her hands on a dollar of that money; therefore, even if it were a part of her inheritance, Margaret was just as much a thief as any burglar would have been.

Sanborn thought, *Like hell she is!* though he knew that Uncle Theodore had a good deal of law on his side. Then, because he wanted to watch them squirm, he came back again to the police, suggesting that maybe some crook had got hold of her. "The Burrinton heiress? A crook would either break her neck and take her money or hold her for ransom!"

The silence that followed was like a weight. The empty glass slipped from Gregory's hand and broke but no one appeared to notice, and the silence closed in again;

and only Isbel's eyes ventured to meet Sanborn's.

Theodore's voice was shaky when he asked, "Aren't you suggesting the most remote possibilities, Sanborn?"

The phone rang and Teddy bounced up with, "Bet that's for me! Hello? Oh, yeah, he's here. Sure, anything to oblige!" He leered at Sanborn. "Um-m-m! For you, and what a nice voice she's got!" He stood close when Sanborn took the phone.

Sue asked, "Buck?" and he said, "Give me a curve!"

The room was as listeningly silent as the beginning of a seance, and Sue's voice squeaked audibly. Teddy could hear about as well as Sanborn, and what he heard was, "See-south-lage-ville."

"Lona?" Sanborn asked.

"No."

"If I'm late, stick with it, then call me back where you are now. I'll be there. What else?"

"Love and kisses, damn you!"

The phone clicked off. Sue's double-talk had let him know that Margaret was at the South Sea Village, and not alone; and he had said that, if she left, Sue and McKay were to follow and call him later at the nightclub.

Teddy piped up, "Illusions restored! Mysterious, wow! I couldn't help hearing, Buck."

Sanborn thrust his hands into his side coat pockets, backed to the fireplace mantel, and looked grim. "Now let's get down to cases. I've got something to say that you'll all pretend not to like. But why not come clean, just among ourselves?"

Everybody looked at him as his eyes moved slowly, judging one face after another and he felt that each thrillingly sensed what he meant.

TEDDY sat on a corner of the table, the cigarette between his fingers was forgotten. Isbel's tinted eyelids narrowed and her toeless slipper—very like the devil's cloven hoof—tapped the soft rug noiselessly. Mrs. Theodore held her breath, looking like something made of rubber and blown up. Gregory was on the edge of a chair, his bulbous eyes wide and staring.

Theodore asked in uneasy wonder, "Wh-what do you m-mean, Sanborn?"

"This! When Old Jack Burrinton's favorite son was lost at sea with his wife, he set up a seven million trust fund for their small daughter. That's a lot of money. He had a lot then. Not so much when he died, so you people didn't get anything like was left to her. Damned unfair of Old Jack, wasn't it?"

Nobody replied; eyes shifted, hoveringly. Sanborn looked them over, then matter-of-factly said to Theodore, "Burrinton, your idea is to have her declared mentally incompetent and so keep control of the trust. No good! Too much money involved. There'll be plenty of smart lawyers, and doctors! To jump in and prove that she's not crazy."

Theodore began to swell up and his jaw trembled, but Sanborn ignored him and went on, still matter-of-fact. "But if she dies, the trust reverts to her uncles, which means to all of you! See what I mean? If you people will be downright honest with me, maybe even that can be arranged."

Mrs. Theodore sank back with something very like terror on her fat childish face and whimpered, "Oh, oh, no!" Gregory's head dropped, his breath a sob and his hands kept squirming together. Isbel seemed to be looking at her blood-red nails but she wasn't: her dark eyes gleamed under lowered lashes at Sanborn.

Theodore arose and drew himself up. "An egregious and unimaginable insult, sir!" It was something that had to be said, but he seemed like an actor who had almost forgotten his lines. He glowered at Sanborn, raised his unresonant voice to shout, "Leave this house, sir, and at once!"

Sanborn turned on a heel and walked without hurrying from the room. When he let himself out he missed the taxi, but a shadow came near and said, "I parked down there away from the house. I was asked to by a woman that come out and got in and told me to wait where she wouldn't be seen."

The taxi man opened the door and a young woman came from the cab. "I am Gracia Burrinton, Mrs. Gregory is my mother, Mr. Sanborn." She enunciated carefully and was without nervousness. "I merely waited here so I could talk with you." He couldn't see her face clearly even when she stood close to him and said, "Let us go this way. A bench is nearby." San-

born was very aware of the perfume she used.

They went along the winding path, their feet softly rasping the loose gravel. He asked, "Why didn't you attend the family meeting?"

"I wished to speak with you alone."

"We are alone."

"The bench is just ahead."

"I have a flashlight. All right to use it?"

"Of course."

He drew the light, cast a pencil-like beam into the foliage, then made an adjustment that diffused the beam into a kind of moonglow and held it on the girl. Her voice had sounded over-cultured with snooty tendencies; the perfume indicated that she wasn't anything of the kind.

Sanborn felt that he never knew a damn' thing about women, not from looking at them, not at least until their way of life had left definite traces, written large; even then he had been fooled by some who were vicious, and looked it, becoming sacrificially generous; and the other way around, too.

This girl was dark, vivid, resembling her mother, or what the mother may have been twenty years before. He had an impression of extreme artificiality but it wasn't unbecoming, being rather like an actress' and needful for the desired effect. She had high cheeks and a pale face and dark, quietly steady eyes; the green dress was high-waisted, tight at the hips, flowingly wide at a hem which was not below her knees. Gold loops dangled from her ears. The voice was too cultured—an affectation, he felt, if not a defense against some social situation; and there was nothing slinky about her though she moved with a grace that was as natural as a cat's.

THEY sat on an iron garden bench before the open space about a fountain that wasn't running, and he continued to hold the flashlight between them so he could watch her face. "What is it, Miss Burrinton?"

"Peggy came to you today, didn't she?"

"Who?"

"Peggy. Margaret, my cousin."

Sanborn said softly and at once. "I wish she had!"

"I am sure that she intended to!"

"Whatever for?"

"I advised her to! And she didn't come, really?"

"Not this morning. And I wasn't in much of the afternoon. Why did you tell her to come to me?"

The over-cultured tone was gone now and her voice was more pleasant, being soft and unhurried. "I told her what a wonderful reputation you have, Mr. Sanborn! And that you, if anyone could, would hide her away. She hates all the family, all but me. Can you blame her?"

" 'Blame'?" he asked in a mild rumble. "How can I have an opinion?"

"Yes, of course; that's so." Her hand fell lightly on his arm. "I am her friend because I know how woefully she is mistreated here; and I want to help her any way I can, but I can't let anyone in the family know—not even my mother, though she is also sorry for Peggy."

"Whatever is wrong?"

"You will be shocked, Mr. Sanborn, when I tell you that Uncle Theodore is determined to prove that she is weak-minded, crazy even! That's awful, don't you think?"

"Well, maybe she is."

"She isn't, Mr. Sanborn. She is sick and frightened and angered. Of course she has a temper! Here in this house they torment her until she flies into rages. Those are remembered as instances of her—how shall I say it? Mental instability? Something like it. Almost every week one doctor or the other comes. Peggy knows why, and could you be normal before inquisitors whose fees come out of your own money? No wonder she has tantrums, is it?"

"Not as you tell it," he admitted.

"I know she intended to get in touch with you, and she may still. When she does, will you let me know? I want to see her, be with her, help her.. I love her, Mr. Sanborn, and am oh, so sorry for her."

"If she comes near me, I think about the best thing I could do would be to have your advice. But I'd be likely to get into trouble if I concealed anyone from a legal guardian. So what do you suggest, Miss Burrinton?"

"Gracia, please!" She gazed at him. "From what I've heard of you, it seemed that you can do anything. They say you are very bold and brilliant, too!"

Sanborn shook his head at her. "You

see, Miss Bur—I mean Gracia—I always serve newspaper men the very best Scotch and plenty of it. That helps!"

She smiled slowly and shook her head, too. "I am sure that isn't the way of it at all, Mr. Sanborn. And I thought, of course, that Peggy had gone to you. That's why I told Uncle Theodore—I serve as his secretary—that he must not notify anybody but you. He didn't want to tell the police, but for some reason he wasn't eager to confide in you."

"Look here, Gracia. Do you really want to help Peggy?"

"Oh, I do! How can you doubt after what I've said?"

"And you are Burrinton's secretary?'

"Yes. And I want to be loyal to my uncle, but I can't sit by and see my cousin mistreated!"

"All right then, you know, don't you, that some of the funds he handles sticks to his fingers?" She gazed staringly and made no reply. Sanborn went on. "So, with very little evidence—if you'll help—we can have him turned out as Peggy's guardian. Then she'd be all right. Will you do it?"

"But I don't know anything of the kind, Mr. Sanborn! Why, you are accusing Uncle Theodore of being a thief!"

SANBORN looked at her studyingly. "You are a very pretty girl, Gracia, and I'd like for you to like me—but no chance! Not after you learn of the infamous proposal I've just made to your family!"

"Proposal, Mr. Sanborn?"

"'Buck,' will do nicely. Your cousin Teddy uses it. 'Proposal,' yes. I asked how much they would pay me if the trust reverted? The implication, of course, being that I would arrange that good fortune—if suitably rewarded. You understand?"

The hush that followed made Sanborn faintly aware of the rustling breeze as he kept the dim glow on the pale, high-cheeked face, now immobile as she stared searchingly. Then her tense fingers gripped him. "You didn't mean it! You couldn't, not a thing like that! You were trying to—Peggy *has* been to see you!—and you were trying to learn if her fears were well founded! Am I not right?"

"Of course not!"

"You didn't think that anybody, anybody of the family, would take your hideous proposal seriously?"

Sanborn stood up. "What's so hideous about getting your hands on a million or more, however you can?" He offered his hand. "I'll have to be going."

She arose and took his hand and as she held it, her dark, bright eyes continued to search his face, then the tense line of her mouth broke as a mask might suddenly smile. "I think you are really very clever, Mr. Sanborn!"

"Buck," he corrected.

"Yes, Buck. You are much too intelligent to have been serious!"

"That's why people think I'm smart—they guess wrong. A million dollars, my dear, is one hell of a big lot of money! Maybe we'll meet again?"

Gracia's "I'm sure of it!" was an alluring promise, and somehow the fragrance of her strange perfume enticed as she stood near as if with willingness to be taken into his arms; and he had temptation and curiosity too, but not time to linger, so he squeezed her hand and found it responsive, but nevertheless he turned away.

Gracia stood with rigid slimness, looking into the shadows, following his heavy tread on the gravel. Then she ran quickly along a twisted path to let herself into the house through French doors and saw the plump butler trotting down the rear stairs.

"Hilary, whatever is wrong?"

"Mrs. Theodore has fainted, Miss!" He showed the bottle of spirits of ammonia. "A great shock and—"

"Shock, nothing!" said Gracia, rather in the manner of a friendly housemaid who likes the butler. "She cinches herself up, then overeats and calls it her heart! Her heart, you know, is in your care, Hilary!"

The butler grinned slyly and trotted on.

IV

AT THE South Sea Village there was much bamboo and a lot of palm leaves, the lights were dim, and unending Hawaiian music droned through not-loud speakers. Fans whirred and dried fonds rustled and tugged like frightened things trying to escape.

The place was jam-packed. Sue and McKay had a small table outside the bar,

and the best Sanborn could do was to have a stool fetched for him at this table.

Sue pointed toward the bar where a long row of people sat with rather the idling listlessness of lotus-eaters. "She's got her a man and they are holding hands!"

Sanborn grunted in a manner of surly disinterest. He had much to think about and had been without dinner. Sue and McKay had eaten Chinese dishes here. It was necessary to keep ordering to hold the table. Now when they had drinks, Sanborn took tonic water. There wasn't even space to spread his elbows on the table.

He nudged McKay. "Drag Red out there on the floor so I'll have room to stretch at least one leg at a time."

McKay grinned and got up. "How about it, Sue?" He was as ugly as a sly-eyed monkey but danced with the smoothness of a chip on water. Sue suspected that in addition to being an ex-prizefighter he was a reformed crook, if reformed.

Sanborn chewed a cigar and stared through the smoky haze toward the only girl at the bar who interested him and wished she weren't so distinctively dressed. If any publicity did develop, there would be a dozen or more women who'd recall what she had worn right down to the buckles on her slippers—then everyone would know that Margaret Burrinton had been here. She was with a good-sized man whose face was averted; and Sanborn couldn't think of anything better than to let them go on holding hands. Undoubtedly, she'd been having something stronger than fruit juice, and, if disturbed, might say things in a loud voice and attract attention.

He was in pretty much of a mess in this case, knew it, stubbornly refused to care. After all, almost everything that was brought to him was a mess—spilled milk, so to speak, and his job was to wipe away the tears.

He didn't blame the girl for having lied to him, and he had found more than he expected of what she had said was truth. There were several things he could do, some of them legally, which would be a slow process and give the Burrintons an inside track. As he had told Sue he would figure things out as he went along, but he had already hit the Burrintons a good hard wallop. His "proposal" was to scare them by showing how perfectly obvious was the plan to swindle Margaret of her inheritance, and to give warning of what would be suspected if she died. In case any of them came to him on the quiet and wanted to consider it seriously, so much the better; he'd have proof to back her affidavit.

Yet he half believed that Uncle Theodore was actually persuading himself that the girl was a mental case; he wanted to think so, then he could feel that he was doing right when he got a court order that would permit him to shut up his niece in some institution. That was how a lot of people kidded their conscience.

The pale young gypsy Gracia was the perspicuous one, that is, if she were following her own ideas and not her mother's design. Though he admitted to himself that it would be no trouble at all to like that girl a lot, and in a foolish way, too, he stood by his basic theory that the least admirable motives should always be suspected in everybody when there was any money around; and a good deal of craftiness might lie behind that long-legged mother's thin painted face.

At that moment a tall man with keen black eyes made his way observantly among the tables and was approaching the bar. He looked down at Sanborn, paused, showed his teeth in a forced smile. "Ah, the old super-dooper-snooper at the keyhole, eh?"

Sanborn's derisive eyes went up and down Clary Lawton's tall body. A good-looking fellow in a cold way, with about the same complexion as a mushroom, dark, sleek-haired and a careful dresser. Not long before he had met Sanborn head-on and Lawton's enmity was malicious and hopeful. He did a little gambling for a living, also made love to women who were no longer young, and cultivated the look of a man of mystery.

"Wouldn't have known you, Lawton. Not as tidy as usual. Stolen anybody's love letters lately? Wish you would because I'd like to be hired again to take 'em away from you!"

Lawton murmured menacingly, "You're not half as smart as you think you are, Sanborn! There'll be other times!"

Sanborn watched him go on to the bar. *Always on the prowl* he thought.

Night clubs bored Sanborn. Smoke,

sweat, chatter; faces hovering above tabletops with the look of confiding intimate secrets in public; men bragging to strange women who yawned behind their palms and ordered another drink; out-of-towners boisterously trying for a good time and merely getting drunk; couples squirming in the small dancing space like sardines being canned alive.

He told Sue to go climb in a taxi and get home. "I'll have to wait it out," he said. "Be like her to shriek if I tapped her shoulder!"

McKay took Sue to the curb and Sanborn settled down over another bottle of tonic water. McKay returned and had rum, straight; no beer was served or Mac would have taken that. Both of them in idling patience looked at the man beside Margaret Burrinton.

HIS name was Randolph Durr Karmondy and for over three years he had been out where the Japs were, and he had been sent back with some battle-starred ribbons, a medal or two besides the Purple Heart, to become a civilian. For more than three years, in his sleep and awake, too, he had dreamed about getting back to what it had been like before he went away. Now he knew it wasn't like that and never would be again. For one thing, there had been changes inside of him that broke up his remembrance of the pattern, even if there had been no change in the pattern itself. His face was bitter with old pain and new distrust of his country as he thought he had found it.

He wasn't yet used to civvies and didn't want them; they made him feel discarded, pushed out as useless. Civilian, and where to go? What to do? Not just tonight or next week or next year, but through the years? And there'd been a girl who was to wait and she hadn't waited. That and other things hurt.

He was a stranger in the town. After wandering off the Boulevard, where he hadn't seen anything up to his expectations of Hollywood, he chanced on the Village and, though he knew what the South Seas were really like, he drifted in, climbed a stool, asked for whiskey.

The girl on the stool beside him watched as he turned the whiskey glass slowly between his fingers, staring like a crystal gazer filled with foreboding.

She said softly, "If you don't mind, I wish you would talk to me."

The Village was kept in a kind of romantic twilight but a big candle was on the bar before her; the wax was colored and much of it had melted and hardened into a mass at the base, and the small flame highlighted her face.

He said, "Sure," and her tawny eyes didn't waver before his cruelly suspicious appraising.

"My name is Peggy."

"I'm Rand."

Peggy's smile was solemn. "I hope I shall be pleased to have met you. But don't try to guess, Rand. It's not like you think, whatever you think!"

"So?" he said, indifferently. But her glass was empty and he asked her to have a drink, supposing that was why she had got acquainted. When it came she pushed his money back. "I told you not to guess!"

The Filipino bartender took the $20 bill she drew from her purse and, when he brought change, she didn't count it but gave him an extra quarter. Her drinks cost seventy-five cents and each time she tipped the bartender; and she wanted to pay for Rand's drinks, too, but he wouldn't have it that way.

Peggy pointed to her glass and explained, "I don't know what it is, but he said it was a nice lady's drink. It's something to have a barman think you are a nice lady!"

Presently Rand decided that she was different; and, after an hour or so with some double whiskies to help, he thought she was awfully nice and really pretty. More time went by and when she looked straight at him with soft-voiced earnestness said, "I like you, Rand!" it got through to a place inside of him that he had thought would never be touched again. He took her hand and held it as if he had found a friend.

When he'd had a good many whiskies he wanted to talk, seriously. Tomorrow the remembrance that he had made a kind of confessional to a strange girl at a bar would cause him to feel a fool, but now there were pent-up things inside of him that he had never put into words and they wanted out. The Village was packed, and the unending Hawaiian music somehow sym-

phonized the voice-hum and tongue-clatter, and squeaks meant as laughter, and her face was listeningly near and intent.

He'd been through a lot of muck and blood and pain and, though he didn't speak of those things, it was those things that had given him the brooding wonder as to the why and what-for of Life itself.

"There must be something good beyond just what's good for you and me, or anybody. One guy gets all smashed up and he's done for. Another that's no better—maybe not half as good!—comes through. Luck?

"That's what we call it, but that's not any kind of an answer! If just what luck lets us reach out and grab hold is the best there is, it isn't much! If that's all there is to it, why did Somebody go to all the trouble to make a universe and put us in it?"

Peggy's only reply was, "Rand!" adoringly, as she tightened her fingers on his hand.

A TIRED old man, hat in hand and wearing a canvas apron, limped diffidently among the tables, showing tomorrow's paper. Sanborn, wearily sipping tonic water, gave him a quarter and peered at headlines. Then McKay, who had been studying Peggy's back, tapped the paper and murmured from the side of his twisted mouth, "She's about plastered, Boss, if that'll help any."

She and Rand had got very well acquainted, so they seemed to think. He knew he'd had a lot to drink, too much maybe, but he liked being here with her. Her fingers weren't steady when she leaned to light a cigarette at the candle, and her words were a bit muffled, thick, slurred. She dropped forward with face down and grew quiet, then roused up and gasped, "Please, Rand, take me out of here!" Her eyes were glazed, her face pale.

Rand got off the stool cautiously, with uncertain movements. When she dropped her jacket he stooped for it, and the floor moved aand it wasn't easy to steady himself. Peggy wavered heavily against him and mumbled contritely, "I'm sorry, awfully." She was drunk but didn't want Rand to think so, and he, too, was trying hard with tremor-shaken dignity not to let her know how he felt. Amused eyes watched their unsteadiness as they started out.

She had forgotten her purse. Clary Lawton reached for it, saying to the bartender, "I'll give it to her," but the Filipino pulled it from him and called to her as he hurried down the bar to return the purse himself to the nice lady. Peggy's was a blind sort of groping before she clutched it under her arm, and faces were so confused that she gravely thanked Clary Lawton who was keeping near her. Both she and Rand were a little bleary and vague about the way out but Lawton was helpful in guiding her.

As soon as they left their stools, McKay had headed out for the car. Sanborn pushed a bill into a waiter's hand and quickly made his way near the entrance where he would wait, guide them down the street a little way, offer a lift, all without any disturbance that could be noticed and remembered by onlookers. Parties were moving in and formed a straggly line on the sidewalk, patient with the foreknowledge that you must always wait at this hour to get inside.

The line opened, the women as if drawing aside their skirts to allow Peggy to pass through, and now she was being held up by Clary Lawton and he was carrying her purse. A cab let out a couple at the curb and Lawton hurried, almost carrying her across the walk. The taximan saw him coming and continued to keep the door open.

Peggy stumbled when getting in and slumped on the seat. The taximan, a short square-built fellow, at once switched off the dome light, giving her that much protection from disdainful eyes, and the next instant Lawton, too, was in the cab.

Buck's look slashed right and left; he came near to jumping forward and pulling Lawton out of the taxi then and there, but checked himself. He still had the intention of keeping Peggy from going back to the Burrintons, but with this crowd looking on there might be revealing publicity, because of the distinctive way she was dressed, if he made even a mild row.

The boy who had been with her staggered blearily about the sidewalk, causing people to move back and avoid him as his blind-drunk eyes peered in aimless searching. Uncomplimentary remarks rippled through the onlookers. Some glimmer of sight or instinct caused him to lurch toward

the cab as the door closed. The squat taximan bounced to his seat and pulled a U-turn into the street. The boy teetered off the curb and barely didn't fall, then began to stagger after the taxi. Somebody ran into the street to bring him back and they were struggling there as Sanborn jumped in beside McKay, who had brought the car; and, when the taxi passed, he said, "Stay with that cab, Mac! Put it into the curb at the first dark spot! Lawton doesn't know it, but he's stealing thirty-five thousand dollars! At least, that's to be my story and I'll stick to it!"

V

THE taxi turned east on Hollywood Boulevard and McKay trailed three cars behind but whipped out from behind a sedan that had stopped for the light and he crossed the street against the red to keep up with the cab that got through.

Sanborn sat stonily, a fresh cigar in his mouth. If Lawton were watching behind he would have seen the car come through against the signal, and might suspect that he was being followed; but it was unlikely that he was watching. He'd be going through the tawny purse. It was Sanborn's guess that Lawton, ever watchful for easy money, had caught a glimpse of the bills left in the purse when she paid for drinks. *Next time I'll take it all, down to carfare!* he promised, and realized that Lawton must be something worse than mere blackmailer and thief if he would try to get away with the drunk girl, too.

The cab swung south on Vine and McKay, eased around the corner with a careful pause for a couple of soldiers on their way across, then he picked up, but a black-and-white was right alongside and a police officer said, "Pull into the curb!"

McKay swung over and stopped. "Shall we tell 'em, Boss?"

"If they know me. Otherwise they'll think it's a stall."

The officer came up and Sanborn saw that he was a stranger. The officer said quietly to McKay, "Color-blind?"

"No argument, Officer. I went through back yonder and hadn't oughta."

"Haven't a wife in the hospital?"

McKay grinned. "I'm lucky that way. No wife anywhere!"

The officer asked for a look at the driver's license, inspected it carefully, gave it back. "Well, you're not drunk and you took it easy on that turn just now. Try to do as good all the time."

He turned away as McKay said, "Thanks a lot."

Sanborn had already left the car. "We've lost it, Mac. I'm going back to the drugstore and phone. There'll be a wait. Park and come along after me."

He used the public phone to call the cab office, gave the taximan's number, asked that the driver call here. "Ten dollars if he gets to me in twenty minutes. This is urgent!" The girl said she'd try by leaving word at the stands or tell him if he called in.

McKay drifted to the counter's stool, took a double coke, two straws, and the counter girl talked with him. He was unhandsome, had a twisted mouth and distrusting eyes, but women were nearly always friendly.

Sanborn carried a sandwich and coffee near the phone so as to hear it ring and, when he had finished the coffee, he called an unlisted number and asked for Bradshaw.

Presently an aloof voice inquired, "Yeah?"

Sanborn told who he was and asked if Bradshaw knew Clary Lawton's address. Bradshaw's chuckle was as dry and brittle as the click of his dice. "Don't tell me he's into you, too, Buck! Some of the boys are carrying his I.O.U.s and his luck lately hasn't been so good. No, can't help you. Don't know where he's living. But drop around sometime and let us cut your throat!"

Sanborn told the gambler that would be a pleasure and said good-bye, then he had a look at his watch. One forty-three and the twenty minutes were more than up, but a taximan was coming into the store, a short stout fellow, and his eyes roved searchingly. He saw Sanborn's lifted finger and quickened his step.

"Are you the gent that left a call f'r me?" The voice has a hoarse rasp. "I was so close I come along over 'steada phonin' because—" He broke off as he saw the $10 bill held out to him. "W'y, thanks, Mister! But what c'n I do f'r you?"

"You picked up a couple from the Vil-

lage a while ago. The girl was drunk. Where'd you let them out?"

"W'y, just now at three-nine-six Garson Place. 'Partmen' house. Anything wrong?"

"Know them?"

"Nozir. The guy said she was his wife. Said, 'My wife passed out on me.' Blotto! He had to carry her in. Upstairs. I seen the jacket left in the cab an' went upstairs after 'em. He was unlockin' the door."

"Number?"

"I didn't notice, but second door upstairs to the right, 'cross the hall—" He paused, reflected, then added scrupulously, "I *think* it was the second door."

"Anybody else around?"

"Didn't see 'em."

"Let me have your name and address, just in case. Nothing may come of it, but maybe so."

Within ten minutes McKay brought the car to the curb before 369 Garson. A brass plate on the white stucco front said the Bilso Apartments. Next door a small store had thrust its clapboard front against the sidewalk, showing that this was one of Hollywood's many neighborhoods where residence values had deteriorated and business property values hadn't developed. Sanborn guessed that the nearest thing to shame that Clary Lawton could feel was in living here, because he wore the pose of somebody affluently disdainful even where the service was the best and the scenery as good as at the Coconut Grove.

A low-watt light was burning inside the glass-front entrance door. Since the taximan had followed them in this door wouldn't be locked. A rubber plant in a pot was on each side of the stairs. At least one rubber plant was to be found in any apartment house of the kind, as if a certain stale frowsiness was the plant's thriving atmosphere.

The hall stairs was not carpeted. Sanborn went up on springy tiptoes and saw a thread of light under only one door, the second to the right and across the hall. He put an ear close and heard nothing, then sensitively touched the knob, turning it. No luck.

Sanborn banged on the door, paused, banged again, and didn't hear a step but Lawton's voice was close when he asked irritably, "Who is it? What'd you want?"

Sanborn roughened his tone to say hoarsely, "Hey, Mister! You left twenty dollars bills all over the floor of my cab!"

It wasn't a particularly good story but Sanborn was playing on his basic theory that people were always greedy, and the taximan had been here before to return something found in the cab.

The knob turned and the door had opened only to a crack's width when Sanborn hit it with a driving shoulder that knocked Lawton into a backward stagger. Oaths hissed at Sanborn as he followed through with a hand up under his coat, but Lawton's hands were empty, so the gun stayed in its holster. Sanborn pushed the door to behind him.

Lawton's coat and vest were off, showing that he wore suspenders and the kind of pants that had a close-fitting waistband as high up as the short ribs. Strands of the long wet-looking hair had been jolted down over one side of his pale face, and he slowly pushed back his hair from his eyes. The eyes were venomous.

Sanborn watched him and waited for the inevitable, "What the hell do you want?"

"What do you think?" Sanborn then stepped close. Lawton's suspenders had a picture series of unclothed girls. Sanborn pulled a strap, let go. There wasn't any snap. "War's hell! They've even taken the elastic out of what holds up your pants! Maybe that's why you are about to lose them! Where's the girl?"

"What girl?"

Sanborn pointed toward the bronze-threaded jacket that had been dropped on the seat of a chair. "Margaret Burrinton and thirty-five thousand dollars, fella!"

Lawton drew himself up and the pale face didn't grow paler but tautened staringly. He was not unused to jams and had a manner. Now, coldly, "Just where do you think you come in, Sanborn?"

"Theodore Burrinton called me in tonight. His niece had disappeared with thirty-five thousand dollars. It didn't take long to spot her at Village. She thought she was having such a good time that I was afraid she'd yell bloody murder if I offered a helping hand. And the Burrintons don't want publicity. That's the only reason I eased off when you pushed her new-found boy friend aside and took over. You ducked away in a taxi but I was on your tail. I'll let it go that she spent fifty dollars on her

spree. That makes thirty-four thousand, nine hundred and fifty dollars that I expect to count before I take her out of here. Hand that over and you can sleep in your own bed. Otherwise, you talk to the cops! Where is she—and it?"

Lawton looked steadily at him, then looked away. "Cigarette," he muttered and reached for a pack on the table and, glancing back, his eyes were narrowed to a dagger-point gleam.

"Try it!" Sanborn told him.

"Try what?"

"Anything that'll give me an excuse to shoot you! Then I can pocket the money and say you hid it."

"You would!" Lawton put a match to the cigarette, dropped the flaming match into a tray, watched it burn. "It won't add up to even five grand, Sanborn." He looked up to see how Sanborn would take it. "That's the truth."

Sanborn shrugged. "Do you think I'm going to carry her out of here and have you tell the Burrintons I also took along the thirty-five grand? Think it over! Let's look at the girl."

Lawton removed the cigarette from his lips and pointed toward an open door with his left hand. "In there and out cold!"

"After you!"

As Lawton went ahead he stroked his hair which wouldn't stay in place. At the foot of the bed he said, "I didn't know who she was. I thought she was a plastered kid. I wanted to see her taken care of, that's all." His voice had an aggrieved inflection.

Sanborn pointed toward the emptied purse, now open like a wide hungry mouth and its contents, excepting the money, lay spilled on the floor.

Lawton explained, "I was looking for an address to see who she was. Late as it is, I was about to call Teddy Burrinton. I know him."

"Where's her money?"

Lawton sucked on the cigarette. Ashes fell unnoticed. "I counted it, of course. Naturally, all that green stuff! Curious, sure! Who wouldn't be? Then you knocked and I tossed it in that drawer over there. Look if you don't believe me."

"I don't believe you," Sanborn said matter-of-factly. "You spotted money on the girl and made a big play. Grabbed girl and all! What you intended from here on, I don't know. Probably would have carried her out and dumped her in a vacant lot. You've done worse for less!"

Lawton eyed him but didn't say anything.

Sanborn added, "This is kidnaping, if anybody wants to call it that. So quit making funny faces. My job is to be sure the girl and her money are safe. After that, what the Burrintons do to you is their business. They don't want publicity, so maybe you can squirm out of it. But I either take the money when I take the girl, or I take you! Suit yourself!"

THEY stood shoulder to shoulder at the foot of the bed where Peggy lay in a rumpled huddle on the green counterpane. Her hat was awry, her hair in a messy tangle; she lay on her side with head back and mouth open. The silk dress, with deep unbrilliant colors, was bunched above stockings that had the sheen of dull gold. Sanborn wore no more expression than a mask as he gazed at her and thought, *You're going to be one awful sick kid when you come out of that!*

Lawton eased a hand down into his trousers' deep side pocket, then he swung quickly aside, backing to the wall as he pulled the gun. It was a .45 automatic and he leveled down on Sanborn with, "Keep back, damn you, or I'll let you have it!"

Sanborn had wheeled into an abrupt stop with hands down; no man could draw against a gun leveled at him three feet away. Gazing at the unlucky girl had tipped him off guard, and the thought, *I'll never feel sorry for anybody again!* He ought to have searched Lawton but hadn't suspected that so fastidious a dresser would weight his trousers with a gun; and, besides, he had never regarded the fellow as more than a posturing crookster whose play was to dress well, look mysterious, and infatuate some fool and usually middle-aged woman.

But Lawton was now desperate and looked it. The stringy hair had again fallen over the side of his face and moved as his head vibrated when he said through clenched teeth, "I'm not going to be the fall guy in this set-up!" His lips unsmilingly drew away from the even white teeth, and a fierce hopelessness was in his eyes. "I tell you she didn't have the money!" Lawton's

voice broke in a panicky threat of, "And if you don't give me an out, I'll let you have it right through the belly! Nobody's going to cold-deck me into the pen—I'll go for murder first!"

Sanborn saw that he was facing a crazed man and studied chances with a blank unhurrying look, glad to have him talk because talk was a weakness that threw a lot of tough bozos off guard.

Then Lawton snarled, "You'll get me out of this or they'll bury you first! Put your hands up!"

Sanborn's eyes focused on the muzzle and his hands moved as if lifting; then the right hand shot out in a far-reaching straight thrust and, with the quick violence of a blow, the heel of his palm struck the gun's muzzle and his fingers clamped on the slide with unyielding pressure. It was all the matter of a second or less, and though Lawton pulled on the trigger the hammer wouldn't fall. The gun seemed broken or bewitched; he couldn't fire. Sanborn's face had a sardonic twist as he stepped closer, bringing a left uppercut against the man's cheek.

The blow hit with a crunch-sound. Lawton's head snapped back on what looked like a broken neck, a rubbery looseness made his knees bend, and the lax fingers fell away from the gun that remained in Sanborn's hand as Lawton slumped to the floor, down and out.

Sanborn eyed him with half-smiling grimness while rubbing his bruised knuckles absently against a hip; he was a better wrestler than boxer, but had liked the feel of fitting his fist against the crook's pale face.

He also liked having tricked the fellow, who never would know what had happened unless somebody who knew guns told him that a Colt .45 automatic can't be fired if there is pressure enough on the muzzle to move the slide as much as the sixteenth of an inch, and it doesn't take much pressure.

I'll give him another puzzle! he thought and, scarcely looking at his fingers, he drew the magazine, threw out the shell in the chamber, and field-stripped the gun, tossing the pieces to the carpet.

He then opened the drawer that Lawton had indicated, but no money was there. He hadn't expected to find any; Lawton had been merely trying to get him to move away, deflect his eyes, so the gun could be brought into play.

SANBORN glanced about the room but would not take the trouble to search, so he scooped the girl's dumped-out articles on the floor back into the purse, closed and pitched it to the bed, then paused with a studying look at Peggy.

He didn't want to feel sorry for her but he did, a little; just how sorry would depend on what kind of a scene she put on when her hangover was at its best. She had played hell tonight with almost anything that he could do for her, at least as far as hiding her from the Burrintons was concerned. He might make a try at even that, and would think it over, but he was doubtful. He went into the front room, returned with the jacket and huddled her into it about as he would have put a jacket on a limber mannikin.

Lawton groaned then sat up with a where-am-I expression. His hand fumbled to his face, touched blood and he stared at the smear on his fingers, then got to his feet and, with an anxious unsteady lurch, made for the mirror. What he saw wasn't pretty. His nose was bleeding, his mouth was cut and his thin lips were swelling, and when he tried to curse his lips had an immobile numbness, giving the words a muffled lisp. He drew a handkerchief and pressed it to his mouth, stared at the blood-stain, pressed again tenderly.

Sanborn said, "Fork over the money!" Lawton, not moving, peered malevolently at him in the mirror. Then when he was told to get going Lawton turned, started to say something, changed his mind and went sulkily toward a closet with Sanborn at his heels and remarking, "The next trick, fella, will be for keeps!"

There wasn't any trick. Lawton held the handkerchief to his mouth and nose as he reached one-handedly overhead for a shoebox on a shelf. "That's all there is," he mumbled.

Sanborn pointed toward a chair, told Lawton to sit down and stay put, then dumped the money on the bed and counted $4,500, which he stuffed into the purse which he again dropped by the girl's side.

He turned to Lawton. "Think I still look like a sap?"

"Sanborn, that's every dime!"

He couldn't blame Sanborn for not believing him, but that was how it was and all he could do was to say so.

Sanborn's reply was, "Where'd you stash it?"

Lawton got up stiffly and again looked into the mirror and took a fresh handkerchief, wiping at his mouth. He faced about, baffled, scared, helpless and tried to explain; it was hard for him to talk because his lips were thickened, and he knew that the best he could say would sound like a stall, being just the sort of thing he would say if he had concealed the money and stood pat on a denial.

Sanborn cut him short with, "All right, empty your pockets!"

Lawton sullenly drew a wallet. Sanborn took it, found it filled, and after counting out $450 gave back the wallet.

"Damn you, that's mine!" Lawton protested.

Sanborn didn't believe him, was sure he'd filled the wallet from Peggy's purse, and demanded, "But what about the thirty thousand that isn't? You're leaving with me!"

"You're not a copper!"

"I'll play the part till we find one!"

"Let me wash up and change a shirt?"

"Don't be fussy! The police'll think you look like you ought. Keep about ten feet before me and go slow. We'll leave the lights on."

Sanborn lifted the girl, held her against him, held her purse, too. Lawton watched from the doorway with thoughts in his eyes, and Buck said, "Get going!"

Lawton, going as fast as he could, dashed with fleeing speed through the next room where he jerked the door open, clicked the light out, slammed the door shut and ran down the stairs. Sanborn, already in the hall, listened and heard the downstairs front door close with a jar that vibrated through the building.

Then he told the unconscious girl, "Just like I planned it, kid! Your thirty-five thousand is accounted for—if we want it that way. And for a while, anyhow, we'll play that we do!"

McKay stood on the sidewalk and with no excitement at all said, "He come out of there, jumpin' high, and I yelled. He cut the corner of that store an' went down the street so fast he wasn't touching the ground more than every third step."

Sanborn laid Peggy on the back seat, then struck a match to look at his watch. He didn't have a radium face because sometimes he got in dark places where he didn't care to have a glow about him. "Pull for the office, Mac. We're going to smuggle her upstairs!"

VI

SANBORN'S office was in a building that had an all-night elevator; from 8 p.m. on, passengers registered on a board in the cage, and after midnight a grille was drawn across the entrance and only persons known to the elevator man were admitted.

The car parked not quite before the entrance, then McKay rang the bell and, when the pilot sleepily left the stool in his cage and opened the grille, McKay thrust out a half-pint.

"Help yourself to some joy-juice, Pete. I'm going upstairs to snooze so I'll be on the job when the boss walks in." And, putting the bottle in Pete's hand, McKay remarked that he'd close the gate, then pushed the grille to with the sound of snapping it shut, though he carefully didn't lock it; and after that he took the pilot's arm with, "I just heard a good one."

McKay stood lazily at the open door of the elevator on the fifth floor to finish the story, which wasn't very funny and took quite a lot of telling; and in the meantime Sanborn carried the unconscious girl through the entrance, opened the unlatched grille, locked it behind him and started up the stairs.

McKay had the office door open and grinned, "Easy, hm?"

Sanborn said, "The easy part is all over. From here on we do a tight-rope dance, blindfolded!"

"I ain't worryin'."

Sanborn carried the girl through the offices and into the Guest Room where he laid her on the couch, pulled the hat which had an elastic band under her hair at the back of her head; and, after he removed the slippers, he shook a light rug over her and opened a window. It was 3:15 a.m.

He flung off his coat and took the bottle

of whiskey from his desk. McKay poured a stiff one for himself, but Sanborn mixed water with his and sipped, thoughtfully. Then he lit a cigar and watched the smoke and presently took off a shoe and scratched at the sole of his foot.

When he had replaced the shoe and laced it, he said, "Sure as hell, Lawton's going to tell that family he had picked up the girl to take care of her and that I got away with all her money. So I guess that trying to hide her from here on is out. You go in there and put a chair against the outside door and get what sleep you can. I've got to think. And don't let her jump from a window. She'll want to, with a head like she's growing!"

Sanborn lifted his feet to the desk and watched the drift of cigar smoke; then he loosened his collar and rasped a palm on his bristly cheek. He felt sticky all over and would get a shave, bath and change when he could.

After a time he pulled his feet from the desk, put the cigar on a tray to let it die and, flipping on the desk light, he began to fiddle with the dismantled Mauser and was scarcely aware of putting it together because his fingers seemed to have little eyes of their own when he was handling anything mechanical.

HIS thoughts went round and round the Burrinton girl. Just a kid, but she had locked people up and made off with $35,000— *Her own money, too!* he insisted, though a court might not agree. And she had fooled him about her age. He rather respected her for having done that since it was his business not to be fooled. She ought to have her ears pinned back with thumbtacks for ducking out and going blotto in a night club, but at least she knew what she wanted and the foolhardiness to go after it. He had watched her in the bar; she'd been quiet and lady-like, except for not knowing what rum drinks can do to you.

No doubt about it, she would probably run wild if and when she received her inheritance, but because other people thought they could make better use of the money wasn't justification for putting her in an asylum or something worse—if there could be anything worse! Her situation at home, or what she called "home," was maddening enough to drive anybody into acting a little crazy; and the wish for her death was in every Burrinton, possibly excepting the gypsy-like Gracia.

That Gracia girl had lure and knew it. Even now the fragrance of her strange perfume returned momentarily to his nostrils as his memory continued to look her over with the wish to see her again. She'd pleased him, too, by the incisive guess that his "proposal" had been a feint, and it hadn't startled her in the least; in fact, her reasoning cut right straight through to the opinion that Peggy had been to see him. *Good head on her!* he thought, approvingly. And she either really didn't know, or had rebuffed his guess that some of the trust money was sticking to Uncle Theodore's fingers. If so, he probably passed it around among members of the family, which might be why the charming Gracia wouldn't care to admit that she knew anything about it. *We'll see when I get to her again,* he decided and wondered just why she had influenced Peggy to come to him; and why Peggy hadn't made any exception of Cousin Gracia when she spoke of hating her family. That was something to be inquired about when Peggy came up for air.

As he carefully sighted and snapped the Mauser at a doorknob, he let his thoughts drift any old way, hoping they would interlock into some kind of plan. He did not want to pull that money out of the safety deposit box and let it go back into Uncle Theodore's fish-flabby hands. *No. Lawton made away with it!* he grinned. *That's my story and I'll stick to it!* He felt that he and Peggy needed a war-chest. Lawton had been maneuvered into the perfect fall guy; and if any talk about the money spread around the town he'd have a high old time explaining to the boys who carried his I.O.U.'s.

As for Peggy's having made a mess of things—it meant merely that things had been messed up and he'd give her hell for it; but, after all, it was his business to see that they weren't messed up after they had been put into his hands. People who were smart enough not to mess things up never came near him.

Sanborn unlocked the gun closet and thrust the Mauser into its wooden holster

which could also serve as a carbine stock, then he swung off the shoulder holster he had been wearing and drew the .45, returning it, loaded, to its green baize niche.

McKay looked into the office and drawled, "She's coming out of it, Boss."

Sanborn swung the closet door to, glanced at his wrist, found it a little after 5 o'clock.

"Coffee may help. Go down and get some, Mac. I've got plenty of aspirin."

McKAY let himself out and Sanborn went in for a look at the girl, whose fingers were writhing about her face and hair, and she moaned a little and struck out with her feet, not yet fully conscious but with pain corkscrewing through her head. She opened her eyes, then shut them quickly and groaned. Dawn was gray at the windows and a small breeze panted timidly, through the one window that was open.

"Still like Hawaiian music?"

That startled her into sitting up with a wild look, but her head achingly whirled and she groaned and lay back, her fingers gouging at the pain in her eyeballs. Each breath was a gasped, long-drawn groan and her fingers, probing for the nerves that hurt, couldn't be still.

Sanborn went near to offer a glass of water and some aspirin and, when he spoke, her head rolled toward him on the pillow as she opened her eyes in a dry, lifeless stare; they weren't tawny now but looked like wet, yellow mud. She made a horrible grimace as she recognized him and cried incredulously, *"You?"*

Then with both hands to her head so that it wouldn't float off her shoulders, she raised up and peered and blinked about the room. "Where's Rand?"

"Probably in the hoosegow!"

"Rand? Where is he? He promised he would never leave me and"—her voice dropped anxiously—"he did?"

As Sanborn was offering the aspirin, he told her, "My dear, men say things they don't mean even when they're sober," and that made her mad and she struck his hand away, knocking the tablets to the floor, and called him a fool because Rand wasn't like that!

He said, "Sister, it's your hangover. Enjoy it all you can," and returned the glass of water to the table.

Out went her hand as her voice went up in an imperious speech, "Give me that aspirin!"

"You forget you're not at home!" he said, but nevertheless shook two more tablets from the bottle into her palm and gave over the glass of water, which tasted so much better than she expected that she thrust the emptied glass at him with, "I want some more!"

Sanborn's eyes hit her, lingered, slid away. After all, she was a wretched kid, so he brought another glassful; and she didn't say, "Thanks," but downed a part of it and held out the glass for him to take. He did, and almost flung what was left of the water into her face, but let it pass though he thought, *You keep on and I'll teach you manners!"*

Peggy fell back on the couch, hid her face with an arm, moaned and kicked her feet about; then a moment later sat up again and blazed at him, "I want Rand!" She flung the rug to the floor, jumped off the couch, clenched her fists, screamed, "I won't be a prisoner! I've hired you to do things for me, and why am I here, like this? You big, hulking stupid, you!"

Sanborn reached out slowly and thrust his long fingers deep into her hair, pushed her head back, held up a hand as if to slap and said steadily, "You're still drunk. Quiet down or I'll bat you!"

"You don't dare!"

Before the words had cleared her lips his palm struck with a sliding smack, and he put a sting into it, then pushed her from him. The blow took her breath, and also her cheek burned and reddened. She pressed a hand there and was startlingly shocked.

"Strike a woman!"

Sanborn told her, "No—just an old fish-packer's granddaughter. Pick up girl! A treacherous little liar who told me she was of age and hadn't stolen anything. And last night you passed out in a decent joint where a good-looking boy had to work to keep you off the floor. Then you went away with one of the dirtiest rats in Hollywood—to his apartment. I pulled you out of there not three hours ago and brought you here to sleep it off.

"Do you think I'm going to waste any time with a hoodlum in skirts? You can

have your money back, all of it except what you blew on rum last night. The police ought to be looking for you by now, so I'm calling a cop! I'll throw you in a taxi with him and send you home. And when Uncle Theodore goes to court to prove you are crazy, I'll be right there to help!"

Peggy's fingertips were pressed to her face in dazed amazement while Sanborn, sardonic and convincing, glowered at her; then he crossed the room, heaved a heavy mirror from its hook on the wall and brought it before her. "Here, have a look!"

As Peggy stared at herself in fascinated distress, her hands moved in feebly straying motions to smooth hair that was matted and at loose ends, too, like a straw-colored wig that had been kicked about. Her face began to twitch and she tried not to cry, but gave way with both hands over her eyes, then threw herself on the couch and huddled on her side with legs drawn up as she sobbed.

McKay came in quietly with two bags and gazed at her, not curious; it was nothing new to have ladies bawl in this office.

Sanborn told him, "All according to Hoyle," and returned to his swivel chair. McKay had brought coffee, and cold beer which he thought the best pick-me-up possible, but Sanborn said not to bother her.

McKay said the beer would get warm, so he drank from a bottle himself. The coffee would get cold but could be heated on a plate. McKay took his half-empty bottle with him and returned to his chair in the other room to make sure she didn't do anything rash.

Presently the sobbing lessened and stopped.

SANBORN'S head rested on the chair's back with his hands folded there for a cushion as he thought about calling the whole thing off. The Burrintons might splutter some when they learned how far he'd gone but they'd keep their mouths shut, not wanting publicity, and their surprised relief at getting back so much of the money would help.

But he told himself stubbornly, *Damn it, the kid hasn't had a fair break!* He could imagine what life with Uncle Theodore, and especially Mrs. Theodore, was like; and Gracia's cat-eyed mother appeared to have capabilities of torment.

He grinned a little, realizing that it wasn't all one-sided; Peggy had something of a hell cat's temper.

Most clients got into messes of their own making, but Old Jack had flung her into this one when he set up the trust, partly to spite the two sons for whom he had neither respect nor liking, but largely out of grief for the one son who had been much like Old Jack himself.

Sanborn opened his eyes.

Peggy was standing before the desk. She had come on timid tiptoes, a bedraggled weary slim shivering figure. She hadn't a handkerchief and, like a child, wiped at her tear-wet face with her fingers, then she rested her shaky hands on the desk and gazed pleadingly as sob-sighs shook her.

It was hard for her to speak through the sighs. "Mr. Sanborn, I'm sorry! I'll be good, honest!" It was so like a spanked child's repentent frankness that Sanborn's lips stiffened to keep the smile out of sight. "Don't send me back there! I don't care what you do with me only—only Rand *is* a wonderful boy! I know I'll never find another boy I like as well, so won't you—won't you please try to find him for me? He likes me, too. He said so! And if I know he still likes me, I'll—I'll do anything you want, Mr. Sanborn, and be *good!* Please?" Sanborn unrevealingly studied her sentimental wretchedness. It was funny, grotesque, pathetic. A kid multi-million heiress, with a whale of a hangover, pining for a stranger with whom she'd held hands while Hawaiian music droned on and through the artificial twilight.

His quiet rumble surprised her with, "All right, Peggy, if you want to play ball that way, I'll try to find him!"

Looking for a tall lad who'd had too much to drink after midnight was not a very hopeful prospect; but, at the last glimpse he'd had of him, Sanborn saw the boy near the middle of the street and fighting with a good Samaritan, so it was very likely that he had been thrown in the hoosegow. He went around the desk and put an arm around the girl. She was shivering; the hangover had drained the heat from her body, and when he stroked her shoulder she leaned against him, liking the warmth of his body, the feeling of security his size and solidity gave. *Just a sick scared kid!* he

thought, thinking of her then as if she were really no more than twelve.

He lifted her as if she were twelve and carried her to the couch.

"We'll work something out, Peggy. So you curl up now and try for some sleep. Everything won't be quiet as we want it because we'll have to start with a new deal. Take a couple more aspirin and go to sleep, kid."

As he tucked her in, she smiled staringly, with trustfulness.

He drew the blinds, beckoned to McKay and closed the door.

"She'll stay put now, Mac. I want you to hike to the police station and see if her boy friend got picked up last night. He was too drunk to have much of anything else happen to him. You had a good enough look at the boy to know him again. Here's some money for bail. Take him to my apartment. Clean him up, feed him, let him sleep, but hold him. If he's a halfway decent kid, it'll pay off. If he's a bum, we'll use him the best we can, anyhow."

McKay's hand waggled assent as he turned toward the door. "Whatever you say, Boss."

SANBORN sat down again, heaved his feet to the desk, to think things over as he waited. He knew a lot about people, but just how much he knew he didn't know because so often what he felt was sure knowledge, wasn't. He believed this girl was spoiled as hell, with an heiress arrogance, too, but that was because she'd been watched over, guarded like the golden-egg-laying goose, and withheld from life as most kids live it; and so, in some ways, she was as immature as Uncle Theodore pretended. Now, like a very small girl, she wanted her boy-doll. She'd never had one before; didn't know they were bargain-counter drugs. Sanborn bet with himself that Cousin Gracia knew.

It was about eight o'clock when the phone jarred Sanborn out of ponderings, and McKay's indolent voice informed him, "We're all set, Boss. He's in your tub now. Good guy, or will be when he gets over wantin' to die! No charge. The cops just picked him up and laid him away overnight for safe-keepin'. The desk sarge said the kids that've been through the smoke over in the islands can stumble in this man's town without bein' sloughed. He's an ex-Marine."

Sanborn said for McKay to get the low-down on Rand, even to the home address; and after that he immediately began to dial Axter 2329. Since the Burrintons were pretty sure to find out that he had grabbed Peggy, he thought it best to give the information first, himself.

A voice that had the smug smoothness of the butler answered. When Sanborn asked for Mr. Burrinton, he got back an immediate very sorry, sir, but Mr. Burrinton was indisposed and couldn't possibly be disturbed; and up went the receiver.

RIGHT off, Sanborn dialed the number again and said sternly, "When it is suitable to disturb the indisposed Mr. Burrinton, inform him that a well-known Hollywood crook carried off Margaret Burrinton to his apartment last night. With all the money she had, too! This is Buchanan Sanborn."

He replaced the receiver, lifted his feet back to the desk, folded his hands across his stomach and closed his eyes with the look of smiling in his sleep.

When the phone began to ring he opened one eye, but let it ring. That would be the Burrintons trying to call him.

Sue came into the office promptly at nine and looked as fresh as a dew-washed daisy, very neat and dainty, with head high, and her violet eyes quizzically studied his haggardness.

"Did you snatch the heiress, Buck?"

He glowered. "Red, you're a fraud. Nobody can feel as good as you look. Not at this time of day!"

"Where's your pet?"

He pointed with his thumb. "Sleeping it off. I don't like her."

"Looks like Mr. Sanborn had burned his little fingers on a red-hot poker, hm? Nobody made you do it, Buck. It's not too late to back up, and you don't need money that bad!"

Sanborn got out of the chair and thrust his fists into his pants' pockets as he paced to the door and back. "Just a kid. I don't like kids! Women ought to be past forty when they sprain their ankles, then you don't care. I'm paid—when I am paid!—for what I do, not how I feel. But kids make you sorry for 'em. From now on I'll

do business with only fat middle-aged people!"

Sue raised her brows. "It must have been a wild night!"

The phone began to ring. She took it up, then held it toward him. "For you—" Sue set her teeth—"damn her!"

"Who?"

"That Burrinton secretary or something!" Her hand covered the receiver as she bitterly mimicked the over-cultured voice with the boneless "r's."

"Ask the name."

Sue inquired, then again mimicked the voice's hyper-elegance with, "Please be so kind as to inform Mr. Sanborn that Gracia Burrinton is on the telephone."

"Umm-m-m!" said Sanborn and reached for the phone. "Hello there, Gracia!"

Sue caught her breath, her eyes narrowing.

"Oh, Mr. Sanborn—Buck, I mean! Was it really you who phoned about Peggy? How horrible, dreadful, and what can be done? Oh, ghastly, isn't it!"

SANBORN told her that what he had reported to the butler was true as far as it went; but it was also true that he had tagged along and persuaded the crook to let Peggy go.

"But all I could find was about five thousand dollars. Just wasn't any more!"

Then Gracia said, "In that case, we must inform the police, don't you think? The money has to be recovered!"

Sanborn groaned inside of himself. He'd either have to get the money back to the Burrintons or let the police go to work; so he told her, sure, sure, by all means to let the police know. He gave her the name and address of the taximan who had picked them up at the South Sea village, and he gave Lawton's name and address, and said that he himself would be glad to cooperate with the police.

"And by the way, your cousin Teddy knows Lawton, so Lawton says. And Peggy? Oh, I don't know yet just which hospital the doctor took her to! You see, there was quite a commotion. Of course, I'll let you know as soon as I learn. And anything I can do to help the police! Good-bye!"

And as he hung up the receiver he thought to himself, *Of all the damn' fools! If I'd thought, I wouldn't have said that! Don't know what hospital—you're slipping, Sanborn!*

Sue eyed him demandingly. "And just who is that Gracia?"

He felt pretty sour at that moment. Just when he was planning to wriggle out of trouble, he'd let his foot slip into something sticky because he hadn't wanted any of the Burrintons trooping into the office to talk with Peggy, not until he had gone over everything with her; and so he must say where she was, or say he didn't know, and he couldn't pretend not to know unless she was under the care of a doctor. Of course, next, they would demand the name of the doctor. Therefore Sanborn knew that today he wasn't going to answer the phone or even admit that he was in his office.

Sue repeated a little angrily, "Just who *is* this Gracia?"

Sanborn looked at her from behind a poker face. "Taller than you, not so old, and more slender. Dark hair, dark eyes, pale face that's not quite regular but striking.

"Brilliant eyes! Poise, lots of poise and pleasant. Smart girl—very; and pretty—also very! Wears a perfume that's new to me and I like it. The aloof voice is to keep servants and such inferior persons as answer office phones in their place. She's eager and friendly—with friends."

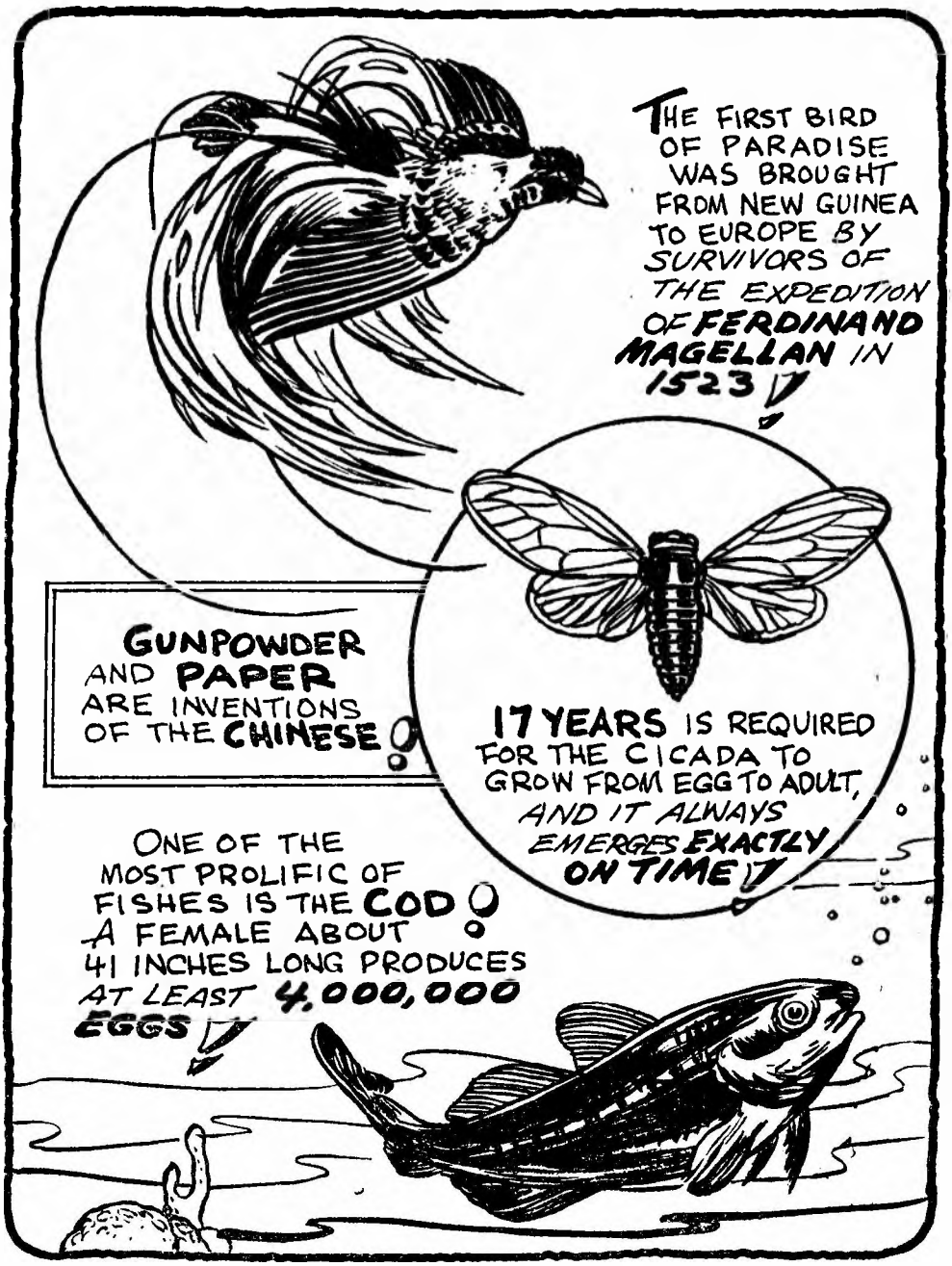
He would have kept on about Gracia's charms but Sue glared, then swished about and her heels clicked rapidly as she returned to her own office.

He called after her, "Miss Carter, I'm not in—not to anybody but Mac!"

The door closed behind her. Sanborn's eyes stayed on the door, solemnly. He began to smile but shook his head and the smile fell away. *No, it's not that. I'm too old and tough. She's not jealous. She just doesn't want to see her boss make a fool of himself. He's likely to do it, too, if Gracia offers to help!*

(*Part II in the next* SHORT STORIES)

Curioddities By Weill



Oceans Brew Hurricanes; There's Comfort in a Ditch.

MAN IN A DITCH

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

TWO hundred feet north of the gas dock John Bell stopped rowing. His solid brown hands allowed the oars to trail in the tea-colored water. The horizontal wrinkles deepened as he slitted his eyes to look back through the hard hitting sunlight at young Dan Turrentine.

There was something pleasing to him in the way Dan Turrentine swung the sledge with which he was spiking together the rotting timbers of that old dock. The heavy tool moved with zest and accuracy. It landed with Dan Turrentine's head and heart behind it.

A satisfying thing, that. But what hurt John Bell was the sight of a young fellow chucking away his mind and muscle on

a hopeless task. That dock couldn't earn its keep on the inland waterway.

John hesitated. For a moment longer he watched the younger man move with willing strength, with easy skill, with youthful confidence. He drew a breath, uncertain, ill at ease. "Young fool!" he mumbled. He stuffed a hank of overlong, grizzling hair up under his battered cap. "Now don't you be a nosy, interfering lubber," he remonstrated with himself.

Thunk! The sledge hit again.

John Bell's oar blades dug into the water. His muscled wrists parted company in opposing thrusts, one pulling ahead, the other backing water. The rowboat spun around like a startled horse.

John rowed back to the gas dock. His strokes lagged and weakened as he drew closer but he laid a hand on the ladder and beckoned with overdone, imperious command to Dan Turrentine.

"Getting this worm-eaten landing all fixed up for a real pretty bankruptcy?" John asked.

Dan Turrentine grinned a little wryly. The March sun of Florida was drawing sweat from his face.

"Maybe, captain," he conceded. "You think so?"

"Look," said John Bell. "Every spike you buy is money goin' out. Before you put too much out get some money coming in."

Dan Turrentine closed one eye thoughtfully and nodded.

"Sense," he said. He looked up and down the empty canal. "But where is this in-coming money?"

"If you don't see it now what's the use of——"

From the shady side of the dilapidated shack beside the gas pump Paul Rickert came strolling out into the sun. Rickert had unloaded that dock on young Dan Turrentine and now points of light in his jet black eyes bore upon John Bell. His lips were tight.

"You always want to listen to Cap'n Bell, Dan," he said. "Captain Bell made plenty carrying cargoes in the islands. Not many of us can quit and be a water hermit at his age. Not many."

John's weathered forehead wrinkled up formidably at that jab. Forty-eight, he was, and maybe it did look as if he had retired. Retired, not quit.

"You can't quit if you ain't been doing something," he said succinctly.

Dan Turrentine, too, was regarding Rickert without favor.

"I'm wide open for advice," he said to John. "So far this dock business isn't quite as represented by this guy."

Rickert smiled tautly, with his approval of himself thinly concealed. "I gave you first shot at it, boy."

"You shot at me first, you mean," Dan said.

John Bell pointed a calloused finger at the outboard motor that hung on the transom of his rowboat.

"That thing quit on me on the way to town, Dan. Overhaul it."

Dan grinned broadly. "A job's even better'n advice," he said.

HE came down the ladder like water flowing, unclamped the outboard and heaved it up onto the dock.

Paul Rickert kept his hands in his pockets. Dressed up, was Rickert, with a linen coat over his narrow, sloping shoulders and a fancy flowery necktie under his narrow, watchful face.

John pursed his lips. Why should Rickert loiter on the dock only a few days after he had palmed it off on young Dan? Dan had no more money. Odd. Odd? More than that.

It was a shouting mystery. There were places in town, a pool parlor, a beer joint, for better loafing.

Dan Turrentine's eyes were eager on John's face.

"Maybe you'd give me a shot at helping you refit the schooner, captain."

Rickert laughed softly. A derisive, knowing laugh. Rickert had been watching John Bell for months now on his hurricane-battered craft. He acted as if he knew the answer to that one.

"You are going to refit, ain't you, skipper?" he said. "Just tearing anxious to spend your insurance money on her and get back to sea, ain't you?"

John Bell grunted non-committally. Abruptly, as if a thought had hit him Paul Rickert stared down at John. There was sudden calculation in his narrow black eyes.

Dan Turrentine shifted a foot on the ladder. He asked uneasily:

"You don't think I can make a go of this place, skipper?"

John Bell kept his mouth shut, thinking of the long empty summer months when ditchcrawling pleasure craft would be laid up in yards or cruising along hundreds of miles north of Dan Turrentine's gas pump. No amount of youthful drive would cure that. Besides that, the place was too far from town or anything else but unending sand, mangroves, and palmetto scrub. A lean living for an old man or a loafer, that rotting gas dock. And even Rickert, who was loafer enough, had unloaded.

Dan read John's face. "Well, I'll sho' give it a damn good whirl, anyhow," he said. "And I'm willin' to listen, if you got any tips."

"When will the outboard be ready?"

"Have it for your later in the day," Dan said too promptly.

John Bell nodded, frowning. He shoved off but paused before he dug in his oars.

"A man could make money almost anywheres, if he did what he said," he told Dan. "Which nobody does."

From above Paul Rickert laughed. "You listen to Cap'n Bell," he said to Dan. "Anything he says about making money is good advice. He knows."

Dan Turrentine ignored him. "I'll have the mill for you later today, skipper," he said. "I know what you mean. I've been stuck by guys whose tongues do more work than their backs."

"That's swell." John's voice had gone sour. Dan had made that easy promise without inspecting the outboard. Just another of them. No wonder John Bell felt better in his mind when he gave other men a good wide berth. He rowed away from the gas dock.

"Good-by, cap'n!" Rickert called. No doubt about it. That "cap'n" was subtly stressed.

The southeaster that blew in off the Gulf Stream and steeplechased on over the sand dunes of the narrow barrier beach gave him a gentle lift on his way but the current was strongly against him in the mangrove-bordered canal.

Less than half way to the schooner *Trident* John passed the green lawn, shadowed by coco-palms, that framed the sand-colored stucco house of Smoke Connor, who ran the gambling rooms in the back of the Mirafleur Club. Right here was where the two Floridas rubbed elbows—the touristy smart playground and the primitive land of 'gators and mangroves. At the Connor house.

Two or three of the sheriff's deputies were still bumbling around the place, as erratic as ants. Maybe they expected to get clues to who had slugged Smoke from the palmetto bugs. They wouldn't. Palmetto bugs had done their dark scavenging by the time Smoke got back to his guileless looking little concrete bungalow with the night's take in his briefcase.

JOHN BELL was tempted to hail a deputy and ask him if Smoke Connor had come out of his concussion, or was going to. But he didn't. He had done enough talking for one day. The deputies, solidly built men with coats on, drifted together to watch John pull past Connor's house. They didn't look too bright but they didn't look afraid of anything, either. They had nothing to say. John glanced past them, at his schooner. Somehow he couldn't take men's eyes these days. The eyes probed into him.

He stared elaborately back at Dan Turrentine's gas dock. Dan had disappeared inside the shack with the motor but Paul Rickert was still in sight. Rickert had been joined by the squat, slow-moving form of the unpleasant mug Bott, who had sometimes handled a gas hose at the dock with ape-like awkwardness. Bottomley, that fellow's name was, but Bott described him better, somehow. Both facing this way. John scowled at them. Funny, Rickert hanging around like that.

In mid-stroke John paused to shove the lock of grizzled hair back under his cap. Probably he'd have to submit to a haircut from that blasted, talky barber one of these days. But not yet. Maybe he could cut his own hair. Save money.

He drew alongside the *Trident*. The beamy old West Indies trading schooner lay in a narrow half-moon of deep water cut out of the canal bank. She was tugging only half-heartedly at her bow anchor. Still a good looking ship, by Peter, though the tough blow had taken bowsprit and foremast out of her. And maybe that big wind had taken the heart out of her master.

Captain John Bell shook his head an-

grily, dumped his meager purchases on deck, climbed aboard at the starboard quarter and ran the rowboat out on the line to the bank.

He unlocked the cabin with brown hands moving quickly and dived below for his binoculars. On deck again he stood in the shadow of the mainmast and focussed the powerful glasses on the gas dock.

Rickert, inconspicuous beside the shack, still had his hands in his pockets. His head was turned toward the schooner—No. His head was turned toward Smoke Connor's place.

John was jolted by a sudden thought. He slued around and looked at the gambler's neat, unpretentious little home. Apparently the deputies had just left.

"I'll be—" John said under his breath. He lowered his glasses and his eyes jumped from Connor's place to Rickert and the formidable ape beside him. The sheriff was looking for two men. Two. They had jumped Smoke Connor in front of his house. And they had muffed the job. Connor had had time to run away from his car and sling his bag of money far into the palmetto scrub before they downed him. When the headlights of a passing truck had picked up the thugs they had fled empty-handed.

"Sounds just like Rickert and his buddy," John muttered. Clumsy, jumpy and rough. And now he's at the gas dock across the canal watching to see if they're getting anything on him. That could be it.

For a moment longer he stood there. Then he stowed the binoculars out of the sun and took a turn or two along the sun-grayed deck of his ship.

"Nothing to do with me," he told the mainmast. "Let the sheriff earn his pay."

He laid a hand on the standing mast and scowled at the stump of the foremast and at the widening seems of the deck. She needed copper paint on her bottom, too. The worms would be starting work on her. But what these shipyard men wanted for hauling a ship these days— Well, it would have to be done—some day.

He inspected the mooring lines fore and aft for chafe. Quite a while she'd been holed up here in the canal. But it was comfortable living in the ditch—and no damned ocean to brew a hurricane, with seas rolling down on you like mountains toppling on Doomsday and the wind screaming, screaming unendingly in your ears.

He went below and shoved aside some canned goods and had a quick look at a preserve jar in the back of the locker. His roll was still there, concealed by a big label, nine thousand odd, packed in big bills and little bills. Safe. A lot of money. More than he had collected from the insurance company for *Trident's* battering. Plenty of money. He had a drink, stared resentfully at a greasy frying pan in the cluttered galley and hacked himself a canned meat sandwich. The coffee pot was empty and the kerosene stove needed filling. He had another drink of Porto Rican rum to wash down the sandwich and let it go at that. He pursed his lips at the Diesel, forward of the galley. It had let him down during that gale. Cost plenty, probably, to get that chunk of stubborn steel repaired.

HE PICKED up a can of seam compound and a putty knife and went up on deck. The gaping deck seams looked endless He dragged his canvas deck chair into the shade under the torn awning, dropped into it and pulled his cap down over his eyes.

Forty-eight, he was, and he had as much money as he'd need to see himself through, if he didn't get big ideas about fixing up the schooner and risking his neck among the reefs and seas of the islands to make some more. And clutter up his deck with jawing, intrusive men—men who talked, who welched on their promises, who went yellow in time of danger, who stared at a man with prying eyes.

He dozed fitfully. The sun was warm, even through that flapping chunk of canvas overhead, and the breeze not so fresh.

He started up, shaking and sweating. Once more he had been back in the midst of the howling hell of the hurricane with no motor, afraid to rig even a storm trysail on the shaky main.

The sun was on his feet. That was it.

"Get a man's feet hot enough and he'll dream every time," he assured the mainmast.

He set to work languidly at caulking a seam. Oakum would be better than this stuff. The schooner tugged listlessly, without hope, at her bow line.

He worked over into the narrow shade of the deckhouse. He stretched out on his

belly, putty knife in his hand. He slept again, roused up and went on caulking.

An endless job. The sun tearing her down faster than he was patching her up. Endless. A man would be better off ashore, except that there were people ashore, crowding, jawing, interfering, peering at a man as if they wanted to read him.

The sun was going down. John looked down the canal. There was no sign of Dan Turrentine bringing the outboard, or even another promise. Connor's place was still deserted.

John went below. He fingered his surf rod tentatively. If he crossed to the outer beach he might pick up a pompano or two as the sun dropped under. The tide was still coming.

"Too much trouble for a fish," he told himself and hung up the rod.

He tapped the rum bottle to brace himself to face the mess in the galley. A man got careless. He filled the stove, heated water, washed up a few things and dumped a can of soup into a saucepan. He boiled a couple of eggs—you could boil eggs without messing up some blasted frying pan and eat them in the shell without smearing glue-like yellow yoke all over a plate.

The sun went in a glow of red and yellow clouds. Twice he stuck his head up the companionway to watch. Almost like a sunset at sea, though the sun plunged into low flat land instead of into blackening blue water. A sunset or a black starlit night could make men mighty puny.

He went back to his dishes and cleaned up the galley, thinking about it. By the time he was through quick darkness was coming on. He brought the rum bottle and a clean glass up on deck, settled in his canvas chair and lit his pipe.

The wind had freshened and the moon, enormous, dull copper, was rising up, with a fretful, lashing coco-palm framed against its reddish disc. Even the captive water of the canal was rippling and whispering. John listened. The sea beyond was drumming on the beach. A man might get a snapper out of a surf like that.

There was a light on in Dan Turrentine's shack. John had meant to put his glasses on the place before dark to see if Rickert were still there. He had forgotten. The sunset or the dishes.

HE watched the moon climb and shrink and change color. He delayed his drink. A man shouldn't drink too much in this climate, especially a man alone. Though a man alone was better off than a man in company with these prying, witless swabs.

The moon was silver now and light fast moving clouds, transparent things when they crossed the moon, were sailing fast. But they weren't skimming along as fast as clouds had raced that day when he knew at last that the hurricane had not recurved; that he was in the dangerous semicircle. He looked up at the ravaged rigging of his ship. It was time for his drink.

Something bumped against the side of the schooner. A drifting log. He reached for his bottle.

A man's shape came up over the side and then another, a long-armed, ape-like shape. John stood up. Unnoticed the bottle went rolling and gurgling against the rail.

"That's no way to board a ship, Rickert!" he said sharply. "You sing out and—"

Rickert came toward him, narrow-bodied, quick moving.

"Relax!" he cut in. "We ain't come by for a drink."

In the moonlight Rickert turned his arm and revealed the blue-black gleam of an automatic. The muzzle bore on John.

So he had been right about Rickert.

"Yeah, relax," said Bott, behind Rickert and padding past him toward John. "Relax, brother, and no yelling or I clip you." The monkey wrench in his hand twiched jerkily. A scared ape, that one.

John stood still. What use would shouting be against the rasp and rattle of cocopalm fronds, the thunder of the surf and the ripple of the canal? Plainly a couple of nervous, bungling tyros. The most dangerous kind of thug, as Smoke Connor had found out.

"Get behind him and tie up his arms," Rickert ordered. "Don't start anything, cap'n; we're here to do business with you."

"Same business you didn't get away with when you slugged Smoke Connor," John said. His voice sounded rusty in his ears, rusty and perhaps a little thin.

Bott's pawing fingers stiffened suddenly on his arms. The two men stared at him.

"That's right," Rickert said. "I'll let you in on somethin'. Those mooching deputies

picked up a flashlight of mine in the grass today. I've got to start traveling—we've got to—before they trace it."

He grinned at John. "A man—Men with jack travel faster and hide out safer. That's where you come in."

Bott was busy with tape, now, taping John's wrists together. He covered up his clumsiness with extra turns enough to hold an elephant.

"O.K.," Bott muttered. Rickert gestured and Bott, still behind, grabbed John by the shoulders and dropped him into his chair.

The two men stood over him motionless.

"Go below and see if he's been playing with his money on the cabin table, Bott," Rickert commanded. "Misers sometimes do."

He waited until Bott had lumbered away. Even with Rickert's face shadowed John Bell could feel the two jet black eyes on him.

"I'm onto you, *cap'n,*" Rickert said softly. "You're hiding in this ditch, scared to go to sea after that blow. You're licked; you're through. And I'm onto you. A man like you don't rate havin' money. Yellow!"

The knowing black eyes were digging, digging, with malicious glee. In white fury John wrenched with all his might at the black tape that held his arms. Rickert laughed quietly.

Bott came back. "Nothin' in sight," he reported.

Rickert reached up and ripped a piece of rotten canvas from the awning above.

"Go ahead, Bott!" he said sharply. He jammed the canvas against John's mouth.

Bott drew in a noisy gulp of air. He grabbed John's right leg and stretched it out straight. He caught up his wrench from the deck and brought it down across the shin bone with a powerful swing. The bone snapped loudly; pain shot up into John's brain. Rickert's hand across his face, Rickert's other hand against his throat, held him down; muffled his cry.

Bott, his broad face contorted in horror, stood back, clutching his wrench. Very slowly Rickert relaxed the pressure of the gag. His fingers stayed on John's throat.

"Yell and I'll plug up your mouth," he said. "That—" he pointed at the broken leg —" shows we mean business. You got ten minutes to tell us where your money's bunked. After ten minutes— the other leg."

The black eyes dug. "Why do any acting, cap'n?" Rickert asked. "You an' I know, cap'n. Come through."

Bott growled a phony sound of forced ferocity.

"You got plenty more bones, guy," he said.

"Time's ticking, cap'n," Rickert said.

JOHN was struggling to get control of that piercing agony in his leg, the sickness inside him. He closed his eyes.

Rickert shoved a watch up to his ear.

"I heard today they think Connor's goin' to die," he said. "We got to be going. Eight minutes! Hurry up, cap'n."

They would kill him. They would have to kill him. They couldn't leave him behind, broken up, to tell his story. The sooner he spoke the sooner he would die.

John licked his lips. This was a tighter place than ever that hurricane had been. But if he had to die he wouldn't go out sniveling and begging for mercy.

He lifted his head, ignoring the ticking watch, and clamped his jaws shut. Rickert was going to be surprised. His thoughts leaped back to the hurricane—how he had felt then. If he could take this—face his finish coldly—then why had that big wind shaken him so?

Why was he here, skulking in a ditch, hiding from the sea, if he could go out decently enough? What more could a great gale, a monstrous sea do to him than these two sneaking killers? Was it something besides fear that had sliced the backbones out of him in the big blow?

"Well, cap'n" asked Rickert, softly confident.

And then John Bell knew. He wasn't a coward who had cracked in a jam. That towering, massive sea had daunted him. The terrible power and violence revealed in that gale had awed and shaken him, not the mere imminence of his own finish. Any seaman might well be daunted, and no shame to him, before such a revelation of the might of wind and ocean. Only a fool would fail to flinch before it. He could go back, face a hurricane again, cower again and still be worthy to keep the sea, master of his ship.

But—he looked up at Rickert and his ticking watch and at Bott, twisting his stupid

face into what he hoped was frightening savagery. A puny pair they were, though they might well kill him. Their eyes didn't hurt. Not a coward.

He did not want to die. To stay alive he must be silent about the roll of bills down there in the preserve jar. It would not be easy but he would stay alive as long as he could. That was a job for a brave man. He straightened up in the canvas chair.

"Now, cap'n!" Rickert remonstrated in a gentle murmur. "Want Bott to operate on the other leg?"

There was nothing to be said to these two. But they had brought him peace. He looked past Rickert, standing over him so threateningly, toward the dunes that hid the sea.

His eyes were caught by a movement on the canal. There was a white rowboat plainly in view fifty feet from the schooner's stern. It was drifting close on the tide. The man in it was about Dan Turrentine's size. He was sitting still, oars in the water, peering at the *Trident,* trying to make out in the deceptive moonlight what was happening on her deck.

John's intent eyes warned Rickert. He spun around, his hand thrusting into his pocket. He took a step toward the rail, automatic in hand. Bott whirled with him, muttering under his breath. Through John surged swift fear for young Dan.

In the deck chair John bent far forward. His taped hands, behind him, shoved mightily at the arm of the chair. He thrust himself up onto his one good leg. He hopped once with all hell flaming in his broken bone, with a wild song roaring in his head, launching himself at Rickert's back.

HE hit, and Rickert's automatic blared in his suddenly contracting fingers. The man staggered, clutching at air. With feet hooking against the low rail he went clawing and twisting over the side. John, off balance, went toppling behind him.

"Look out, Dan!" he yelled.

Bott's hands grabbed at him with savage power and snatched him back. He landed against the rail. Breath went out of him.

Bott fastened his fingers around John's windpipe and jammed knees into his belly.

Something went flying past Bott's head and crashed against the house. It was one of Dan Turrentine's oars. Dan was standing, sculling across the last few feet of water. The bow of his boat thudded against the schooner's side. From the second thwart he leaped aboard, hands gripping his oar.

Bott, crouching, was reaching for his wrench. He grabbed at the jabbing oar with both hands. He jerked and twisted.

Dan dropped his end and closed in with a leap. Both Bott's hands were on the oar. Dan's right fist swung at Bott's jaw with the same authority with which he used his sledge. Bott went down, limp as a jellyfish.

"Thanks," gasped John Bell. Flat on deck he raised his head to stare overside. Rickert was floundering in a hurry toward the mangrove saplings lining the canal edge.

John looked at Dan.

"Bring the outboard?" he croaked.

"Sure," said Dan. "Say, what it—"

"Fix it?" John asked. "The day's not done yet. You were going to fix it."

"Yeah, fixed," Dan said. "I had to put new rings in it. That's what kept me. But—what is this?"

John drew a lungful of the salt breeze. It soothed his pain.

"A chance for you and me to go to sea," he said. "A man that can mend an outboard can handle a Diesel."

"But—" Dan was bewildered. "Say! You—all right?"

"Never better," said John. "And I'll have two sound legs under before you have that Diesel turning. Well, what'll it be—a mate's berth? Or loafing in a ditch to sell gas to tourists?"

"You know the answer to that," said Dan.

"Good man!" said John. They listened to Rickert, scuttling through the mangroves like a landcrab from a booted foot.

John clamped a hand on Dan's restless arm.

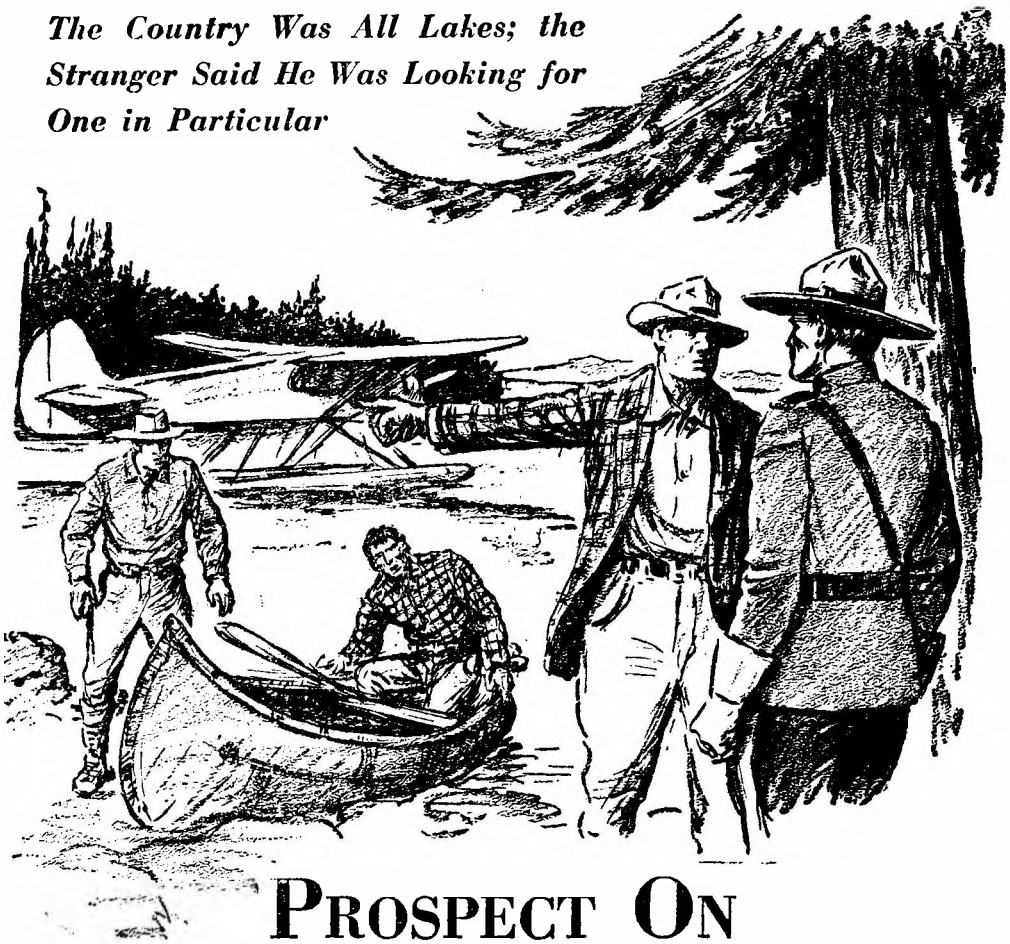
"Let the sheriff's men handle him," he said. "He lifted a dock off your chest and something heavier than that off mine."

"Uh huh," said Dan. "Let me look at that Diesel."

John kept his grip on Dan's arm.

"Wait a minute," he said. His voice was urgent. He looked Dan square in the eye. "You know that hurricane? Well, it sure scared me cuckoo."

The Country Was All Lakes; the Stranger Said He Was Looking for One in Particular



PROSPECT ON SQUIRREL LAKE

By H. S. M. KEMP

FOR an hour the storm had been building up behind the Bear Hills. Thunderheads raised their snowy peaks, only to crumble away into low-hanging bunches of fat, black grapes.

In the dead stillness the air seemed heavy; and from five thousand feet the lakes and sloughs were pools of ink.

Then came a breeze, the plane rocked; and to the prelude of an ear-splitting crash, the storm struck with savage fury.

Carl Hausemann, blond, granite-eyed, shoved hard on wheel and rudder-bars. Yank Jones, tough, weatherbeaten, gave a grunt as his safety-belt tightened. Philip Valdez, the olive-skinned man in the rear chair, hung on grimly and stared at the rain slashing at the windshield.

In two minutes all visibility was zero. Hausemann tried to fight his way through the storm, around it. He zigged, and zagged, and finally, with a heavy German curse, said he'd have to go down.

He began a slow bank, losing altitude. Yank Jones called for caution. "You want to watch it! There's hills and trees—"

"I'll watch it!" snarled Hausemann. "If

you'd watched your course, we'd have missed all this!"

Throttle cut, the swing was continued, till Valdez gave a sudden yell. "Water—right beneath you!"

Water it was; for in a moment Hausemann himself saw it—slate-colored waves, rolling by and around them.

He showed his airmanship then. With speed cut to the minimum, he flew against the waves. When they lessened, flatted out, he touched down with a thudding of pontoons.

He lowered his window. Clean, sweet air swept in on them. It was still raining, but it was a gentle rain and the wind had moderated. Then, with the engine still ticking slowly over, they saw the outline of the shore.

Hausemann inched his way towards it. Now more was to be seen. There was spruce-trees, a rush-fringed bay, a teepee beneath the spruce with blue smoke going up lazily from its cowl. And there was the figure of a man standing at the waterline.

Yank Jones dropped to a pontoon with a rope in his hand. He coiled the rope, then, twenty feet from shore, threw it. The man, an Indian, made the catch, heaved, towed; and the pontoons grounded.

THE three white men got out. All were dressed in the khaki-drill and high boots of the prospector, but only Yank Jones looked natural. Hausemann and Valdez could have been a couple of tourists out for a weekend in the woods.

Now the Indian turned. He seemed to be waiting for them. Broad-faced, intelligent, his age could have been somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. Hausemann, as pilot of the plane and leader of the expedition, walked up to him.

"Hullo!" he said.

The Indian nodded, said, "Hullo!" in return; and Hausemann asked him, "You savvy? 'You talkum English?"

The Indian, shirt-sleeved, moccasined, looked from one man to the other before replying to Hausemann's question. "I talk English." He added, "Some."

Yank Jones, broad-shouldered, grinning, shoved forward and offered his hand. He gave his own name, asked the Indian his.

"Joe Head, eh? Well, I'm sure glad to meet you, Joe. For a while I figured the next guy I'd meet'd be Saint Peter!"

Hausemann, cold and arrogant, frowned as though the handshake between the two was something he deplored. But he gave the Indian his own name and waved towards his olive-skinned companion. "Philip Valdez."

But the Indian showed little interest. "Wet, here," he remarked. "Come on up to the camp."

He led the way past half a dozen growling huskies, reached the teepee, raised the flap and waved his visitors inside. An Indian girl was spreading a Hudson's Bay blanket over the floor of balsam tips, and when she had finished, the man invited them to sit down.

HAUSEMANN and Valdez looked about them interestedly. Yank Jones took it all for granted. He warmed his hands over the fire in the center of the lodge, told Joe Head that for comfort he'd take a teepee every time.

A copper tea-pail bubbled over the fire. The girl made a brew, spread a strip of oilcloth before the visitors and arranged cups, spoons and a sugar-can. She glanced up at a rack-full of smoked whitefish and looked questioningly at Joe Head.

"You guys hungry?" asked the man. "The wife fix you supper if you are."

Hausemann declined. He turned to Valdez. "You, Philip?" But Yank Jones spoke for himself. "Sure, I'm hungry! Hungry any time there's a free feed around!"

The girl reached for a fish and set it on a gridiron over the fire.

But Hausemann's interest was in the Indian. He offered him a cigarette, flicked a lighter for him, said, "You seem to talk good English—for a native." Save for a slight guttural inflection, his own English was perfect.

The Indian shrugged, as though Hausemann's compliment was of little interest. "I get around."

Hausemann gave a grunt. "I suppose you do. And if you get around this country, you can be a help to us."

The Indian let that pass. He smoked, stared into the fire. In a somewhat nettled tone, Hausemann said, "We're looking for a lake."

The Indian lifted a shoulder. "Lots around here."

"Too many!" rapped Hausemann. "And that's the trouble. From the air, this country's all lakes. We're looking for one in particular. Dodging the storm, we missed it. We're lucky we landed where we did."

The girl poured hot, black tea and indicated the sugar-can. She placed another cup in front of her husband and turned the fish on the grill. Already half-cooked from the smoke, three minutes finished it. She set it on a plate before Yank Jones, sliced bannock and produced a shaker of salt.

For a little while, nothing was said. Hausemann lifted his cup, frowned at it, then turned it and drank from it, using his left hand. The girl saw the play, glanced at her husband. The Indian's only reaction was a slight flaring of the nostrils.

Suddenly, there was a tiny, whimpering cry. It came from a baby, lashed in a beaded moss-bag among its mother's blankets. The girl picked the baby up, rocked it and crooned soft words in Cree. Yank Jones smiled.

"You're a lucky jigger," he told the Indian. "Got a home, wife, everything. Things I never had myself."

Then Carl Hausemann's guttural voice broke in. "Tell him about that lake."

BUT Yank took his time. He stirred his tea, washed down a mouthful of fish and bannock before he addressed the Indian.

"Yeah, Joe," he said in his easy tone of friendliness. "We're lookin' for a lake. Not a very big one, and she lies about thirty-five miles northeast of here." He described it. "She's about six miles long and four wide, with a creek at the north end and full of islands. The main island is about a quarter-mile long; and halfways down her there's a big red cliff facing south."

The Indian sipped at his tea. After a while he asked, "Northeast of here?"

"Yeah, northeast. About thirty-five miles away."

The Indian was thoughtful for a moment, then he turned and spoke to his wife. There was a cross-fire of sibilant Cree, then he faced Yank Jones.

"You missed the lake in the storm?"

"He missed everything!" growled Hausemann. "He wasn't sure we were on the right route when the storm hit us; and after that he didn't know anything at all!"

"Okay!" retorted Yank. "So I got mixed up, lost my bearings. Well, I was only over the route once—and that by canoe."

Ignoring the interchange between the two white men, Joe Head said, "That lake's northwest of here. Sixty miles away. Squirrel Lake."

"North*west?*" Hausemann and Yank Jones spoke together. But it was Hausemann who went on. "Can't be! I did a lot of dodging, but I didn't get off-course as badly as that!"

The Indian merely shrugged.

Followed an argument between the three white men. It became heated, acrimonious. Hausemann blasted Yank Jones for losing a lake he had seen scarcely a month before. Yank fell back on his old defense of seeing the lake but once.

"Would you know it if you saw it again?" Valdez put in.

"Der tor weiss nichts!" snapped Hausemann. He emphasized it. *"Nichts!"*

Yank Jones glared suspiciously from one man to the other. "And what does that mean?" he demanded. "If you want to talk about me, put her in English so's I can understand!"

Hausemann gave him a cold, deliberate stare. "You don't need to understand. I was wondering if you knew anything at all!"

"I know about that lake," retorted Yank, stubbornly. "And Joe knows about it! If he says the lake is northwest of here, well, northwest she is." He turned to the Indian. "How about comin' along and guidin' us in there, Joe?"

Hausemann grabbed command again. "Yes. I was going to suggest it. Then if this Squirrel Lake isn't the one we want, we'll have to fly south and start all over again."

He waited; and when no reply was forthcoming from the Indian, he barked a peremptory, "Well?"

Joe Head turned, gave him a casual glance, then said he didn't think so. He had too much to do.

Hausemann gave a short, spiteful laugh. "To do what? Eat? Sleep? Kill a few fish?"

"Mebbe," agreed Joe Head, carelessly. And he let it go at that.

YANK JONES finished his meal, lit his pipe. He seemed as contented as Hausemann was ill-humored. The blond man muttered something to Valdez in German, then got up and took a peep through the teepee-flap.

"Still rainin'?" asked Yank Jones.

"No," Hausemann grunted. "Beginning to clear up." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Six-fifteen. Bit late in the day, though, to go on now."

He spoke again to Valdez, then ducked outside.

In a few minutes he returned with the grub-box from the plane. At a nod from her husband, the girl brewed more tea. Hausemann dug out a can of milk, bread, pickles and an assortment of food in tins. He glanced speculatively at the Indian, conjured up a smile and tossed him a can of fruit and one of meat. The Indian nodded, said, "Thanks!" but let the stuff lie there.

Hausemann frowned. "Not afraid of me poisoning you, are you?" He added, "White-man's food'll be a change from your everlasting fish."

But Joe Head was in no conversational mood. He stripped off his moccasins, lay back on his blankets and seemed to be listening to the raindrops falling from the trees onto the teepee wall. Hausemann and Valdez ate their supper, and when they had finished Hausemann consulted his watch again.

"Not seven o'clock yet," he groaned. He glanced across at Joe Head. "What the devil do you do in this country to keep from going insane?"

The Indian wiggled a toe. "She's a good country."

"Good? It's good for what you can get out of it," Hausemann agreed. "But what are you getting out of it? All the fish you want and a place to pitch this tent!"

"Then what are *you* going to get out of it?" For the first time the Indian's tone held a hint of authority. "You don't like fish, you don't want to pitch a tent. If the country's no good—?"

"Wait!" interrupted Hausemann. "I didn't say it was no good. I said it was good for what you could get out of it." His voice became a bit harsh. "You may say as much for any country. All have resources, all have some sort of wealth. It's a matter of these resources being developed."

The Indian wiggled another toe. "But suppose the people don't want their country 'developed'? What then?"

Hausemann brushed the suggestion aside. "That is often the case. And when it happens, well, it's just too bad for the people."

Yank Jones, sucking on his pipe, gave a short grunt. "Seems like," he observed, dryly, "I've heard that slogan before."

"You'll hear it everywhere," concurred Hausemann. "It's the price of progress. But in your case," he turned again to the Indian, "it is hard to understand. You seem intelligent—you must be to pick up English as you have done—and you should appreciate these things for yourself." He became almost didactic. "Of course, your environment is against you. If you can kill enough fish, hunt a bit and trap enough fur-bearers to supply your animal wants, you're satisfied."

"And why shouldn't he be satisfied?" broke in Yank Jones. "It's only us guys that've bin out in the world that ain't satisfied. We taken on notions, get ambitions. We start chasin' rainbows."

Hausemann frowned, became coldly matter-of-fact again. "Chasing rainbows, yes. Like this Squirrel Lake rainbow of yours. Well, you can start chasing it again in the morning."

HE STOOD up, yawned, and for the third time studied his watch. It's early, but I'm going to bed. There's nothing else to do."

"Good idea," approved Yank Jones. "I'll fetch the bedrolls."

"Fetch them?" repeated Hausemann. "You mean—sleep in *here?*" He looked about him, frowned. "I'm sleeping in the plane."

Yank Jones gave a grunt. "Go to it, then. But I ain't sittin' up in a chair all night. I want to be comfortable."

"And I want—" Hausemann bit the words off sharply. "I'll feel more at home in the plane." He turned to Valdez. "How about you?"

Valdez nodded, and the two went out together. But as their footfalls died in the

distance, Yank Jones glanced at Joe Head. The Indian was sitting up, poking the embers of the fire.

"Those babies," observed Yank, "have got a lot to learn."

Joe Head said, bluntly, "I don't like that big man."

"I don't like either of 'em," grinned Yank Jones. "They ain't my sort. They're foreigners. But still, they're goin' to do business with me."

The Indian looked at Yank, and there was interest in his eyes.

"Yeah," said Yank. "I'll tell you." And he went on to explain.

"I was headin' south this spring from the Clearwater country, and I run onto some pretty fair-lookin' stuff up on this Squirrel Lake. I don't know much about minerals, but I took some samples along. Then down East I was put onto these two guys. They were up from South America, lookin' for

mineral prospects; and the next thing I knew, we were all headin' north." Yank went on to tell that if the strike were as good as it seemed to be, claims would be staked conjointly. "And it should be good," he insisted. "Both Hausemann and this Valdez guy are mining engineers and they say the stuff looks okay to them. Only thing is," grinned Yank, whimsically, "we've got to locate that lake."

Joe Head nodded. After a while he asked, "You really want to locate her?"

"You kiddin'?" demanded Yank. "Who wouldn't quit the trapline for a share in a fortune? And I ain't so much a trapper, anyway."

"I guess I'll go with you," the Indian agreed. "But it's only to help *you,*" he pointed out. "Not those other men."

GREETED the next morning with the news of Joe Head's decision, Hausemann and Valdez were impatient to get away. The sky was a dome of blue; and when they took to the air, visibility was unlimited.

The plane was a single-engine, four-place job. At Hausemann's suggestion, the Indian rode beside him in the co-pilot's chair.

"Now then," the blond man said, tersely; "let's see if you're any better guide than Yank Jones."

At least, the Indian seemed sure of his direction. He pointed north and west to a low range of hills. "There!"

Beneath them was the broad panorama of the North—forest, lakes, rivers and muskegs. Nowhere was there sign of habitation, none whatever of life.

"Great country to be forced down in," Hausemann muttered. "And worse to get out of!"

But the engine roared its song of power and the ridge of hills came closer. Then, twenty minutes after the take-off, the Indian turned to Yank Jones in the chair behind him. He pointed to a lake somewhat larger than the rest, a lake with a big island set amongst a dozen others.

"Squirrel Lake," he said.

Yank Jones straightened, stared, gave a broad grin. "You've hit her, boy!" He added, for Hausemann's benefit, "Now all we've got to do is to land on the north side of the big island, right across from that high red cliff!"

They lost altitude, circled. Hausemann held the plane into the wind and touched down at the spot indicated by Yank Jones.

"Keep going awhile," ordered Yank. "I'll tell you when."

This came soon. For when they were abreast of a small half-moon bay of spruce and birch, Yank told Hausemann to swing into shore.

They piled out, dragged the plane up onto the beach and secured her with stout lines. Yank was for plunging into the bush

immediately, but Hausemann thought otherwise.

"We'll be camping here at least one night. We'll put up the tent and get prepared first."

There was evidence that someone had camped there previously. Yank took credit for it.

"I laid up here for a day, coming south this spring. There was a bunch of partridges drummin' back in the bush apiece, so I took out after 'em with a twenty-two. That's how I come to blunder onto this strike of mine."

The actual work of making camp was left to Yank Jones and the Indian. Hausemann and Valdez carried the stuff from the plane. Valdez himself said little, but he had said little on the whole trip. But he did suggest, once the tent was up, that the rest of the work could wait. With a flash of teeth, he said. "I am a little boy. If it is a surprise package, I want to look into it."

So with Yank Jones in the lead, they swung into the bush.

THE strike itself wasn't much to look at. There was an outcropping of velvety-black rock against a rise in the ground and across a fifty-yard natural clearing. Hausemann and Valdez both carried light prospectors' hammers. With these they chipped at the scarred face of the bedrock, then examined their samples with powerful lenses. They moved further into the bush, found more outcroppings, noted that the formation ran lengthwise of the island. Yank Jones finally sought an opinion.

"Too soon for that," Hausemann told him. "But this afternoon we'll do a bit of blasting. We'll know more then."

"But the samples, the rock?" insisted Yank. "What d'you think it is?"

Hausemann told him. "Pitchblende."

"Pitchblende." Yank repeated the word, as though it were something holy. "Ain't that—ain't that the stuff that gives you radium?"

"It is," Hausemann answered, grimly. "Now you see why I wouldn't tell you in town."

They spent an hour at the place, then at Valdez' suggestion went back to the campsite for dinner. But Yank Jones ate little. With a possible fortune within his grasp, he wanted to know the best. Or the worst.

Following dinner, Hausemann fetched a case of dynamite from the plane. Valdez followed with the caps and fuse. At the major outcrop they fired a shot or two, then moved progressively inland. Hausemann and Valdez appeared satisfied with the showing, and Yank Jones' excitement soared. Only Indian Joe Head appeared unmoved. He watched the planting of the powder, the fixing of the caps and he ran with the rest of them, but the results interested him little. So that when, at mid-afternoon, Valdez said he would go to the plane for a spade and a sledge-hammer, Hausemann suggested he take the Indian along.

"You fix up the camp, Joe," he told him. "Get it ready for night."

But Hausemann himself and Yank Jones continued with the blasting. As Valdez and the Indian reached the plane they heard the roar of another blast; and another after that, while Valdez took time out for a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

But there was something different about this second blast. Instead of the ensuing silence, they heard a series of yells from Hausemann. The yells sounded urgent; there was tragedy in them. Both men turned towards them, and ran.

They met Hausemann halfway to the clearing. The big man was about out of breath.

"An accident!" he managed to say. "Yank —hit with the blast!"

He turned, retraced his steps; and they followed him. Then, midway of the clearing, they came across Yank, bloody-headed, face-down in the cariboo-moss.

Valdez pulled up shortly. He stared, lapsed into German. *"Ist er tot?"*

"Jowoh!" grunted Hausemann. *"Ich habe sorgfalt genommen!"*

"Dead!" Valdez' face was the color of faded buckskin as he turned to Joe Head. "You hear that? He says he's dead! Struck by a rock!"

The Indian dropped to a knee, rolled Yank over. He slipped a hand in his shirt, stood up. "Yeah; he's dead, all right." And he looked at Hausemann questioningly.

Hausemann explained. "A faulty fuse. I knew it as soon as I put a match to it. It burned too fast." He gave a heavy sigh. "I

told him to run—to run like the devil. Then it let go, and a rock went whistling by my ear."

Valdez seemed to have a better grip on himself. "But what shall we do? We can't help him, we can't leave him—"

Hausemann said, "You, Joe, go down to the plane and fetch a canvas. We'll wrap him in it. Then after we finish here, we'll fly him back to town."

The Indian's sooty eyes narrowed. "*After* you finish here?"

"Of course!" Hausemann's voice toughened. "It is unfortunate. It is tragic. But I'm certainly not wasting the trip."

THEY spent two days on the property, then Hausemann declared himself as satisfied and ready for town. They struck camp at dawn of the third day, but with the equipment and the body of Yank Jones loaded, the plane went temperamental. The starter growled, and the propeller turned over, but there was no life in the engine itself.

Hausemann did what he could—checked the fuel-lines, tried the ignition connections; but it was evident he was more pilot than mechanic. After fifteen minutes divided between the engine and the starter, he slammed out of the cabin and glowered at Joe Head.

"Now what?"

The Indian shrugged. "I don't know anything about airplane engines."

"You fool! Did I expect you to?" blared Hausemann. "I mean, how the devil do we get out of here?"

The Indian studied Hausemann for a moment; then he said, "Walk."

"Walk?" Hausemann almost screeched the word. "Walk three hundred miles?"

As though to a child, the Indian explained. "My brother-in-law's camped over on Clear Lake. Maybe fifteen miles from here. We'll borrow his canoe and motor and go on to Looking-Glass Lake. Planes are in and out of there all the time."

"Fifteen miles!" Hausemann frowned at the hills around them. "Fifteen miles—through the bush?"

"We be there by noon."

The two white men held a consultation. Part of it was in German, part in English. Then Hausemann asked how far it was by canoe from Clear Lake to Looking-Glass Lake. When Joe Head said thirty miles, he decided they'd tackle it.

"That is," he explained, "if I can't get the cursed engine to start."

But Hausemann had no more success at his second try than he had had with his first; so after a final session with the starter, he gave up.

"All right," he told the Indian curtly. "Show us those fifteen miles. And heaven help you if you lose your way!"

The Indian suggested taking a lunch along. Hausemann grudgingly agreed. So with a loaf, a tin of butter and the tea-pail they struck off.

But Hausemann needn't have worried about Joe Head losing his way. He laid a course southeast and followed it unerringly. They topped a jackpine ridge, crossed it and followed a long tamarack swamp. The sun was well up, and mosquitoes rose in clouds. When they quit the swamp and reached higher country, the mosquitoes gave way to black-flies. The tiny pests burrowed into ears, eyes and noses, till at last, sweating and cursing, Hausemann called a halt. Over the fire and the comforting smoke from it, the blond man wanted to know how far they'd come.

"Five miles," guessed Joe Head. "I dunno. 'Bout that."

"Only *five* miles?" Hausemann swore he'd never live through the remaining ten. He damned Yank Jones for bringing them into such a country and swore that next time he'd fetch a mechanic along.

Valdez looked at him curiously. "Easy, *mein freund!* Our troubles are small, and we have much to win."

"Much to win?" sneered Hausemann. "It should be—to pay for all this!"

They went on, but Hausemann made an even worse showing than before. Sweat poured from him, and though the Indian slowed his pace, he had to wait periodically for Hausemann to catch up. They stopped, had a lunch; and spent longer over the fire this time; so that it was well on to two o'clock when they reached the camp on Clear Lake.

Valdez suggested a stop-over, but at sight of water, the canoe and engine, Hausemann's spirits seemed to revive. After one more lunch in the teepee of Joe Head's

brother-in-law, they started the last leg of the trip.

LOOKING-GLASS LAKE was a fair-sized settlement. It boasted a Hudson's Bay store, a church and mission, and a detachment of the Mounted Police. In fact, when they pulled up at the company's wharf, the policeman was on hand to greet them.

Hausemann, rested, was his old self again. He offered introductions, learned the policeman's name was Austin and gave an account of the tragedy on Squirrel Lake. The policeman, who seemed acquainted with the Indian, frowned and asked, "That the way of it, Joe?"

Indian Joe Head said, "Yeah."

"Yank's body," Hausemann went on, "is still in the plane."

Constable Austin squinted. "Plane, you say?"

Hausemann detailed this angle of the matter, nodded to a Junkers sitting on her floats some distance along the shore, and said, "If I could get a mechanic and pilot to fly us over there and get my engine started, I'd deliver Yank's body here to you."

The policeman debated the point. "A better idea is for me to go over to Squirrel Lake and take a look at things for myself."

"A look at things?" Hausemann didn't seem to understand. "But there's nothing to look at. Except Yank's body and the place where he was killed."

"Sure," agreed Pete Austin. "That's what I had in mind."

It was late afternoon, but there were still four hours of daylight left; so after a talk with the pilot of the Junkers, Constable Austin returned to say he had arranged for the trip into Squirrel Lake.

"And we'd better all go. I'll need statements from each of you, and there's lots of room in the Junkers."

SO, with the Airways mechanic along, they landed at Squirrel Lake after a twenty-minute flight. The policeman examined the body of Yank Jones, then asked to be shown the exact spot where the tragedy had occurred.

Hausemann took over the job. In the clearing at the pitchblende claim, he indicated the exact spot where Yank Jones had fallen. Yank's blood still sprinkled the cariboo-moss.

"The fuse was faulty," Hausemann explained again. "I knew it, and I shouted for Yank to run. And we had come but this little distance when the rocks began to fall.

Pete Austin, Stetson shoved back and blue-shaved jaw hard and grim, made a note of all this in a little black book. Then he turned to Valdez and Joe Head for confirmation.

"That is correct, though we were not here at the time," Valdez explained. "We had gone for tools." With spread hands, he added, "Perhaps so we were lucky. We, too, might have been struck."

Austin nodded, looked about him. "'Then the rocks began to fall,'" he quoted. "Funny, though, but I don't see those rocks."

"And I don't, either, And I didn't see any right after Yank was killed."

It was Joe Head who had spoken. And the Indian was looking directly at Constable Pete Austin.

The constable frowned back at him. "You didn't, eh? And that means—?"

There was a sudden tenseness. It gripped each man present—Hausemann, Valdez, the pilot, and the mechanic off the Junkers. Hausemann, his cold eyes fixed on the Indian, suddenly said, "Do you know what you're saying?"

The Indian faced him. In that moment, Joe Head seemed to have grown in stature. There was a cold, metallic hardness about him.

"I guess I do," he retorted. "And I'll back up what I say." He made a sudden motion, and from beneath his shirt he drew out a short-handled prospectors' hammer. "I figure this is what killed Yank Jones."

THE policeman took the hammer, twisted it around and looked at Hausemann. "Well?" he asked.

At first, Hausemann was silent. His face reddened, though he was fighting to control himself.

Then, truculently, he said to Austin, "If you believe what an ignorant Indian says—"

"Just a minute!" interrupted Pete Austin. "Joe's no ignorant Indian—" He turned

suddenly. "But go ahead, Joe. Let's hear what else you've got to say."

"There were two or three hammers like this on the plane," stated the Indian. "They were new, like all the rest of the stuff. And when I caught this guy"—indicating Hausemann—"cleaning one the night Yank was killed and caching it in his packsack, I figured it all out. So when I got the chance, I switched hammers on him."

PETE AUSTIN was studying the thing again, turning it over so that the low-sinking sun caught its gnarled face. "Hand this to the boys in the lab," he remarked, "and they'll probably make something out of it." He looked suddenly into the clouded eyes of Hausemann. "Well, what about it?"

Hausemann began to bluster. "The whole thing is ridiculous! I've told you once how Yank was killed. There was an explosion; we heard the rocks fall; and the rock that struck him probably went bounding off into the bush."

Indian Joe Head gave a sudden laugh. It was harsh, sneering. "Then why did you tell Philip, when he asked you if Yank was dead, that he was dead all right—that *you'd* taken care of that?"

Hausemann blinked, frowned. But Joe Head merely laughed again.

"And you told him plenty other things—that the police were dumb, that they'd believe anything you told 'em, and that Yank was a fool anyway and got what he deserved. Oh, sure; you didn't say it in English; you said it in German, so I wouldn't understand. But *das ist gut, Herr* Hausemann. I understood you just the same!"

Hausemann stared; and his jaw was clamped, hard-set.

"But you guys weren't getting away with murder," Joe Head went on mercilessly. "You figured to drop me at my camp and fly out to town. But I fooled you. I got up that night, reached in back of the engine on the plane and tore out a bunch of wires. Then I walked you in for a talk with Pete Austin."

Hausemann wetted his lips, and a change came over him. Cold, deadly hate burned in his eyes as he squinted at Joe Head.

"A bush Indian! A savage! Babbling a few words of the German tongue!" Then, "Who taught you?" he challenged. "Some demented explorer, some sniveling priest—?"

Pete Austin stepped in. "Don't blame the explorers or the priests," he suggested. "None of your countrymen were that good to Joe! Joe learned German like he learned English—the hard way, picking it up for himself. And why shouldn't he?" he demanded. "Joe was overseas, a sergeant, with me for four years; and he stayed on in Germany for another year in the army of occupation." Pete Austin grinned. "But you couldn't feature him in uniform. That wouldn't occur to you!"

Hausemann swept the faces of the onlookers in one swift glance. He looked at Valdez, by his side. The olive-skinned man merely gave a shrug, a fatalistic smile, and spread his hands. Then the policeman was speaking again, in a tone that had taken on an edge.

"Yeah! Joe was just a bush Indian. And the cops in this country were all dumb. And you didn't have a thing to worry about. Well, you boys of the Master Race aren't so bright yourselves. You make the same mistake over and over again. And you know what that is?" Pete Austin waited, and when no answer was forthcoming from Hausemann, he gave a pitying smile. "It's the mistake you *Herrenvolk* always make—you take too much for granted!"

THE QUICKNESS OF THE HAND

LONG before the wagon came into view the people of Marka's kraal had been aware of its advent. Keen eyes accustomed to gazing across Africa's veldt lands had that morning marked a faint coil of blue smoke against the paler blue of the sky which betrayed the night's outspan made by the travelers. And later, when the rising sun had painted the eastern sky a flaming red, those same keen eyes had detected the thin, wraith-like column of red dust churned up by the wagon's swiftly revolving wheels.

But long before this, even, the people of the kraal had known of the wagon's coming. Word has been brought to them within two or three hours of its departure from the diamond town three days' trek distant. How that word had come to them is not to be explained. Wise men attribute it to the miracle of the "bush telegraph," one of the many mysteries which keep Black Africa, black. It is no more to be explained, or understood, than the conduct of a native who, after years of service with the white man's magical inventions, returns to his kraal and dies because he believes a spell has been cast on him.

By
L. PATRICK GREENE
Author of the "Major" stories

Quick Eyes and Ears Can Make the "Bush Telegraph" of Africa's Great Veldt Lands

To all the people at Marka's kraal the approaching wagon was a symbol of happiness and justice. To all, that is, except one. And he was Thuso, the witch doctor. He was an ancient graybeard. He was grotesquely thin. The blackness of his wrinkled, leathery skin was scorch-grayed at the belly by the heat of the hut fire about which he coiled himself in the night time of his life. But the burden of years which had bent his tall frame had not dimmed the light of his eyes; they seemed to be fed by an inner fire of an intelligence above that of the kraal people and his deep voice had the lusty timbre of youth.

He sat on his haunches in the sun, leaning back against the wall of his hut, staring directly before him with so fixed a gaze that he seemed to be in a trance. He paid no attention to the excited babble of the people

as they milled about the kraal making ready to welcome the expected visitors.

Marka, the headman, a fat, jovial man, came up to him and with a world of deference in his voice, said:

"The wagon will be here by sun-under, O Father of Wisdom."

"Aye." Thuso spat expertly on to the back of a green and gold lizard that was sunning itself nearby. "And with sun-order, also, comes the blackness of night and the evil of darkness."

"*Wa!*" Marka exclaimed. "That is ill-omened talk. It is the wagon of the white man who is the friend of all us black ones. Have I not heard you say, many times, that he is a king among men, that none can compare with the strength of his justice and wisdom? What evil can such a one bring to us? Why should we not feast in celebration of his coming?"

"You talk like a fool, Marka," Thuso said contemptuously. See—" he indicated the small calabash which stood on the ground beside him—"a little while ago this held beer. Now it is empty—"

"It shall be filled," Marka interrupted hastily.

"It shall be filled in good time. But now listen. It is my beer pot—but I am not in it. *Wo-we!* And it can hold—what can it not hold? Water, say you. And milk. And beer to strengthen the desires of man. It can hold magic charm medicines that will cure many ills. But is can also hold filth, and poison and evil charm medicines. Is there any need to say more? How do you read the riddle?"

"You would say, old one," Marka replied cautiously, "that the white man is not in his wagon. And though the wagon is his it can hold evil as well as good. Truly, that is to be thought of." Marka was thoughtfully silent for a little while, then he slapped his thighs with a triumphant laugh. "But it *is* your calabash, Old One, and you would not have anything that is evil put into it. Neither can there be any evil in the wagon of the white man. He will see to that. Besides, even if the white man is not in the wagon, the Hottentot—his servant—is. And that Hottentot—even if I do not like Hottentots: *wu!* they are half brothers of the apes—is a cunning hunter, a warrior and a man. So I say, there is no evil in that wagon."

MARKA paid the old man a salute of deference and continued on his way to oversee his people's preparations for the night's festivities. But Thuso resumed once again his fixed, unblinking stare as if he were striving to look beyond the curtain of darkness which his inner doubts had hung before him.

"I can not see," he muttered finally. "There is evil menacing this kraal—and it comes to us in the wagon of the white man who is our friend. That much I know. But what that evil is—*wo-we!* It escapes me."

From a reed bag which hung about his neck on a greasy string he took his "diving bones." He held them for a moment or two in his cupped hands, warming them, holding them to his mouth and whispering secret things. Then he "threw" them on the ground before him and carefully noted the positions in which they fell, trying to read the message they held for him. Finding that the message still escaped him he scooped up the bones and returned them with a sigh to the bag. As he did so Tomasi, the sturdy, eight-year-old son of the headman came and squatted beside him.

"Did they speak to you, o Wise One?" he asked breathlessly.

"Aye," Thuso said dully.

"What did they say? Is it permitted to know?"

"They spoke of evil—but of what that evil is, they do not say. *Au-a!* It is because the spirits are angry. There are too many in this kraal who mock at the ancient wisdom. It may be that I have stayed here too long, being content to sit in the sun, and the power has gone from me."

"I do not mock, Wise One," the boy said sturdily.

Thuso looked at him and smiled.

"No, O Lion Killer—" He gave the boy the "praising" name the boy had earned by his bravery. "You alone, of all the people in this kraal, do not mock. And so, to the wisdom of age is added the wisdom of youth. Together—perhaps that was the message I could not read; the vision I could not see—we must guard these people from the evil that threatens."

"We will defeat it," the boy said.

"It will doubtless be as easy as that," Thuso chuckled.

"But this evil," Tomasi persisted gravely, "does it come from the white man who has a window in his eye?" Or from the Hottentot, his servant? But how can that be? They are our friends, and yet—" the boy shook his head.

"And yet?" Thuso prompted.

"It is beyond my understanding, Old One. How *can* evil come from good? But if it comes, rest assured I shall know how to deal with it. Thus!" He made a swift stabbing motion with his toy assegai.

"Even if the white man, or his servant, the Hottenot, is the bringer of evil?" Thuso questioned.

"Even then," Tomasi replied, but there was an unhappy shadow in his large brown eyes.

"That is enough dark talk for young wisdom," Thuso said gently. "Why are you not with the other boys?"

"Their childish play tired me, Old Wisdom," Tomasi replied loftily. "And I saw that you were alone, and troubled, so I came to you."

"For that thought," Thuso said, "there should be a reward."

Tomasi clapped his hands.

"A tale to be told, Old One?"

"Truly. Have you ever heard the tale of the jackal who thought he was too powerful to hunt with the pack and went hunting with a lion—"

"As I would not play with children but came to talk to you," Tomasi commented shrewdly. "But you are no lion, Old One—or are you? Still, no matter." He settled himself more comfortably. "Tell the story. I listen."

A MAN rode over the veldt. His horse was a coal black stallion. Its gait was the pace deceiving, rocking chair movement known in South Africa as the "tripple."

The horse had a lot of Arab blood in him, and little of the sturdy native Basuto—but despite the mixture of blood, he carried himself with the assurance of a thoroughbred; the fire of his eyes, the arch of his neck, the grace and suggestion of a tremendous reserve of power in his action all were ear-marks of a blooded animal. There was, too, some pride in his bearing—pride and affection for his rider.

There was evidently a close understanding between the two, man and horse. They seemed to be welded into one whole. The man sat in the saddle with ease and perfect rhythm of movement that did much to minimize his weight. And he was a big man; at least six feet tall and—perhaps it was due to his posture—seemed to be tending to obesity. He scarcely need the reins he held in his kid-gloved hands; they were little more than a concession to convention, for the horse responded to the slightest pressure of his rider's knees and weaved his way in and out of the bush growth with the agile sure-footedness of a well-trained polo pony.

And if the horse's accoutrement—the saddle and bridle—were of the finest quality, the brass work gleaming like gold, the girth as soft and as pliable as silk—the rider's attire matched it. On a dummy advertising the very latest in tropical attire, in the window of a Saville Row tailor, it would not, perhaps, have looked so out of place, so theatrical in its dudish perfection. From the top of his white pith helmet to the soles of his brown polo boots, the rider was beautifully turned out. His white, semi-military tunic coat fitted without a wrinkle. His white riding breeches flared widely at the hips and were skin tight at the knees. His box spurs were of gold. And as if to proclaim his dudishism to the world, a monocle gleamed in his right eye. After that, its seemed as if the revolver attached in its holster to the cartridge belt around his waist and the rifle he carried slung over his shoulder could be no more than stage props.

His face was clean shaven, full and round. His eyes, shaded by the brim of his helmet, were a light baby blue and seemed to hold the dancing innocence of a child. His lips were parted slightly in a smile of contentment—or inanity, according to the mood of the observer—exposing white, even teeth. He was bronzed—so bronzed by Africa's sun that it seemed an artificial coloring against the whiteness of his clothing.

But the man could ride! Nor was he ignorant of the ways of the veldt. That was obvious from the manner in which, despite the constant detours necessitated by the hazards of the bush—the thick patches of thorn bush, the marshy *vleis*, the patches of knife edged outcrop and, in one place, several acres of seemingly firm, level ground

which was undermined by ant-bears—despite the turnings and twistings forced on him by these obstacles, he always returned to his original course, heading due East.

It was equally apparent, when his horse suddenly propped and then swerved violently, that his eyes were keen and his muscular reaction to the dictates of his brain perfectly coordinated, for at the same instant that the urge of his knees brought his horse back to the course he had drawn his revolver and fired. The shot smashed the head of a twelve foot black momba—Africa's most deadly snake.

"That was a dashed silly thing to do," he reproached himself as he cleaned his revolver before returning it to its holster. "It was doin' me no harm. But—" he affected a shiver—"I hate snakes. 'Pon my soul! I need Jim along. He would have splendid arguments to justify the killing. An' it wasn't showin' off—though it was a dashed good shot, if I do say so myself.

"Wonder how Jim's getting along with the three prisoners? Between me an' myself, I'm afraid I acted too impulsively when I sent him off with them to Marka's kraal. It rather—er—smacks of turning the wolves loose into the sheep fold." He sighed. "I ought to have known better! Wouldn't be surprised if they don't try to stir up some trouble—an' I've tied Jim's hands by tellin' him he's to treat them with suspicion an' all that. I rather think that the sooner I get there the better. Don't think I'll do any more visiting. Wasted too much time as it is."

AND having come to that decision he changed direction slightly and now headed for some kopjes which, blued by the distance, showed faintly on the horizon.

His immediate objective now was the ford of a river which had cut a deep ravine in its timeless journey across the veldt. There he would make his night's outspan. It would be rough traveling from now on. He would be obliged to seek the hospitality of native kraals along his route instead of the softer hospitality of the white homesteaders he had originally planned to visit. But he was now saving at least fifty miles and, as speed now ruled him, that more than compensated for the rigors of camping out and roughing it at the kraals. He made a mental check of the few things he had with him. Pajamas and towels in the blanket roll fastened to the D's at the cantle of his saddle. Changes of linen in the neatly rolled raincoat strapped over his wallets. And in the wallets, his shaving kit and sundry odds and ends.

"An' that's all," he concluded lugubriously. "It rather looks as if I'll have to pull the jolly old hunger belt tight before I get to Marka's. Oh, well, it's my own silly fault. I suppose I'm a bit of an ass to worry about Jim—but I am worrying. And that, most definitely, is that."

Characteristically, he then put the matter from his mind and gave himself up to a full enjoyment of his ride. Occasionally he sang snatches of song in a deep, rich bartitone. Once he gave chase, whooping with delight, shouting shrill tally-ho's, to a wild pig which broke cover just in front of him. He laughed as the animal suddenly went to earth in an ant-bear's hole, swinging 'round with amazing agility as it backed into its haven of refuge.

The sun was hastening to its setting when the horseman came to where the veldt dropped toward the river which was still hidden from sight by its steep, rocky banks. Presently he came to a road—it was no more than a dirt track, ankle deep in dust in the dry season; a muddy quagmire in the season of rains.

He turned into this road, reining to a walk as the gradient steepened. It was a winding road, strewn with small boulders between which the stallion picked his way with dainty fastidiousness.

At last, rounding a bend, the horseman came in view of the river—it was now no more than a narrow trickle in the middle of a quarter-mile wide sandy bed. About half way across was a large transport wagon and a span of sixteen oxen. Some of the animals were milling about restlessly; some were lying down. Two men were seated on the driver's seat. One was a thin, gray-bearded man. His companion was scarcely out of his teens.

"Good lord, uncle!" the younger man exclaimed. "Look at the dude. Am I dreaming—or do you think it's lost its way from a circus."

"Eh! What's that," the other exclaimed with a start, and shading his eyes with a hand he looked in the direction of the oncoming

horseman. "A dude, you say, Joe. Hell, it's the Major! The Major, I tell you."

He stood up on the seat, waving excitedly and shouting a greeting. Then he sat down again with a complacent grunt.

"That's half our worries over," he said. "The Major'll be able to get things moving."

The other sniffed contemptuously.

"He doesn't look as if he had enough brains to come in out of the rain," he said. "Great Scot, uncle, I don't think I've ever seen such a helpless looking fool of a Stage Door Johnny in my life. He can ride, though," he concluded as an afterthought.

"And that's the least of his accomplishments. The Major—his real name is Aubrey St. John Major and he's always careful to tell you that S.T. J.O.H.N. spells Sinjun—but we call him the Major. Anyway, he's the best shot, the best veldt man, best everything a man can be in the country. And he's the most popular man to boot—and with good reason—with white an' black. 'Course, they do say he's an I.D.B.* I don't know anything about that. But if he is one, he must be the King pin of them all, for the police have never caught him with the goods."

"He's got a good champion in you, uncle," Joe Baines said noncommittally. "But it seems impossible such a silly ass could be all that you say."

"That's his protective coloration, Joe. Don't let it fool you. It hides his real self; the way a chameleon does when it changes its color. An' believe me, the Major can change to suit his environment or whatever his little game at the moment might be. But, generally speaking, he looks like you see him now. A dude of a—what did you call him—Stage Door Johnny."

By this time the Major had made his way slowly across the shifting sand of the river's bed to the wagon.

"Hello, Baines," he said in a drawingly affected voice as he reined to a halt. "Jolly nice to see you, an' all that. But I say, you seem to be in a deuce of a mess. All your jolly old cattle in a tangle, eh, what?"

"You're damned right, Major," Baines said slowly. "We're in a hell of a mess an' I don't know when I've been so glad to see you. Where's Jim the Hottentot—coming along with your wagon?"

The Major shook his head.

"No. I'm absolutely on my own—roughin' it, don't cherknow. All alone on the trackless veldt, headin' into the great unknown. But Jim—Jim's at Marka's kraal. At least I hope so."

Baines' face fell.

"When I saw you," he said, "I was counting on Jim coming right along. He can talk to cattle in their own lingo. Oh, well—" Then with a start of self-reproach he continued. "But my manners, Major. This—" he indicated his companion with a laugh—"is my nephew, Joe. He's only just come out to the country. He's a greenhorn—don't know nothing yet; not enough to come in out of the rain. And he's too apt to believe what he thinks he sees."

"Pon my soul," the Major exclaimed after he had acknowledged the introduction, "aren't we all? But what's the trouble, Baines?" His eyes keenly examined the wagon and oxen.

"Trouble enough," Baines exclaimed. "Yesterday morning my two natives got drunk an' I lost my temper an' sacked them. Thought I'd have no trouble with the oxen seeing we're on the homeward trek, though I'll be the first to admit I'm no cattleman. Don't understand 'em. Anyway, everything was all right until we got here just after sun-up this morning. The going across the river's a bit heavy an' I've got a full load. Well, to cut a long story short when we got to here the dumb stupid beasts jibbed an' wouldn't go any further. I can't get 'em to budge. I've tried everything I know. I've coaxed 'em. I've changed 'em around. I've thrashed 'em. I've even threatened to light fires under their tails. But no! They've gone on strike an' it looks as if we're here forever."

"You'd be in a pretty pickle if there was a cloudburst up country an' the flood waters came down," the Major said with a laugh.

"Is that likely?" Joe Baines asked with an anxious look at the sky. "But there are no clouds about."

"It's always the unlikely things that are likely to happen in this country, old chap," the Major said as he dismounted. "I say, Baines," he continued, "come an' introduce me to your oxen. They might feel insulted if I miscalled them."

"I've done nothing else since early morn-

* Illicit Diamond Buyer

ing," Baines laughed as he jumped down from the wagon. He walked with the Major among the oxen, naming each one and appraising its worth. At last the Major said:

"I think we know each other now. Do you mind if I see what I can do with them? Perhaps it would be best if you went back and sat in the wagon, out of sight. They're temperamental beasts, you know, an' just now I rather fancy that you are in their bad books."

Baines nodded and joined his nephew in the wagon. "Don't talk," he whispered. "You're goin' to see something now that'll make you open your eyes. Look!"

THE Major walked up and down the line of oxen, talking continuously in the native vernacular, calling to each beast by name, praising, cajoling, scolding. And, gradually, the restless milling ceased. The beasts that had been lying down got ponderously to their feet. In a very little while he had the spans straightened out. Up and down the line he went, straightening out the trek chain, adjusting yokes—a pat here, a little prod there, but talking softly, encouragingly all the time.

Then he went to the head of the line and spoke to the two lead oxen. They responded immediately, moving forward a little, followed by all except the two wheelers, until they had taken up the strain.

Then they halted, but still leaned forward against the yokes. The Major then went to the two wheelers and took up the driving whip; it had a twelve foot stock and a *voorslag*—lash—of at least twenty.

"Ah now!" he shouted in a high, shrill voice. "*Juk*!" with expert skill he flourished the big whip, making the long lash snake out over the backs of the oxen with a loud report.

The beasts strained forward. The wagon moved—and kept on moving as the team got down to its task. Across the sandy bed of the river they went, encouraged by the Major's voice calling to them by name, guided by the long lash of the whip which constantly threatened but never touched their hides.

The Major did not permit them to halt until they had hauled the wagon up the winding road to the level of the surrounding veldt. And there, as the afterglow was already beginning to fade from the sky, Baines said they would outspan for the night.

He did not attempt to thank the Major—that was not necessary. But he laughed softly at the expression of wondering amazement on his nephew's face when the Major—showing no signs now of the man of action he had been so recently—drawlingly commented.

"You've got a good team, Baines. But oxen are bally funny beasts, aren't they? Never could understand them myself. But Jim now, he can work miracles with them. They'd haul a wagon up the side of a steeple for him." He turned to unsaddle the stallion which had followed meekly behind the wagon and now was muzzling him affectionately.

"Major—" Baines began, then hesitated.

"Yes?" the Major prompted.

"Well—it's this way. I'm worried about the wife. She's all alone, an' we ought to have been back the day before yesterday. Now we'll be lucky if we get back tomorrow sun-under. An' you know what women are. She'll think all manner of fool things. Could you—"

"Of course," the Major said quickly as he tightened up the stallion's girth again and swung up into the saddle. "Any message?"

"No. Save we're all right. An' thanks a lot, Major."

The Major waved his hand and rode off into the fast gathering darkness.

Joe Baines gave a long, low whistle.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "If that doesn't take the cake. Do you mean to tell me, Uncle, that the Major's riding to our place tonight?"

"Sure. Why not. It'll only take him three or four hours on that horse of his. An' at the end of it, he'll have better grub and a better bed than we'll have tonight. Now come on, we'll get outspanned before it gets too dark to see anything. An' don't worry about the Major. He'll think no more of the ride than I think of asking him to do it. This is Africa, Joe. White men don't call it going out of their way to help a friend."

Joe Baines shook his head thoughtfully as he climbed down from the wagon:

"You know, Uncle," he said slowly, "he didn't look a bit like a dude when he was

working the oxen. I think I judged too hastily."

IT WAS nearing the hour of sun-under when the light, tent-topped wagon, drawn by twelve sleek mules, came to a halt in the cleared space before the opening of the pole stockade which encircled the kraal of Marka. The people who had been so excitedly preparing to greet its arrival waited, in silence for the most part, inside their huts lest their enthusiasm should break through the outward indifference of true courtesy.

As the driver—a squat, ugly, but immensely powerful Hottentot—jumped down from the driver's seat, Marka accompanied by several old men and a number of warriors came out of the kraal. They sat down just outside the stockade.

"Greetings, Marka," the Hottentot said casually.

Marka took a large pinch of snuff and sneezed loudly before replying:

"Greetings to you, Hottentot. You have trekked far today?"

"Truly. Last night we were outspanned beside the water hole at Lion Rock."

"Ou!" Marka exclaimed, his hand over his mouth as if in awed amazement at news which, indeed, was no news. "That is indeed very far. You must be tired, Hottentot. The hospitality of my kraal is yours."

"My thanks, Headman," Jim the Hottentot replied. "I have need of that—not only for myself but for those who are with me."

"You know us, Hottentot. It shall be given to all with you. And the *inkosi*, whose servant you are, he is not with you?"

Jim shook his head.

"He will come later, riding on the black stallion. When he will come, I do not know. He is like the wind—free to blow where it pleases him."

"Truly. He is such a man. We know his worth—and yours, Hottentot. But now, why do not those who are with you show themselves?"

"They remain in comfort with their guards," Jim replied dryly, "until I have spoken to you."

"Ou! They are great ones then? Are they friends of the *inkosi?"*

"No," Jim said. "The time has come to put an end to words which lead nowhere. No pay heed—I speak now the words of my Baas, the *inkosi* you call friend and whom it is an honor to serve. In the wagon are three white men. They are bound hand and foot. Warriors from the kraal near the diamond *dorp* keep guard over them. The white men are cunning and evil—as some white men are evil. It is my Baas' desire that they be kept safe prisoners at your kraal until he arrives. No harm is to be done to them. In all things—save that they must not be allowed to leave this place—they are to be treated as if they were indeed white *inkosis. Au-a!* You, and your people, will show them the same respect that you would show to my Baas himself."

"But," Marka said hesitatingly, "suppose they wish to go from this place."

"Then the spears of your warriors must stop them," Jim said grimly. Then he added with a laugh, "But have no fear of that. They would not dare to go with none to guide them. They would be lost before they had gone beyond sight of this place. They know nothing of this land. In that respect they are fools. Now—what say you, Marka. Do you obey my Baas' request, or must I trek elsewhere?"

"You are as full of words as a Kaffir Orange is full of seeds," Marka exclaimed. "Outspan, Hottentot."

Jim grinned as, all formalities now at an end, the young warriors sprang to their feet and hurried to help him outspan. And, at the same time, the kraal came to life as the rest of its inhabitants swarmed out of the stockade, shouting happy welcomes.

The Hottentot gave a few directions to the men who were unharnessing the mules, then content that the animals would be well-groomed, fed and watered, he climbed up into the wagon. There sat three white men, bound hand and foot and securely gagged. Sitting on the floor were three armed natives.

"Your task is ended now," Jim said. "My thanks, warriors."

The natives laughed. One said, "The task was light. Now what?"

"Loose these men. Take the gags from their mouths and help them down to the ground—doubtless their legs are stiff."

He jumped down from the wagon and joined Marka, laughing at the sallies of old friends, paying outrageous compliments to

the women, listening with ever outward appearance of grave consideration to the excited chatter of the children.

PRESENTLY the noisy clamor ceased as three white men climbed awkwardly down from the wagon, assisted by the three warriors who, their tasks accomplished, quickly joined the young men of the kraal.

The white men stood huddled together against the wagon. They were an odd-looking trio. They wore tight-fitting, flashy clothes; their shoes were flimsy, with pointed toes, their hats were dented and travel-stained felts, their linen was dirty. The incipient beards which sprouted on their faces added to their unkempt appearance. Each had a viciously repellent expression of low cunning which would have betrayed their characters no matter what their dress had been. In the slums of any of the world's big cities they would quickly have found their level and a measure of material comfort, for their peculiar assets—an undoubted manual dexterity and a contempt for law and order—have an almost universal application. But here, surrounded by the open veldt, alone—despite the hundreds of natives who stared wonderingly at them—they were helpless and desperately afraid.

Here there were no pockets for them to pick! None to inveigle into a trickster's games of chance. Here they were vastly outnumbered and they only took violent action when the odds were the other way. Here were no slums. Here ruled a law which was unknown to them; a law which was imposed, they thought, by men who regarded killing as a very minor crime.

They started when four warriors, obeying an order from Marka, came running toward them.

"Hi! Wot are ye goin' to do with us?" one of the men asked. He was a thin, underdeveloped man with narrow, close-set eyes. His hair was rust red and he answered to the name of Foxy Smith.

"That's the way to tork to them, Foxy," Smiler Stoyles encouraged. He was a big man with the build and muscle of a prize fighter. He was a bully and, by the same token, an arrant coward. "Tell 'em we're white men," he continued, speaking out of the corner of his mouth. "Tell 'em there'll be trouble if they harm us."

"Oh, shut up, Smiler. The silly fools don't seem to understand English. You try talkin' to 'em, Squint. You speak a bit of the lingo, don't you?"

The third man, he was easily the most prepossessing of the three—at least he had signs of intelligence—took a deep breath and addressed the leader of the four natives who now stood silently before him:

"What you going to do? We big chiefs. Much money. Give you. Give you drink—white man's drink."

He spoke a weird dialect known as Kitchen Kaffir—a sort of pidgin English.

The natives grinned. Apparently they had got the general sense of what Squint had said.

"You come," one said. "You eat."

Squint turned to his companions.

"It's all right," he said. "They're friendly enough. They want us to go with them to get some grub. Come on."

"May be they're plannin' to eat us," Smiler said cautiously. "An if they're so friendly—" his speech was interlarded with vicious curses—"what are they carryin' them big spears for?"

"There ain't no cannibals in this part of the country," Squint said shortly. "I do know that. An' I'm hungry. Come on."

And so, escorted by the warriors, the three were taken into the kraal, to a large hut. It was spotlessly clean, as too were its primitive furnishings: three beds made from interlaced strips of hide stretched on wooden frames, three native-made stools crudely carved, sundry eating and drinking utensils and on the dhagha floor, serving as mats, several well-tanned buck skins.

THE three men looked about them disconsolately when their guards had left them.

"Nice friendly lot, ain't they?" Smiler whined as he sat down on one of the beds. "I bet they'd stick us with them big spears as soon as not. You wait 'til I get out of here. I'll learn the Major he can't play a trick like this on me."

"What are you whining about, Smiler?" Squint snapped. "We ain't been hurt yet. An' I wouldn't brag too much about what you'll do to the Major. He ain't the fool, monocled dude we thought he was."

"No," Foxy added reminiscently, "nor

he ain't helpless when he's drunk—or when he *appears* to be drunk. I'm talkin' soft when he's around."

"There more ways of killin' a cat than skinnin' it," Smiler growled. "Just because he played a trick on us once don't say he's goin' to do it again. Hell! He's goin' to pay for this. He's abducted us, that's what he's done. That's against the law. He can be sent to prison for that. I'll complain to the police—"

"Oh, shut your gab," Squint interrupted viciously. "What he's done to us ain't one, two, three to what we tried to do to him. As for complainin' to the police—you're talking like a damned fool, Smiler. In the first place they wouldn't listen to you. And, in the second place, we'd be the laughin' stock of the *dorp* if they did. Figure it out, here the three of us—an' Mawson, blast him—try to hold up the Major an' he turns the tables on us. As for Mawson—he thought he was goin' to lift a parcel of stones off the Major. Instead—Hell! I wonder what the Major did to him."

By this time the sunset's afterglow had faded from the sky and the hut was in darkness.

The men's voices died away in an uneasy silence—a silence that seemed all the greater in contrast to the laughter, singing and the beating of drums which accompanied the merry-making of the kraal people.

Presently several natives entered the hut, one carrying a lighted hurricane lantern, the others platters of food—chicken, and sweet potatoes, green corn, sourdough bread, and a calabash full of beer. They set the food on the floor before the white men and retired, leaving the lantern behind.

"At least," Squint said, "they don't plan to starve us." He began to eat greedily.

"Maybe it's poisoned," Smiler said dubiously.

"Maybe it is," Foxy laughed as he joined Squint. "Keep on thinkin' that way: there'll be more for us."

Muttering something about them being greedy swine, Smiler hestitated no longer.

They ate noisily, like animals, washing down the food with huge draughts of Kaffir beer. It was a potent brew and by the time the calabash—it was a large one—was empty, their faces were flushed, their speech thickened. They giggled at each other's slurring of words and the next moment were snarling curses at each other over some fancied insult.

"Let's go an' see what the niggers are up to," Foxy suggested.

They went to the door of the hut, but at that moment a burst of wild yells came from the cattle scherm where the feasting and dancing were in full swing.

"We're better off here," Squint decided. "No sense pokin' our noses where we ain't been invited. And me, for one, don't want any argument with a lot of drunken nigs. Listen to the devils!"

They want back to their beds and sat down despondently.

After a little while Foxy took a greasy pack of cards from his pocket and suggested a game. When his suggestions was greeted with scornful contempt, he amused himself by performing some sleight of hand tricks which would not have disgraced a professional—and, in a sense, Foxy was that. Once or twice he even succeeded in mystifying his companions who were no novices in the art of card manipulation.

But at last the food and the heady beer they had had weighted down their eyes and they slept.

WITH the rising of the morrow's sun the three men were awakened by natives who brought them breakfast. And again they had no cause for complaint in the quality or quantity of the food. Indeed, it was a far better meal than they would have eaten had they been in their own quarters in the *dorp*. The coffee was excellent; the grilled buck kidneys would have pleased an epicure. No matter what Jim the Hottentot's private opinion might have been as to the way in which these men should be treated, he obeyed his Baas' orders and he had, therefore, prepared that meal with as much care as if he had been cooking it for the Major.

After they had broken their fast he visited them with one of the kraal natives—a simpering youth who had been a prize pupil of a distant mission school and, consequently, could speak English. And that was a language which Jim—despite the years he had been with his Baas—could not speak; or perhaps he only feigned igno-

ance. Even the Major was not sure as to the truth of that.

Through the native interpreter, Jim told the white men that they would be treated as honored guests during their stay at the kraal; if they wished to go hunting, that could be arranged. There was a river nearby, where they could bathe or fish. If they desired to explore the surrounding country, they could do that and guides would accompany them to make sure they would not get lost. But they would not be allowed to have firearms, neither would they be allowed to make their way back to the *dorp*. Here they must stay until the Major, his Baas, arrived.

When the interpreter had finished, the three men bombarded him, and through him, Jim, with questions and threats. While one was promising great rewards if Jim would only drive them back to the *dorp*, the others were cursing him and shouting vicious threats. But it was all to no purpose, and presently they found themselves alone once again—and found no solace in each other's company.

At last they left the hut and wandered aimlessly about the kraal, but it held no interest for them. They regarded the routine occupations of the people with mirthful contempt—whether it was the women pounding the corn to a coarse flour or tanning skins; or the menfolk making cunning game snares and mending their weapons. To them it was all something to be laughed at and they boasted to each other of their own superiority.

They had no desire to go hunting—the thought of it frightened them. Fishing or bathing brought visions of crocodiles to their minds. They did discuss the wisdom of climbing one of the nearby kopjes in the hope of locating a white man's homestead in the vicinity to which they could make their escape. But Smiler remembered stories of the savagery of baboons which lived in kopjes. Besides, didn't leopards live in the hills?

So they returned to their hut and sat down in its shade, drowsing away the morning hours until their mid-day meal was brought to them.

In this way they spent the next three days: eating and drinking when food was brought to them. They did not bother to go outside the kraal. They seemed to have no other interest in life. They got dirtier—washing seemed to be *tabu* to them. They quarrelled almost incessantly, threatening each other, but being too indolent to implement their threats. And as far as their knowledge of the kraal and its people went, they were as ignorant as on the day of their arrival. Except for two or three things which were made evident even to their debased minds.

AS, for instance, they discovered the reverence that the kraal natives paid to age and the wisdom of age. This was when Smiler Steyles raised his fist, threatening to strike an old man who did not get out of the way quick enough to please him. The threatened blow was averted by two men whose assegais were levelled at Smiler's chest. He grinned sheepishly and let his hand fall harmlessly to his side. But despite his grin there was fear in Smiler's heart—and that fear was not altogether created by the threat of the sharp-bladed spears. It was chiefly due to the note of anger in the old man's voice; a voice which was unexpectedly deep and strong. It is as well, perhaps, that Smiler did not understand what the old man said, for Smiler was a superstitious soul and the curse of Thuso, the witchdoctor, had a bite to it. Certainly it overawed the two natives and they put their hands to their gaping mouths and looked at Smiler as if they expected him to disintegrate to nothingness.

Again Foxy, caught playing a cruel practical joke on a small boy, quickly discovered that the kraal people were quick to resent any unkindness shown to children. He was glad when warriors interposed to save him from the angry women who milled about him.

And all three found that the women of the kraal were *tabu* as far as they were concerned.

Having learned by bitter experience these three lessons nothing was left for them to do but await the arrival of the Hottentot's Baas, the man who was responsible for their present predicament. They tried to comfort themselves with boasts of what they would do then.

On the fourth day chance turned things their way.

They were seated as usual outside their hut. Squint and Smiler were watching Foxy play a game of solitaire with the greasy pack of cards. It was typical of the man that he cheated himself by a clever manipulation of the deck. It was typical of the other two that they could not refrain from jeering, boasting that they could see through his trickery with both eyes closed.

"Think yer smart, don't you?" Foxy snarled, gathering up the cards with a curse. "I'll show you something you won't see with your eyes wide open. What do you think of this?"

He performed a series of tricks—not the least of which was his ability to deal himself a full house, or four of a kind, no matter how carefully the others shuffled the cards. He palmed the cards. He seemed to produce them from the thin air. A wave of his hand, and they all vanished.

Presently Foxy saw that he had a large audience of kraal natives, who stood watching him intently, expressions of awed amazement on their faces.

"Bli'me!" he exclaimed. "Look at the niggers. Better go round with the hat, Squint. I ain't goin' to give no charity show."

"Keep on, Foxy," Squint said quickly. "Maybe there's something in this for us. If we play it properly, there's no tellin' what might happen."

"That's a fact there ain't," Foxy answered uneasily as he saw the old man Smiler had threatened join the crowd of natives. With him was the Hottentot.

The two watched for a little while as Foxy resumed his display, then Thuso made his way to the front. Then standing before Foxy and facing the natives, he drew himself up to his full height and pointed the finger of scorn at the people, bidding them get back to their tasks, upbraiding them, calling them foolish children to be amazed at the childish tricks of white men. There was something grand about the old man; an almost kingly dignity. But the three white men only saw a dirty, decrepit old native, fantastically dressed—he had buffalo horns attached to his head; he had a cape of monkey skins about his shoulders and in his hand he carried a fly whisk made of a hyena's tail. He spoke with the voice of authority and the eloquence of an orator. But the white men only heard a monkey-like, meaningless jabbering.

Foxy stood up behind the witchdoctor just as the old one had reached the climax of his speech and appeared to take some cards from the horns on the witchdoctor's head. The atmosphere changed immediately. Thuso saw that he had lost his hold over the people just at the moment when he had thought he had them completely under his control. He hesitated. He lost the thread of his argument. Some of the people tittered, none paid attention to him any longer. With a shout of anger he sprang forward, threateningly. They made a passage for him—apart from that they paid no heed to him.

"That's enough for now, Foxy," Squint said with a good sense of timing. "That'll give 'em something to think over. Come on."

He went into the hut, followed by the other two.

"Bli'me!" Foxy chortled. "Did you see the niggers' faces, Smiler? They looked at me as if I was a god or something."

"Wot of it?" Smiler growled. "I ain't plannin' spending the rest of my life being a god to a lot of dirty niggers."

"Use your brains, Smiler," Foxy said. "Squint's right. We ought to cash in on this somehow. Come to think of it—don't they give presents, sacrifice or something, to their gods?"

Squint nodded.

"Something like that. But we'll lay low and let them make the next move. Maybe this'll help us turn the tables on the Major. There ain't nothin' we won't be able to do if we play the cards right—an' Foxy's goin' to be the one to play them. He's goin' to be the chief of us three, see, Smiler. Course, we'll all be gods—but Foxy'll be the chief. Me an' you, Smiler, 'll be his attendants—we ain't as clever with our hands as Foxy is. How about it, do we agree?"

"'Course!" Foxy chortled, sitting up on his bed and assuming an attitude which he imagined to be god-like. "An' you can come an' kiss my foot, Smiler, by way of showin' proper respect."

Smiler told him in a few curt phrases just what he would do before he kissed Foxy's foot.

"Nobody's going to ask you to? Don't be a bloody fool!" Squint exclaimed impa-

tiently. Foxy's only pulling your leg. Just the same, we've got to show Foxy proper respect when there's any niggers about. Wish I could talk the lingo, proper. Wish we could get hold of that nigger who interpreted on the day we arrived."

He and Foxy were both excitedly elated, laughing at Smiler's gloomy forebodings.

"All right," he conceded finally. "I'll play my part. Just the same, Foxy, I don't reckon you ought to have made fun of that old nigger. I'm afraid of him. An' did you notice the Major's nigger went off with him?"

"What does it matter who he is. You saw for yourself he didn't count for nothing."

"I still don't like it," Smiler grumbled. "An' anyway, if you're so damned sure we've got the niggers eatin' out of our hands, what's the sense of stayin' here waiting for the Major? Let's get away while the goin's good. We can take his wagon an' mules an' get one of the niggers to drive us back to the *dorp*—"

The other two saw that there was a great deal to be said for Smiler's suggestion and they were still discussing the pros and cons of it when natives entered with their evening meal.

IF THERE had been any doubts in their minds as to the complete success of the afternoon performance, the attitude of the natives dispelled them—even Smiler's! The natives almost groveled before the white men. They did, actually, go down on hands and knees, as they would have done in the presence of their paramount chief; and in that manner they backed out of the hut.

The three were still eating, drinking and laughing confidently at the unexpected change in their fortunes when the English-speaking native entered. His attitude was typical of the tribesman who has painfully acquired a veneer of the white man's civilization sufficient to create doubts of his own people's ancient lore, yet not sufficient to enable him to discriminate the true from the false of the white man's. There was just a suggestion of mockery in his manner; but there was fear and wonder there, too.

"What do you want?" Squint demanded.

The native laughed self-consciously.

"My name is Tom," he said. "I am a Christian. I passed fourth standard at the Mission School. I am educated. I know many things that the people of this kraal do not know."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yes. I know the magic the red-haired man did is not truly magic. It was only a trick. But"—he added quickly, his doubtful fears for the moment gaining control—"the tricks were magic ones."

"You know too much!" Foxy snarled.

And Smiler exclaimed:

"Wot did I tell yer? We're fools to try an' play any god-stuff with these niggers."

"Shut up, both of you," Squint said. "You are very clever, Tom," he continued. "But you don't know everything. What have you come here for now?"

"I thought," Tom said falteringly, "you would teach me how to do the tricks."

"Is it likely?" Squint said. "Why should you think we'd teach you our magic which, you say, is only a trick."

"My people—they are poor ignorant heathen—think it is great magic. They think the red-haired man is a servant of the Great Spirits. Now, if you were to teach me how to perform the magic tricks, my people would not laugh at me any more. They would give me many head of cattle to pay for my wonder workings. I should have many wives. Will you show me how to do the magic, white men?"

He looked eagerly at Foxy who made a pass with his hand and extracted a card from Smiler's nose? The native's eyes widened. His mission training assured him it was only a trick. But the evidence of his eyes confirmed his inner belief that it was all very great magic.

Squint said slowly:

"It is a magic that cannot be taught in a day. Besides, why should we show you? You are less than nothing to us!"

Tom looked at them slyly.

"What if I can help you escape from here? What if I can make you rich?"

"What you mean, rich? Cattle and nigger wives don't interest us."

"But diamonds would," Tom said, and he smiled with more confidence at the expressions of greed which came into the faces of the white men.

"Go on," Squint said.

"If I tell you—will you show me how to make things appear and disappear?"

"Sure we'll show you. Won't we, Foxy?"

"Look!" Foxy said. "It's as easy as this."

And he performed another palming trick, very slowly. Even so, it was so well done that it completely mystified the native.

"*Au-a!*" he exclaimed. "It is good magic. If I could only do that, there is nothing that would not be mine in this kraal. I would be the greatest witchdoctor in the land. You held your hand so, then— *Au-a!* How does it go?"

Squint stopped Foxy from a further exhibition.

"No," he said. "We won't show you any more now. You tell us about the diamonds."

"Listen, white men," Tom said quickly. "You know that men from this kraal all, at one time or other, gone to work at the diamond mines?"

"What of it?"

"Well, each one on his return brought presents for the Headman. That is the custom."

"Cut the cackle an' get down to layin'."

"For years," Tom continued complacently, ignoring Smiler Stoyles' interruption, for he saw that the other two were listening eagerly to him, "this has been happening. And what do you think were the presents the men brought back from the diamond mines?"

"You tell us," Squint said.

"Diamonds, white men." Tom looked at them triumphantly. "It is well known to all at the kraal. He has hundreds of them. But they are of no value to him. He keeps them in a tin chest in his hut."

"Might as well be in the Bank of England," Smiler observed. "Fat chance we've got of getting in there—"

"You got a plan, Tom?" Squint asked.

"Yes, mister. But what we have to do we must do quickly. It must be done before the white man you call the Major comes. And he will be here in two or three days, maybe. Once he is here, it will be too late. It will be too late, even, once the people see the dust clouds of his traveling. For he, truly, is a god in the eyes of the people. He can do no wrong. Besides, I think his magic is even greater than yours.

"Now listen: this is my plan——"

THERE was great excitement in the kraal the following night for Tom, aided by a number of the younger men whom he had won over by the promise of reward, had spread the news that the white men would perform a great wonder-working. A large fire had been lighted in the clearing at the center of the kraal. In that clearing, facing the fire and to the right and left of the headman's hut, sat all the adult people of the kraal. Marka, the headman, with his wives on either side of him, sat on a stool placed before his hut. A little to his left stood Thuso, the witchdoctor and Jim the Hottentot. The witchdoctor wore the full regalia of his craft: grotesque patterns were smeared on his naked body and thighs with a white paint made from wood ash. Small gourds containing seeds which made a rattling sound when he moved were fastened to his wrists and ankles; fish bladders were fastened to his hair and to the horns on his head. Every part of his attire had a deep symbolical meaning and, at normal times, his appearance would have created awe in the minds of those who saw him. But not now. The people had had a taste of a greater magic than any they had *seen* Thuso perform, and tonight they had been promised a still greater demonstration.

The drums beat a monotonous rhythm which was staggered by the clapping of hands. Snatches of song were begun; eerie, mournful cadences which died away almost as soon as they had begun.

The moon rose above the kopjes, its white light seeming to pale and flatten down the dancing yellow glare of the fire.

The Hottentot talked continuously in a low voice to the witchdoctor, evidently urging him to a definite course of action—and failing. Thuso's attitude was that of a man who had no part or interest in the proceedings. He stood aloof from it all. He and Jim alone were unmoved by the atmosphere of suspense which seemed to have all the people in its grip.

Suddenly the drumming and hand clapping ceased. The silence which followed was pregnant with a sense of hushed expectation of great things to happen.

And then, from outside the ring of light cast by the fire, from the dark shadows beyond the huts, came the sound of singing. It grew in volume and presently a little pro-

cession of singing men came into view. At their head walked Tom, the mission-educated native. In one hand he held a flaming torch, in the other a small gourd hanging from a chain from which poured clouds of pungent-smelling smoke. Foxy came next. He wore some sort of paper crown on his head. A gaudy blanket hung down from his shoulders. The ends of it, as if it were the train of a priestly vestment, were carried by Squint and Smiler who acted as his acolytes. Behind them, in pairs, were twenty young men, their bodies daubed white, carrying spears.

The demeanor of the white men, and the song they sang, was a blasphemous parody of a church ritual. But the watching natives did not know that.

Three times the procession encircled the clearing and then came to a halt in front of the headman's hut. Their singing ceased.

Squint and Smiler bowed low to Foxy, then took up their position to the right and left of the headman. Tom and the young warriors also bowed to Foxy, then seated themselves on the ground behind him.

Foxy stood alone. He let the blanket fall from his shoulders. The upper part of him was naked and on his freckled skin were crude designs, in keeping with the obscenities of the rest of the performance. But the kraal were impressed—there was no sound other than their heavy, measured breathing.

And then Foxy moved his hands in a series of flickering passes and suddenly the watching natives saw a lighted cigarette glowing between the fingers of his right hand. He put it in his mouth and gulped realistically. He opened his mouth wide. The cigarette had vanished! He had swallowed it! But no! Look! He was taking it —the end glowing redly—out of his ear!

Trick followed trick with bewildering rapidity. He juggled with stones. Cards appeared and disappeared, only to appear again in some unexpected place. The tricks were no more than those which form the A. B. C. of a sleight of hand performer, but to the natives they were undoubtedly great magic. They had eyes for no one but Foxy.

But Marka, the headman, was not greatly impressed, though he was being won over from his predetermined attitude of disbelief. Thuso, the witchdoctor, maintained his contemptuous aloofness. As for the Hottentot. He was more than ready to concede that the tricks were magic ones, but if magic it was then he knew it must be of an evil variety and he tried to anticipate what that evil might be. He felt, remembering his Baas' instructions, that he could not act until the evil came out into the open. He noticed that the two white men beside the headman were slowly backing toward the entrance to the hut. They stopped when they saw that his eyes were riverted on them.

Squint said then:

'We'll have to go on with the rest of the plan, Foxy. The Major's nigger is watching us."

"Yes," Smiler added, "and the headman here has got his suspicions. Not to mention the old bloke in the funny get-up." Foxy nodded and suddenly brought his performance to a close. He sat down on the ground and Tom draped the blanket about him. Then Tom faced the people, his young warriors standing just behind him.

"The Great Wonder Worker, whose hair is like a burning flame," Tom said, "grieves for you. He would perform other and greater miracles that would bring to each one of you his heart's desire, but there are doubters among you. So, he can do no more. . . . I have spoken."

"Who are the doubters?" the people shouted. "Show them to us."

At a signal from Tom, Foxy rose to his feet again and pointed at Thuso, Jim and, finally, the headman.

AS HE pointed, the young men sprang forward and made prisoners of the three men. Too late Thuso attempted to overawe them and the people, with the mysteries of his craft; too late Marka, the headman, tried to exercise his authority.

The Hottentot fought grimly, but was soon overpowered. Marka's angry voice was stopped when a filthy rag was thrust in his mouth. Gags stopped the voices of Thuso and Jim.

The three were then hustled away from the place and there was a hushed silence for a little while which was not broken until the young warriors returned to report that the prisoners had been put into a vacant hut with warriors standing guard over them.

Foxy then held the attention of the people by performing more tricks—they were only variations of the ones he had already performed, but they served to mystify the people and still further convince them that the white man was high in the favor of the spirit. They did not notice that the other two white men had left the place; they did not see them return with a case of liquor they had looted from the Major's wagon, now unguarded by Jim. This case, covered with a blanket, they put at Foxy's feet.

Once again Foxy halted his performance as gourds of beer were brought and put on the ground before him. He sat down and, his movement covered by the blanket, poured several bottles of whiskey into the beer.

Then the blanket was removed and after Foxy had made a series of passes over the gourds, the beer was passed to the watching natives. They drank heavily and greedily. More beer was doctored and passed round and, in a very short time, any inhibitions the people might have had were completely destroyed. The beer alone was highly intoxicating; the addition of the whiskey had made it a deadly brew.

The drums commenced to beat a dance rhythm and the natives abandoned themselves to a night of revelry.

They did not see Tom and the three white men enter the headman's hut and afterwards leave the place, carrying the rest of the whiskey and a tin trunk, covered by a blanket.

Once inside the white men's quarters and the hurricane lamp lighted, Tom was anxious to be given his first lesson in magic making.

"I have done my part," he said. "You will keep your part of the bargain?"

"Not tonight, Tom," Squint replied. "We are all very tired. Wait until tomorrow. Here—take this."

He handed the native a bottle of whiskey and Tom departed happily.

The three men now lost no time in examining the trunk. It was locked, but the lock was a flimsy affair and Squint quickly fashioned a key of sorts from a piece of wire. Then throwing back the lid he emptied out the trunk's contents—some small rolls of gaily patterned calico, a few thin blankets, a broken alarm clock, the cast-off garments of some white man, a battered opera hat.

The faces of the men grew longer and longer.

"To think I made a—fool of myself for this," Foxy cursed.

"An' wot about the whiskey we wasted?" Smiler cried. "That nigger Tom's been playin' a game with us. I told you not to trust him. Wait till I lay hands on him."

Squint said nothing. He was still delving into the trunk, heaping onto the floor the treasures of an unsophisticated mind.

At last he took out five cigar boxes. He opened one and found that it contained a weird assortment of childish toys—tops, gaily colored marbles, toy pistols and such like trivialities which a normal school boy collects and treasures. Mixed up with these "treasures"—and of no greater value in the eyes of their owner—were a number of diamonds.

"Look," he cried, "the nigger didn't lie to us after all!"

As he picked the diamonds out of the rubble the others knelt on the floor beside him, watching him closely, eager to handle the stones themselves, their excitement flushing their faces and thickening their voices.

They pounced on the other boxes. Each one, they found, was filled with a similar collection of trash—and precious stones. At last they had nearly three hundred stones which had been smuggled out of the diggings over a period of years. There were no very large ones—the methods of smuggling made size impossible; some had been swallowed, others hidden in self-inflicted cuts in the thigh—but they were of good quality and color. At any rate the stones represented a sizeable fortune for the three men. Even so, they quarrelled noisily about the division and some time elapsed before the parcel was finally divided into three lots.

"We'll get the trunk back to the headman's hut tonight," Squint said, "and he won't suspect a thing. Maybe he'll never know."

He carefully repacked the trunk and locked it again.

"Come on," he said. "We'll take it now. It'll be safe enough. Listen to the niggers—there'll be a lot of thick heads in the morning. You go first, Foxy. Me and Smiler'll

carry the trunk. Here, put the blanket over it. Now if anybody sees us we'll pretend we've come to work some more magic."

Fifteen minutes later they were back in their hut once again, their mission successfully accomplished. They were too excited to go to sleep. Each man sat on his bed, examining again and again his pile of diamonds. They drank heavily, anticipating the way in which they would spend their easily acquired wealth.

At last Squint said, "We ought to plan what we're goin' to do next."

"Get away from here," Smiler said quickly.

"An' how are we goin' to get away? Have yer thought of that?"

"We can go in the Major's wagon, can't we? We'll take the nigger Tom along with us to look after the mules. He'll come, right enough. Come on—let's go now."

"Don't be a damned fool, Smiler," Foxy said. "In the first place, how are we goin' to get hold of the nigger. Chances are he's blind drunk now, anyway."

"Besides," Squint added, "suppose we did get away, we'd run into the Major as likely as not. Then where would we be?"

"There's three of us, ain't there? We can take care of him."

"We thought that once before, Smiler. No. It's too damned risky. Don't forget he'll be on horseback and he'll see us—an' recognize his wagon—a long time afore we see him. An' he's *slim*. They say he's the best veldt-man in the country."

"Then how about treking the other way, Squint?" Smiler said. "Let's make for Portuguese territory. No chance of meetin' the Major then. And over the border, we'll get a better price for our stones."

"Smiler's got a good idea there, Squint," Foxy said.

Squint shook his head dubiously.

"It might work," he said. "But then again, it might not. You see, we ain't any good on the veldt. An', somehow, I don't reckon Tom's much better. But I do know it's a damn long way to the border. An' it's a long trek through bad fever country after that before we get to the coast. No. I don't like the idea, specially knowin' the Major 'ud be ridin' hard on our tails. Don't forget, he knows the country like a book."

"Bli'me," Smiler ejaculated. "All you can do, Squint, is find fault. I say, let's go. The quicker the better. Tomorrow mornin' at the latest."

Squint hesitated a moment. Then:

"Look here," he said. "Hear my plan—if you don't like it, we'll do as Smiler suggests."

"Spit it out then," Foxy said.

"You'll both agree," Squint began, "that we've got the niggers here eatin' out of our hand—an' likely to continue to do so. Magic and booze'll do the trick every time. Right?"

"Go on," Foxy said.

"Right. Well, my plan is that we stay here nice an' comfortable with these friendly niggers who're ready to do anything we tell them. In due course the Major comes along, suspectin' nothin'—why should he? An' we'll have him where we want him. It won't be just the three of us against him. All the niggers in the kraal will be on our side. What's more, if we play our cards properly, we may be able to get our hands on some more stones. I bet any money there's some more hidden away somewhere. They didn't give 'em all to the headman. Well—what do you say."

"You've hit it," Foxy exclaimed triumphantly. "We'll make the Major a prisoner, milk the kraal dry an' then go back to the *dorp* in style. Maybe we'll take the nigger and the Major back with us. There's nothin' he can do about it—an' we're safe once we're in the *dorp*. After all, he kidnapped us. We'll only be turning the tables on him. Gord! Won't the chaps laugh?"

Squint looked at Smiler.

"I've got no choice," he growled. "But I don't like it."

"Then that's that," Squint said complacently. "Now let's get some sleep—it'll be daybreak first thing you know. Hell, listen to them niggers!"

He put out the light and presently the hut resounded to the snores of three well satisfied men.

WHILST the three white men slept, drugged by vision of wealth and luxurious living, whilst the people of the kraal were indulging in the wildest of orgies, the small form of Tomasi, the headman's son, crept out of the communal hut which housed

the boys who had not reached puberty. Keeping in the shadows he made his way swiftly to the hut where Thuso, Marka and Jim the Hottentot were imprisoned. There were two young warriors on guard there.

"*Wu*!" one exclaimed, pretending to be afraid. "Be careful, brother. Here comes a warrior against us. Keep close guard."

"Who is it? *Wo-we!* It is Tomasi the Lion Killer! My spear shakes with my fear," the other said, then added, "It is time children were asleep. What are you doing here, boy?"

"I wish to hold speech with my father," the boy replied.

"*Tchat!* That cannot be. It is forbidden. We are here to see that none hold speech with him, or the other two with him. It is forbidden that any go in or that they should come out."

"Marka is the headman of this kraal. And I, I am his son. May I not go in?"

"No. You have been told—it is forbidden."

"*Wo-we*!" Tomasi exclaimed shrilly. "This is a foolish thing the people of the kraal have done. They have made a mock of their headman. They have made a prisoner of a guest who has always been a friend. And, greatest evil of all, they have laid violent hands upon Thuso, the father of Wisdom."

"We have not hurt them," one of the guards said uneasily. "Besides—" his laugh was intended to hearten himself— "we have done no more than obey the orders of the white magic workers. If there be any blame, it is they who must bear it."

"Magic workers they may be," Tomasi said stoutly, "but it is evil magic they work and will not protect you from punishment when my father takes his rightful place again."

Both the guards laughed at that.

"Marka will never again be our headman, boy," one said. "Tom—the mouthpiece of the white wonder workers—will be headman and we—we will be his counsellors."

"So the jackals will give advice to the hyena," Tomasi exclaimed. "And what will you do when the white man—the man who has a glass window in his eye—comes to the kraal?"

"The white wonder workers will deal with him. If they order it, we will take him prisoner. It may be we will kill him. But you crow too loudly, boy. Get you to your own place. Quickly—before I raise my hand against you."

Realizing that he could not presume further on his age or his kinship with the deposed headman, Tomasi checked the hot retort which rose to his lips and made his way back to his sleeping hut. Entering, he moved cautiously in the darkness, stepping carefully over the sleeping forms of those who shared the hut with him. Coming to his own pile of blankets he sat down and considered what he had best do, remembering the talk he had had with the witch doctor, remembering his boast that he would help to defeat the evil that threatened the kraal with the coming of the wagon.

He sighed heavily. The problem was a very difficult one, its solution far beyond his years. But was he not Tomasi, the Lion Killer?

And so—

A few minutes later he again left the hut. In his right hand was his little assegai. In the small charm bag which hung about his neck he had put a little biltong—all that he could find in the way of food. He cautiously made his way to a gap—it was known to all the boys—in the pole stockade at the back of the kraal. Ten minutes later he was crawling across the open space surrounding the kraal. His movements were very slow until he had reached the shelter of the bush beyond the clearing. Then he sprang to his feet and ran on, heading due west; heading, he thought in the direction from which the Hottentot's Baas would come riding. Occasionally the moon's rays, breaking through the bush growth, tipped the steel blade of his assegai with a cold, white light.

ALTHOUGH his pace slowed presently to a walk, Tomasi trekked on doggedly through the night, keeping to his course as surely as if a road has been opened up for him through the bush. Gracing buck hardly knew of his passing, and their flight was purely a physical reaction to fears which would have come too late had he been a hunter. Once a hyena stalked through the bush on a course which paralleled the boys' —and not a spear's throw separated them. But if the beast's movements were silent, it could not disguise its unclean scent, be-

traying its presence, The boy stopped and faced toward the hyena, shouting a shrill challenge. Then he picked up a stone and threw it with all his force. He laughed when he heard it thud against the beast's ribs.

The hyena snarled--it was more like a whine of fear—and galloped clumsily away. A few minutes later its tittering laugh sounded a quarter of a mile distant.

The boy resumed his journey, kept to his feet by his resolve when his physical powers cried achingly for rest.

It was nearly sun-up when he did finally surrender. He dropped to the ground, utterly exhausted, and slept where he fell.

His sleep was a very brief one. He was cold, hungry and thirsty and—though this he refused to admit—just a little frightened.

He slaked his thirst by licking the dew off some broad bladed leaves. His hunger he appeased by chewing some biltong—but the salted, sun-cured buck meat only re-created his thirst and by now the dew had vanished from the leaves, vanquished by the swiftly rising sun.

Stiff, leg weary, cold and hungry, weighted down by the task he had set himself, Tomasi continued his trek—still heading due west. The rays of the sun quickly warmed him, loosened his stiffened joints; his plump, naked little body, oiled by his sweat, looked like polished ebony. But before he had gone far the sun's heat was no longer a friendly comfort. It beat down on him with physical force. It burnt away from him all self-pretense that he was a full-grown warrior, hastening to avenge a wrong that had been done his people. It left only a naked little boy who carried a toy assegai in his hand.

His pace became slower, his halts more frequent and of greater duration. But whenever he resumed his trek, he headed westward—and if his legs were trembling unsteady, at least his spirit was resolute.

In the mid part of the afternoon, a vulture which had been watching the veldt from an unbelieveable height, dropped plummet-like to a lower level—so low a level that its shadow merged into that of the boy's.

THE vulture's downward swoop was marked by the Major who was riding at an easy canter over the veldt, content in the knowledge that he would reach the kraal of Marka before sun-down. Five days had passed since his encounter with Baines at the river's ford and he had made up for the delay his errand to the Baine's homestead had caused him by taking a course which had led him in a bee-line across the veldt, avoiding even the hospitality of native kraals. To have visited them would have meant detours and further delays.

Mrs. Baines had packed him up a plentiful supply of food—otherwise he could not have made the journey; even so, it had been rough going. Nevertheless, he now looked as smartly turned out as if he had just left the hands of an accomplished valet. Satan, the black stallion, and his equipment were no more travel-stained than the day's trek warranted.

The Major's course was taking him a mile or so to the right of the down swooping vulture, and he was in no mood for detours to satisfy an idle curiosity. Still he reined to a halt and sat looking toward a thick patch of mapani bush above which the vulture was now hovering. Several other black specks appeared against the blue of the sky and,

dropping, became vultures. They all perched presently in the upper branches of a stunted thorn tree. Their discordant croakings came faintly to the Major's ears.

"Funny!" he mused. "Something's still alive there or they'd have dropped immediately to the ground. Wonder what it is?"

He laughed softly, knowing that he could not let it go at wondering. He had to find out—if only to fire the shot that would put an end to some animal's sick misery, and so save it from being torn by the vultures before death finally came to it. It was that, rather than curiosity, which now motivated him.

He galloped swiftly over the veldt toward the patch of mapani. As he neared, he fired several shots from his revolver into the air and the vultures, croaking angrily at being deprived of an expected feast, flapped heavily away, presently zooming up to their stations to resume a scavenging watch over the veldt.

A few moments later, picking a way carefully through the bush growth, the Major came to a small clearing in the center of which stood the thorn tree on which the vultures had perched. Near its gnarled trunk, lying prone, an assegai clutched in one outflung hand, was a small boy.

With a *click* of sympathy the Major quickly dismounted and kneeling down beside the unconscious figure, gently turned him over. He whistled softly as he recognized the boy. With tender, searching fingers he probed the youngster's body to see if he could locate an injury. Finding none, and rightly judging from the regular breathing and the beat of the heart that Tomasi was deep in the sleep of utter exhaustion, he picked him up and carried him to a more shady place. Then he off-saddled and sat down beside him.

Lighting a cigarette he smoked thoughtfully, wondering what the boy was doing here, alone, so far from the kraal. He decided to let the lad have a good sleep before awakening him to whatever fancied adventure had sent him so far afield.

"Something must be wrong, though," the Major's thoughts continued and a line of worry creased his forehead. "Here he is at least fifteen miles from the kraal. If he's run away for some incredible reason, why hasn't Marka sent some men after the boy. Why—"

He shook his head. None of the explanations which suggested themselves to him made sense. He was conscious presently that the boy's eyes were open and fixed upon him.

"How now, Tomasi, Lion Killer?" the Major said cheerfully. "There is a tale to be told?"

"Truly there is a tale to be told," the boy said thickly. His lips were dry, his eye lids seemed very heavy. "But it is not ended—yet." He groped with his hands, feeling about him. "My assegai!" he exclaimed. "Where is my assegai? You have taken it from me."

The Major found it for him and put it into his hand.

"Here, warrior," he said gently.

As the boy's fingers closed on the haft of his spear, his expression changed as with a shout of *"Bulala!* Kill!" he scrambled to his feet and lunged at the Major, attempting to stab him.

"Wo-we!" the Major exclaimed, easily avoiding the blow and taking the boy up in his arms. "What is this, warrior. Since when have the Matabele stabbed their friends."

"I have failed!" Tomasi wailed. "I am no warrior. I am only fit to play with girls."

"Tchat! The Major exclaimed. "This is no talk for a killer of lions. Take heart, warrior."

But the boy now burst into a fit of sobbing, tears rolled down his chubby cheeks, and when the Major put him down he rolled over on his belly and hid his face in his hands.

The Major considered him thoughtfully and then took from his saddle wallet a small flask of brandy and several lumps of sugar. He dripped a spot or two of brandy on each lump then once again knelt beside the boy, turning him over and raising him to a sitting position. He put a lump of sugar to the boy's lips, Tomasi spit it away—but his sobbing ceased, his eyes brightened and he licked his lips experimentally.

The Major chuckled and gave him another lump.

"Eat it slowly, warrior," he said. 'It is strong medicine."

They were both silent for a little while, save for the crunching of the sugar lumps

between the boy's white teeth. When all were gone he looked at the Major and grinned sheepishly.

"You will not tell about the tears, *inkosi?*" he said.

"No," the Major replied gravely. "But what shame? They were a warrior's tears because he had failed in some task which had been set before him. What was the task, Tomasi? Why did you try to kill me?"

"Because, through you, evil has come to my father and his people. Yes. And to Thuso, the Father of Wisdom. And to the Hottentot who is your servant."

"So?" the Major said softly. "It is always good to destroy evil, warrior. Here, then, is your assegai. But before you strike, tell me of the evil. It may be that, together, we can defeat it. Tell the story's beginnings, Tomasi, and we will see to it that it comes to a proper end."

WITHOUT further prompting, soberly and with proper regard to all the essential details as he saw them, the boy told of all that had happened at the kraal. Because of his knowledge of the people involved—the white and the black—the Major was able to fill in the gaps of the boy's narrative to getting not only a very clear picture of the situation as it affected the natives but a very good idea of the reception the three white men planned for him.

"And so, *inkosi,*" Tomasi concluded, "remembering the promise I had made to Thuso, remembering that I had said I would destroy the bringer of evil—even if it were you—I left the kraal last night, thinking to take you by surprise and kill you. But, *wo-we!* I have failed."

"The assegai is in your hand, warrior," the Major said softly. He did not attempt to reason with the boy or argue with him. Perhaps he felt, too, that there was some justice in the indictment. After all, he—and he alone—was responsible for the presence of the three degenerate white men at the kraal.

Tomasi picked up his assegai, hesitated, then threw it on one side. "I remember you have always been our friend, *inkosi.* So how can you be evil. I cannot kill you." He added with a grin, "I think that I have been a fool."

"No. Not a fool, warrior. And truly you have not failed. You have brought word to me of the evil. But for that I should have ridden into the trap the evil white men have undoubtedly set for me. But now—" he laughed.

"It will not be easy to defeat them, *inkosi,*" Tomasi said with a precocious gravity. "They are cunning and can work great magic, as I have told you."

"A magic greater than this?" the Major asked. And he did a few simple passes with a large silver coin he took from his pocket.

The boy's eyes opened wide with wonder, a wonder which changed to a happy delight when the Major showed him how the tricks were done.

"Come, *inkosi,*" he said at last, jumping eagerly to his feet. "Let us hurry back to the kraal—"

"Patience, warrior. First I must eat and rest—I have trekked very far. Besides: it is better that we do not reach the kraal until darkness hides us."

Tomasi sat down again, reluctantly. He had—in boyish impatience for action—forgotten for the moment his weariness and hunger. Perhaps the brandy-sprinkled sugar had something to do with that.

But he eagerly ate the bread and hard-boiled eggs the Major took from his saddle bag and did not notice that the white *inkosi* ate nothing. When the food was finished his eyes closed, despite his attempts to keep them open.

He was still sleeping soundly when, this was at sun-under, the Major picked him up and mounted the stallion.

With the boy cradled securely in his left arm, the Major rode forward through the gathering darkness. The pitter-patter of the stallion's hoofs and the jingle of bit were no more than a soothing lullaby.

THAT night the people of Marka's kraal once again awaited the moon's rising and the coming of the white men to perform more magic workings. They waited in darkness, beyond the circle of light thrown by the fire's leaping flames. Although the beat of the drums was accompanied by some handclapping and, spasmodically, voices were raised in song, as on the previous night, a sensitive observer accustomed to the psychology of the people, would have been conscious of a strange tenseness that was not

altogether one of expectancy. Strangely, this atmosphere was strongest where the women were seated.

Some of the young warriors who supported Tom and the white men, passed among the people, collecting empty beer calabashes which they said, would be refilled and changed into an infinitely stronger brew by the white man's magic. But these same young men seemed to have lost the arrogant confidence that they had hitherto shown; they moved almost timidly. They spoke softly, placatingly.

One hurried away to the hut of the white men. Entering, he saw that, aided by Tom, they were dressing themselves for the procession which would precede the magic making. He spoke swiftly, in an undertone, to Tom and then departed.

"What did he want, Tom?" Squint asked suspiciously.

"He is afraid," Tom answered. "And I am too."

"What's there to be afraid of?" Squint demanded sharply. "We're great magic workers, ain't we? We've got the only men who might upset our plans under close guard.

"You wait; as soon as Foxy, here, has done a bit of magic and the beer's been passed 'round, every thing'll be all right." And he slapped Tom on his naked back with a boisterous show of good humor.

The young man shook his head.

"All today, mister," he said, "the people have been idle, recovering from the beer drinking. And when my people do nothing, they think. And thinking is not good for them. Besides—there is this matter of the boy—"

"Oh shut up whinin'," Foxy interrupted. "We ain't to blame because one of the kids got lost. We'll square that, somehow, tonight. You see. I'll work great magic that'll bring him back."

"You see?" Squint said. "There's nothin' to be frightened of, I tell you. As soon as Foxy does his magic and they've all had a good swig of the stuff we're goin' to mix for them, they'll be ready to eat out of our hands. All that you've got to do is behave like a headman an', at the proper time, tell the men to go an' get the diamonds they've got hidden in their huts. Here. Drink this."

He poured out a generous drink of whiskey. Tom gulped it down with noisy appreciation.

"That was good," he said. "That kills fear, mister. Now I think it is best that we hurry and not wait for the moon to rise. The people are impatient. The sooner they see the magic and drink—the better."

"An' that's wot I say too," Smiler Stoyles put in heavily. "Just the same, I don't like it. I never did."

Squint turned on him with a vicious curse.

"Stop your everlastin' whinin'," he exclaimed.

"Yes," Foxy echoed. "For gord's sake live up to yer name for once, Smiler. Have a drink. Have two. Get bottled—you might make a hit then with that woman you was eyeing this afternoon. An' you, Tom; you go an' set some guards on the stockade gate—just in case the Major should turn up tonight. We don't want to be taken unawares, like."

And Tom, his fears blanketed by the rising fumes of the whiskey he had drunk, hastened to obey.

THE unrest of the people communicated itself to the men who kept guard over the three prisoners. Had either of the men called, demanding release, the guards would have obeyed. But that the prisoners could not do. The gags which had been put into their mouths last night had only been taken out at meal times—and that in the presence of Tom and the white men.

The guards tried to comfort each other with assurances that all would yet be well.

"The red-haired whiteman is a greater wonder-worker than Thuso," said one. "He will give us charms that will defeat any magic Thuso might make against us."

"Truly," the other agreed. "And when Tom is headman—we shall be rich. It will be an end to the rule of the old ones. *Wo-we!* I am thirsty."

The other laughed.

"I, too. But as to that, I can wait. Soon our relief will come."

"They cannot come too soon for me," his companion grumbled. "Of what need is a guard here? The men are bound hand and foot. They cannot escape. And there is none to free them."

It was about this time that the Major and Tomasi came to a dry, narrow gulch

which ran between two of the kopjes at the back of the kraal. The Major had ridden to this spot by taking a sweeping detour which avoided the necessity of having to rise across the clearing which surrounded the kraal.

He tethered the stallion to a boulder in such a way that the animal could break free if need arose, then with Tomasi—who was now wide awake and eager to see the end of the venture—went silently forward. And despite the darkness his booted feet made no more sound than did the boy's naked ones. Nevertheless, at this stage Tomasi was the leader. He held the Major by the hand and led him forward with easy assurance. Here the boy was on well-known territory. It was the playground of the boys of the kraal.

At last they came to the pole stockade—to the gap in the stockade. Tomasi slipped through easily; the Major with some difficulty, and not without tearing his riding breeches.

"It's a poor guard, Tomasi," he said with a soft laugh. "They lock the front door, but the back one they leave wide open. Not so wide, by Jove," he added in English.

With Tomasi still leading the way, they went forward, moving with an exaggerated caution—this was to please the boy, for, actually, the darkness protected them from observation, the throbbing of the drums deadened their footfalls.

They came to the hut where the three men were imprisoned just as the rugged outlines of the kopjes were being picked out in silver by the light of the rising moon. They made their way stealthily to the rear of the hut. There they waited, listening. They heard the sound of chanting rising above the drumming. They heard the voices of the two guards at the door of the hut.

"Wait here until I call, Tomasi," the Major whispered.

He reached up on to the sloping thatch of the roof, found a purchase for his hands and with the skillful agility of a trained athlete, pulled himself up onto the roof. Then, very cautiously, he inched his way 'round to the front of the hut. As he reached a position directly above the doorway, the chanting and the drumming ceased and one of the guards—he was directly below the Major—said with a yawn:

"All goes well. We were fools to fear. Soon the magic-working will commence—and then will come our relief."

"My thirst grows," the other grunted.

The Major rustled the thatch with his hands.

"What is that?" one of the guards exclaimed.

"A snake hunting rats, most like."

The rustling noise continued. The guards rose lazily to their feet, intending to beat the thatch with the hafts of their assegais. As they did so, the Major slithered off the low sloping, roof on top of them, bearing them to the ground. Before they could recover, before they could emit shouts for help, a strong hand gripped each one's neck and a stern voice commanded them to make no sound.

They knew that voice and obeyed it unquestioningly.

"Come, Tomasi," the Major called.

The boy came quickly.

"Go in and free the bound men—that is your right," the Major said. "Here, take this knife to cut the bonds. It is yours, Tomasi."

The boy excitedly stammered his thanks and ran into the hut.

THE Major gave him a little time to taste the full flavor of the victory his courage had earned, laughing softly at the boy's eager, incoherent flood of words as he tried to explain what had happened.

And then, ordering the two cowed guards to go before him on hands and knees, the Major entered the hut.

He saw by the light of a small fire which burned in the center of the kraal that the boy had already taken the gags from three men and was now busily engaged in cutting through the rawhide reims which bound his father.

The Major quickly released the other two.

"I knew you would come, Baas," Jim the Hottentot said with a dry-lipped grin, "so I did not worry unduly. Neither did Marka or Thuso. *Wo-we!* But the anger of those two, Baas. They will flay their people alive with words! But I have been a fool, Baas. I should have stopped the evil before it began."

"There is no blame to you, Jim," the Major said. "The greater fault was mine in

sending them here. Now talk to these," he indicated the guards. "Find out when their relief will come. But be gentle with them, Jim. They are young and, I think, regret their folly."

THE Major turned then to Marka, who held his son in his arms, and to Thuso, silencing their thanks.

"Give your thanks to Tomasi," he said.

"As, rest assured," the witch doctor said gravely, "We do. I bend my head to the wisdom of youth."

"His mother will have doubts as to her son's wisdom," Marka said dryly. "But why do we sit here talking, *inkosi*. There is much to be done in the way of punishing evil."

"All in good time," the Major said. "But the evil is the evil of white men—and we, I think, are not blameless. Fault lies with me, and with you, Marka, and your, Thuso."

"It is true," the witchdoctor agreed. "I knew evil was threatening the people and, because they laughed at me, I did nothing though the Hottentot pleaded with me. But no. My pride ruled me, driving out wisdom. But now—pride has gone. Now I can talk to the people—and, they will listen."

"I, too, did nothing," Marka confessed. "I could have stopped the magic-making trickery in the very beginning—"

"And I was the cause of it all," the Major concluded. "So now, because no fault lies with the people, the punishment must be very light. That is agreed?"

"Not even the fool who acted as the mouthpiece of the white men? Not even the fools like these two who followed him—" Marka indicated the guards with a contemptuous out-putting of his lips—"are they to go without heavy punishment?"

"Their failure and the scorn of the people will be their heaviest punishment," the Major said. "The evil is the white man's evil—and I will deal with that."

"Baas," Jim interposed, "we must act quickly. Soon the relief will come."

"Then listen. This is what has to be done—"

He swiftly outlined his plan of action and it was indicative of the confidence they had in him that neither the headman or the witchdoctor raised any objections, but agreed to carry out his plan down to the least detail.

He had scarcely finished when they heard footsteps approaching the hut.

"You know what you have to do." Jim whispered fiercely to the two cowed guards "Make no mistake or—"

This was no need for him to finish his threat.

"We are in the hut, brothers," one of the guards called. *Wo-we!* We only came in time. The Hottentot had nearly burnt through the *reims* which bind him."

"Come and see to the other," his companion added, "so that we can go to the drinking."

There was some grumbling outside and then two men crawled on hands and knees into the hut. . . . It is doubtful if they knew what hit them.

"I did not strike very hard, Baas," Jim said with a chuckle, answering the Major's question. "But their heads will ache when they wake up—and it will not alone be due to the beer they have drunk."

'Then bind them quickly, Jim, the Major said. "It is time we left here. And you—" he spoke to the first two—"you know what you have to do?"

"Yes, *inkosi*," they answered meekly, glad they had not fared as their relief had done, glad, too, that they had come to the end of folly.

"And do not forget," Jim reminded them grimly, "that I shall always be in reach of you."

MEANWHILE Foxy, assisted by Squint, Smiler and the native, Tom, was working hard to make his performance a success. But something was wrong. The people were not reacting as they had done on the previous night. From the very beginning there had been murmurs of discontent, started by the women.

"If you are indeed a witchdoctor and a worker of magic," Tomasi's mother cried, "tell us what has happened to my little son."

When Tom had translated this to him, Foxy consulted with the other two and then told Tom to tell the people that he would work a great magic which would bring the boy safely back on the morrow. And as he accompanied this promise with one of his more elaborate tricks, the people seemed to be appeased.

But not Smiler!

"I told yer," he said in his whining voice. "I told yer we ought to have let somebody go an' look for the kid when Tom told us he was missin' this mornin'. But no. You knew it all. You was afraid somebody 'ud go and blow the gaff to the Major an' gave orders nobody was to leave the kraal. An' wot's goin' to 'appen when the kid don't show up tomorrow?"

"We'll clear out in the mornin'," Squint said hurriedly. "We won't wait for the Major. You're right, for once, Smiler. It's gettin' too dangerous for my likin'. Now we'd better get the booze circulating. We'll make it special strong—it'll be easier then to get the stones from them."

Foxy nodded and, bringing his performance to a close, knelt down beside the calabashes which were covered by a blanket. That blanket also hid the bottles they had taken from the Major's wagon. Smiler and Squint knelt beside him and as they fumbled under the blanket, uncorking the bottles, Tom harangued the people, playing on their emotions—and thirst—in such a way that when the time came for him to demand—on behalf of the white men—that the men of the kraal hand over any diamonds they might have, the order would be unquestionably obeyed.

"It is all right, misters," he said proudly when he had concluded. "Listen to them! They are applauding what I have just said. Only, be quick with the drink—"

"What's that?" Smiler said sharply.

HE and the other two jumped to their feet as a little procession came into view from behind one of the huts. It was headed by the Major. His clothing was dirty and torn. He had a bloodstained bandage about his head. His hands were bound behind him and his walk was no more than a shuffle because his feet also were bound. Two young warrior guards walked closely behind him. They prodded him with the hafts of their spears. Behind the warriors, shadowy figures in the shadows, were three other natives. They halted, almost hidden by the hut of the headman. The Major stumbled forward.

"Hell!" Foxy cried exultantly. "We've got the Major. Now we'll have a bit of fun."

"You see, Smiler," Squint said complacently. "We've got everything playin' into our hands—just as I planned."

"Bli'me, yes," Smiler agreed. "An' this is where I pay off an account."

He went forward to meet the Major. Squint and Foxy watched with knowing grins. They knew what the Smiler was like when in action against a helpless man. They did not sense the change which had come over the people at the Major's appearance, even if they had, they would have been unable to gauge its implication. But Tom did. So did the young warriors who had followed his lead. If flight had then been possible, they would have taken to their heels.

The Major halted as Smiler neared him. His eyes were half-closed. He seemed to sway from weakness.

"Hello, dude!" Smiler snarled. "This is where I pay a little debt." He spat in the Major's face and then launched a vicious blow at the Major's jaw. Had it landed—

But the Major side-stepped with perfect timing. He kicked the bonds away from his feet. They dropped from his wrists.

"I was rather hoping you'd do that, Smiler," he drawled. "It rather excuses this little demonstration of the quickness of the hand, what?"

Smiler saw the blow coming and made a futile attempt to block it. On his face was a look of ludicrous dismay. And that look was still on his face, as if frozen there, when the Major's fist landed full on the point of his jaw. It lifted him up and he crashed heavily backward to the ground.

Squint and Foxy, shouting to Tom and the young warriors to come to their aid, rushed savagely at the Major. He stopped them easily with a right and left. They staggered back, Squint doubled up with his hands to his belly—he felt that the Major's fists must have gone through to his backbone —Foxy nursing an aching jaw. They glowered at him silently. They were bewildered by the quick turn of events. They had thought the Major was their prisoner and an easy prey. They were still far from understanding how he had freed himself.

As if answering their thoughts, he said:

"Just another demonstration of the quickness of the hands. Only, I wasn't really bound, you know. And it isn't a bit of good appealing to—er—Tom or the young fools with him. They've come to their

senses. If you don't believe me—look at them.

"Tie up the white men, Jim—and gag them."

"Yah, Baas," Jim said coming forward from the shadows.

WITH the aid of Tom and two other natives he trussed and gagged the three men securely. While that was being done the Major removed the blanket from the calabashes of beer, uncovering, too, the bottles of spirits. He tasted beer from each calabash to make sure none had been doctored. Finding one that had, he poured out its contents on to the ground.

Then: "Take the men and the bottle to the wagon, Jim," he ordered. "And inspan. Presently we trek."

And then, and not till then, did the Major seem to be conscious of the silently watching people.

"Greeting, people of Marka!" he called in the vernacular.

"We have been fools, *inkosi.* But now you are here—all things shall be as they were."

"But my son?" the mother of Tomasi called. "What of my son, *inkosi*? The red-headed wonder-worker was going to make a magic that would return my son in safety."

"There is no need of such magic, O mother of Tomasi. Your son is safe. Presently you will see him. He is with his father. And I tell you that son of yours has great wisdom and courage. He is to be thanked for removing the evil from this kraal."

"Too much praise is bad for a child, *inkosi.* But we know whom to thank."

"Then now watch this," the Major said. He held up a large silver coin. It glinted brightly in the moonlight. He seemed to throw it into the air—the people fancied they could follow its flight.

"*Au-a!*" they cried in amazement. "It has gone—vanished."

The Major laughed at them.

"No. See it is here. It was only a trick. It never left my hand." He held the coin up between thumb and forefinger for them all to see. "And now I tell you that all the magic of the white men who have been with you, was only trickery. *Au-a!* the Hottentot told you that they were evil men. Marka told you. Thuso, the father of wisdom told you. But you would not believe. And so you were betrayed into doing a great folly. Now comes an end to all that. One trick I have showed to you. Laugh if ever again white men try to make fools of you by such tricks. Now I will show you another—at this you should not laugh."

He threw the coin high into the air. They could see it turning over and over. Before it had reached the top of its flight he fired. The bullet from his revolver hit the coin and sent it spinning out of sight.

Once again he laughed at their loud "*Au-a*" of wonder.

"I leave you now," he said. "Perhaps I will come again when this folly is forgotten. What else is there to be said—*wo-we!* That shall be said by Marka, your headman. And by Thuso who is, truly, a worker of magic."

As he left the place Thuso the Witch-doctor and Marka came forward out of the shadows. And riding on Marka's shoulders was Tomasi, laughing happily.

ON HIS way out of the kraal he met Tom and the others who had carried the three men to the wagon. He stopped them and spoke to Tom—calling him by his native name, Gaikwa.

"We have been fools," the native said in the vernacular. "I knew the magic was only trickery. And yet, *inkosi*—will the punishment be great?"

"No greater than you can bear," the Major promised. "But tell me do I know the full story of the evil done by the white men? For what purpose was all this trickery?

"Because they promised to teach me how to do the magic tricks, *inkosi,* I told them about the stones."

The Major whistled softly. He knew all about Marka's store of diamonds.

"And they stole the stones?"

"Yes, *inkosi.*"

The Major nodded thoughtfully.

"That is all," he said. "You have my leave to go."

He made his way then to where he had left Satan, mounted and rode to where his wagon stood.

Five minutes they were trekking westward. They did not halt until they reached the place where the Major had found Tomasi.

"Do we outspan, Baas?" Jim asked.

The Major shook his head. He went into the rear of the wagon and released the three men.

"Get out!" he ordered sharply.

"What are you goin' to do with us, Major?" Squint asked.

The other two were too cowed for speech.

"Nothing," the Major replied as he jumped down from the wagon after them. "You're as free as the bally air. You can go where you like—only I advise you not to return to Marka's kraal."

"But we're unarmed," Foxy plucked up courage to say. "We've got no food or drink—"

"You don't need arms. And as to food and drink—"

He took from the wagon three packs and gave them to the men. "You'll find more than enough there. There's only whiskey for you to drink, I'm afraid. But there's a waterhole about fifteen miles ahead. You know, if you hadn't given the natives at Marka's kraal whiskey to drink I should have been inclined to be only amused at your —er—abortive attempt to get rich quick. But that was a sad mistake on your part. An' so—" he shrugged his shoulders—"we'll say good-bye an' farewell. At least, I hope it isn't *au revoir*. I don't like you well enough to want to see you again. I fancy that's mutual, eh?" He turned to climb up into the wagon, seemed to hesitate a moment and then came back to them. His attitude now had changed. Despite his dishevelled appearance he was once again very much the monocled dude.

"I say," he drawled, "I hope you don't think I'm dealin' too harshly with you? If you do, I shall be only too glad to debate the matter with you with—er—fists. In the jolly old bare-knuckled style. It will be three to one, you know."

"We ain't looking for any more trouble, Major," Squint said quickly, silencing the other two with a meaning scowl. He was thinking that they could still have the laugh on the Major.

"You're quite sure, old chap?" the Major drawled. "That's a pity—'pon my word it is. You know, had you shown any—er—guts at all, I should have been tempted to let you get away with part, at least, of your bally loot. As it is—turn out your pockets. Quick!" The revolver in his hand enforced his order.

They cursed, they whined, they pleaded—but they obeyed. To make sure they had held no stones back, he and Jim searched them—and that search was a very thorough one. The Major and Jim had had much experience in that line.

Five minutes later the Major and the Hottentot trekked swiftly away from the place. The Major was on the driving seat: his horse tethered to the tailboard. For a little while the curses of the three men came to their ears, but they soon died away in the distance.

Jim chuckled softly.

"They will be footsore before they reach the *dorp*, Baas," he said.

"Doubtless, Jim," the Major replied absently.

The Hottentot looked at him and guessing what was troubling his Baas, his Baas who could do no wrong, he said:

"Truly, Baas, there is no need to grieve over what happened at the kraal. No great harm was done: none that will not have been forgotten before the death of this moon. Marka's hold over the people will be stronger than ever; none will dare to mock Thuso and the young men of the kraal—they have, I think, learnt their lesson. As for the three white men—is the fault ours if they cannot profit from the lesson we teach them? As for us—we come well out of it, Bass."

"How, Jim?"

"Has the Baas forgotten already? *Wo-we!* We have all the stones that were Marka's—"

"I had forgotten, Jim," the Major confessed. "But they are not ours. We must take them back."

"*Wo-we!* What folly, Baas," Jim exclaimed. "They are no more worth to Marka than so many pieces of glass."

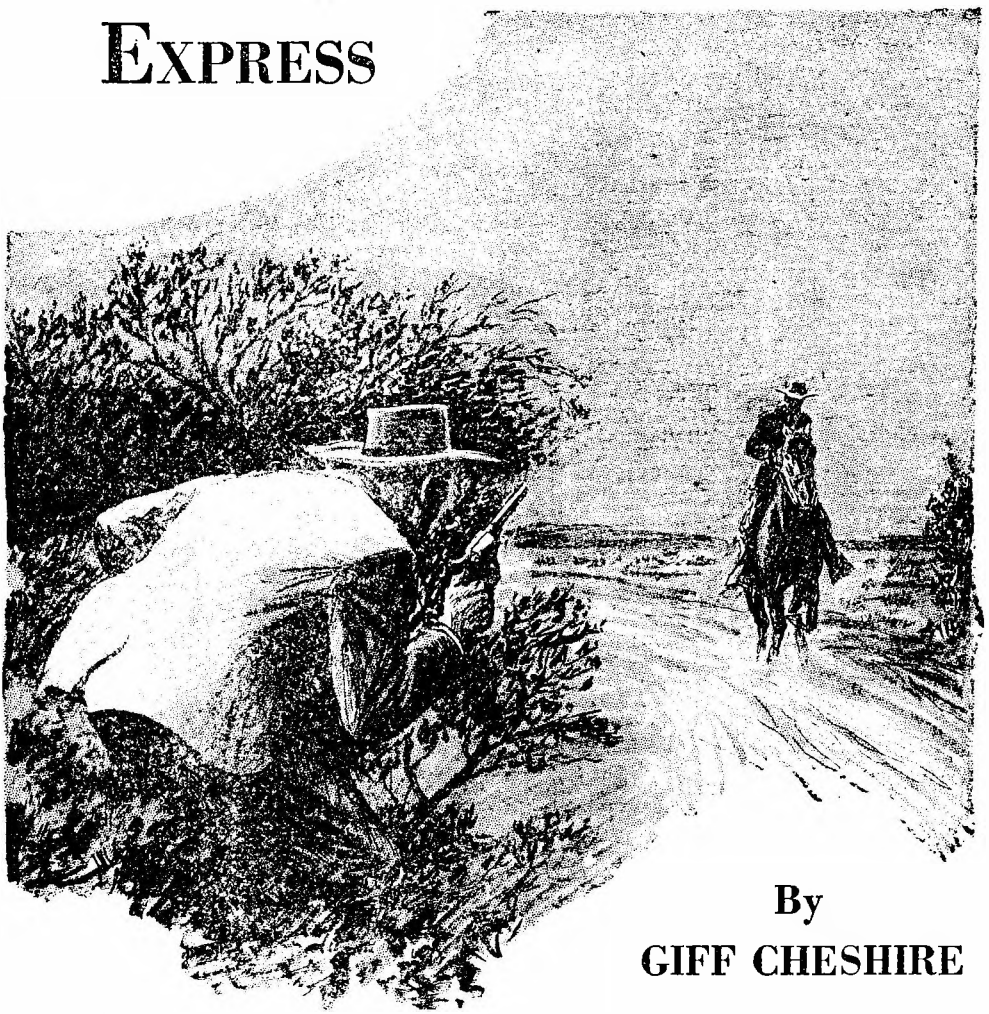
"Nevertheless," the Major said, "we take them back."

Jim shrugged his shoulders. He knew that it was useless to expostulate any further.

"So we take them back," he said, adding his stock phrase of English: "If I don't see you, s'long, hello. Damn no yes."

"Decidedly yes, Jim," the Major laughed and swung the mules round.

GUNS OF THE SHYSTER EXPRESS



By
GIFF CHESHIRE

Who'd Be a Safer Messenger to Carry Gold Than a Young Man Going to Meet His Girl? Who'd Suspect Him?

I

THERE was a mounting pleasure in Jim Brannan as he shaved, guided by a cracked mirror and stripped to his lean middle. Wide, tanned shoulders rippled in smooth motion as he turned, razor poised, in response to a knock on the door.

"Come in!"

Linus Ravel stepped in from the street, which was fronted by Jim's quarters off the store. A portly, amiable man, Ravel wore a smile. He was one of the organizers of the Oregon Exchange Company, newly formed for the purpose of relieving the sluggishness in the territory's trade caused by the scant money in circulation. Though a genial acquaintance, his coming here

roused Jim's curiosity more than he let show.

"Shaving up for the big event, Jim?" asked Ravel.

Jim nodded, jutted his square jaw at the mirror and scraped off another swathe of lather and beard. "You bet. The big day—or the day before the big day, maybe. Charity gets in on the *Northern Star* today, if it's on time, and we'll be married in Portland tomorrow." He motioned with a hand. "Take a chair."

"Can't stay, Jim." Ravel looked thoughtful for a moment, then cleared his throat. "How'd you like to do my company a favor at the same time?"

"Glad to, as long as it doesn't keep me away from that clipper or that wedding."

Fishing for a stogie, Ravel chuckled. "Nothing that bad—unless you have trouble. Will you come back to Oregon City tonight or stay in Portland?"

"Come back, I guess." Jim wiped his razor and folded it. "Frank Oakland won't have my wedding suit tailored up till this evening. He's been sick."

"Good." Ravel let his gaze pass carefully over the two windows on the street. He lowered his voice. "Jim, being in the store business you know better than most why the exchange company was organized. The only money in this country's what the settlers have brought out in their pockets. There's so little of it trade's practically at a stand-still. We've just been made a territory, and when we've grown enough we'll have facilities for bringing in federal currency. Meanwhile, we've got to have another medium of exchange."

"Are you telling me?" asked Jim, with a laugh. "I trade flour for eggs and eggs for drayage and so on till I get dizzy. But the Beaver Money you've struck is helping. And the gold dust coming up from California."

Ravel nodded, firing the stogie he had been rolling in his fingers. "We're coining another batch. The dust for it's coming up from 'Frisco on the *Northern Star.* Twenty thousand dollars worth. We want you to bring it to Oregon City tonight."

Jim heeled around. "Why me?"

"Because a man going down to welcome his girl and dreaming about his marriage tomorrow would seem to be the last man on earth who would be bringing it up."

"You think somebody might try to get it?"

Ravel shrugged. "No particular reason for thinking so. But it's well known that we've coined better than thirty thousand in five and ten dollar gold pieces under the beaver seal. If one of us met that clipper, it wouldn't be hard to guess what for. We're not rich men. We couldn't afford to lose that dust."

JIM thought it over, not too pleased by the prospect. He could easily make some excuse that Ravel would accept without offense. Yet he could see the sharp common sense of Ravel's request. Pioneer Oregon wasn't particularly infested by trouble-makers, but there were unstable elements in any settlement. Jim Brannan's store business had benefited considerably from the specie bearing the impresssion of a beaver, authorized by the provisional government but private struck. Moreover, he was flattered by this confidence because of things that Ravel and his associates did not know about Jim Brannan—the old Jim Brannan.

In quick decision, he said, "Sure, glad to. Who do I see to get the stuff?"

There was relief in Linus Ravel's eyes. "Fine, Jim. That relieves a worry I've had on my mind, for some reason. An express runner is bringing the dust up from 'Frisco. You won't be able to recognize him, but I'll give you a letter to the purser, and he'll introduce you. It'll also serve as your identification and authority to pick it up. In fact, I was so hoping you'd oblige that I already wrote it." Ravel took an unsealed envelope from his inner coat pocket and handed it to Jim as he rose. He turned toward the door. "Thanks, Jim. You can bring it to my house tonight, when you get back."

"Sure."

Jim Brannan watched the man go, at once elated and sobered by the chore imposed on him. This unsolicited trust was, in a sense, a fitting thing to have on the day before he was to marry Charity Wilmot. It proved that he had made good in what he had chosen for himself; it proved that he was more worthy to be Charity's husband than he had been when he had met her in San Francisco, some nine months before.

Jim dressed and stepped onto the street and locked his door. Rounding the corner, he passed by the front windows of his small store, locked for the afternoon, glancing in with the pride of ownership and an internal lift oddly potent considering what a small, inconsequential business it really was.

Warm and busy, Oregon City's midsummer streets were crowded hard against the Willamette River by a towering, step-backed bluff of basalt rock. Jim headed north to McReady's Livery, where old Angus had a saddle horse ready.

"Tomorrow it'll be a buggy," the hostler said, with a chuckle. "I'll sure have it washed up, Jim, for you to bring your bride home in."

Jim flashed him a smile of thanks and rode on up the street. A mile or so above town he crossed the Clackamas, the creak of the saddle and smooth, swift motion of the good horse Angus McReady had picked for him giving him satisfaction. Far to his left, the Willamette moved placidly on its twelve-mile way to Portland, while the sun that warmed his back pushed blunt shadows straight ahead of him. He rode unhurriedly, crossing Kellog Creek an hour later, following the territorial road as it swung closer to the river thereafter. The buttes east of Portland rose up before him. Yet as he traveled, Jim Brannan thought mostly of the space he had put behind him in his own life.

Where wealth moves swiftly from hand to hand, where men are drawn together in great numbers because of it, there sordidness creeps into the atmosphere. Jim Brannan had sensed this quality in San Francisco, when he had first landed there, a year before. The gold discovery was new then, only a few months old. The news was only then traveling across the continent to start the avalanche of '49ers. Yet the Americans already in California and deserters from ships were scouring the hills, with nearly every other enterprise abandoned.

Rebel from a good, solid family of Boston traders, Jim Brannan had shipped around the Horn to the West Coast in search of adventure only. He had succumbed to the spell of the bemused land of softly purpled bare hills and softly spoken natives. With no taste for the rigors of prospecting, he had chosen his wits to live by. Then, as the tide of population began to swell in California, he had found himself in the unexpected role of a professional gambler.

He had been fairly honest, but not above outwitting less clever men. It had become an exciting game. As rough, swollen towns bloomed between the Feather and Tuolumne, there had been fat pickings for such as he. Yet some solid New England conscience had slowly restored sanity. Jim Brannan had known that this was happening even before he saw the girl. Then, when he had met Charity Wilmot in San Francisco, through her father who had come out to practice medicine, he had known that he was through with the goldfields.

Lingering in San Francisco, solely to know her better, Jim had finally told Charity of his feelings and plans, making no effort to excuse himself.

"I like what I hear about the country up around the mouth of the Willamette," he had said. "It'll never be the flashy country this is, but there's something substantial about it. I'd like to have a little business in one of those towns. If I make a go of it, I'd like to have you come."

"Of course I'll come, Jim," Charity had said. She had searched his face closely, then smiled. "If you feel like you do and know you'll never be tempted to take the easy way again, I don't care what you've done."

It was this that made the chore for which Linus Ravel had commissioned him satisfying to Jim Brannan. Not that he would ever have entertained ideas of betraying such a trust; his gratification was in the fact that Ravel, who was no fool, had read him as a man to be trusted. It was a nice feeling to have inside of him when he met Charity.

JIM came to the river, across from Portland, and took the ferry to the town. Like Oregon City, it was a raw, crude, overgrown village, set on the river edge and cramped by rising, forested hills. He put his horse in a livery, tossed the hostler a coin, and moved down front. There were two ships anchored in the river, but there was no telling when the *Northern Star* would be in until her masts hove up down below Willow Island. Jim paced the street, reminding himself that the only assurance

he had that Charity would be on it was the fact that he had written her, at last, to come.

Two hours before sundown the *Northern Star* reached the town, a hundred-odd miles upriver from the sea. She put out dinghies, with others shoving out from various floats and landings to bring in passengers. Jim Brannan felt an ache in his throat as he waited, a looseness in his knees. Then at length he was lifting Charity from a skiff and holding her closely, neither of them speaking.

She stood back finally, looking at him in her intent way, smiling at him. Plainly, almost severely dressed, the slender lines of her lithe body, the sheen of her soft black hair under a small hat, set his heart to drumming. Softly she said, "Darling!" and he bent to kiss her again. A man's voice said, in what was less than pleasant surprise:

"Well—Jim Brannan!"

Jim turned slowly, frowning, for he had recognized the voice. He said, "Si Tyler! What're you doing in Portland?"

Simeon Tyler, a middle-aged man rather flashily dressed, ignored the question and glanced at Charity, removing his hat. "You didn't tell me about this, Miss Wilmot."

When Charity failed to reply, Jim said, "You know each other?"

"We got acquainted on board ship," said Tyler. He had deep, masked eyes, and he kept watching Jim closely. "Imagine finding you here, Jim. I had no idea where you were." He replaced his hat, turning. "Well, maybe I'll see you again before I leave. I go out again on the clipper. He walked away.

Jim nodded absently, the closeness of Charity crowding all else from his mind. "I've got to go out to the ship, after a while, and I'll have your luggage sent to your hotel. Come on, we'll find you a room." They turned up the street, quiet but needing to say but little, caught in this moment that was on the verge of their fuller life.

II

DUSK was closing in over the town when Jim Brannan hired a man with a skiff to take him out to the clipper. He located the purser and presented the letter that Linus Ravel had given him. The ship's officer read it, then said, "We'll have to go back ashore. Your man wanted to stay in a hotel while we're here." So, returned to the town, they made their way to a hotel a few blocks south of the one where Jim had left Charity for the night. The purser made a low-voiced inquiry at the desk, and they ascended the stairs. At the end of the hall, the officer knocked, and when he heard a responding voice, Jim frowned.

He was not surprised when Simeon Tyler opened the door, but there was a momentary look of disbelief in Tyler's eyes. He stared at Jim. "So you're the one!"

"Why not?" Jim asked.

"He's got a letter from Ravel," the purser said, "which lets me out of it. I'll leave you gents to yourselves." He touched his cap, grinned and left.

Tyler motioned Jim in and closed the door in idle thoughtfulness. He turned, and while his close gaze searched Jim once more, Jim studied the subtle animations of the man's blocky face.

"See any good reason why I shouldn't be the one?" asked Jim.

Tyler smiled, waving a hand in dismissal. "Why would I? You surprised me, Brannan. When I knew you, you were turning a clever dollar wherever you could."

A steely quality flashed in Jim's dark eyes. "And the last time I saw you, you tried to cheat me at cards! I let you beg off and kept my mouth shut on your plea that a man in your business couldn't stand suspicion! A runner of trusted errands! Well, you showed up here with the money, all right. I'll take it now, and say good day to you!"

Tyler shrugged and turned toward an innocent-looking leather valise on his bed. He opened it and lifted out several buckskin *parfleches*. He had retreated into thought again, his movements slow, almost unconscious. He turned to Jim. "It's all there, with the seals they started with unbroken. If you'll sign a receipt, Brannan, I expect we can part company without grieving either of us. How soon are you starting for Oregon City?"

"When I take the notion," said Jim. He signed the receipt, and again the two men looked at each other thoughtfully.

Jim ferried the river at once, the gold

dust in his saddle bags. Full dark had come on, and as he followed the rough road southward, a sense of uneasiness mounted in him. He had removed his small hand gun from the saddle bag and dropped it into his coat pocket, but it was a single-shot, palm-size affair that suddenly seemed wholly inadequate.

The idea that Simeon Tyler could be up to mischief seemed preposterous, yet a small cheat would likely prove also to be a big one if opportunity offered. Jim crowded the thought out of his mind. Tyler would have to ride fast to overtake him. But Tyler had had some reason for coming ashore at once, for taking a room in a hotel. He would have had time to contact someone else—

It came before Jim had time to digest it. There was a flash ahead in the night, coming from a clump of brush, a sharp report, and Jim Brannan fell from the saddle.

There was a moment in which black pain held him powerless. He heard his horse hammer on; he heard another rider cut out in pursuit. Then quiet. Jim shoved himself to his feet, dizzy, shaking the shock out of him. He was hardly two miles under way. Whoever it was had known he was coming and had waited here. He had lit out to catch Jim's spooked horse, and there was no sound southward now. When he had lifted those dust pokes out of the saddle bags, the man would send the horse on again, wanting to leave Jim set down. There was no use trying to chase them on foot.

Jim had a better idea, and that was to get back to town as quickly as possible. He choked on his rage as he stumbled back up the dusty, rutted road. The thing had been neatly planned for fast, confusing action. The members of the Oregon Exchange Company were the only ones locally who had known about the dust shipment, and Jim felt no slightest suspicion toward a one of them. Except for whoever in San Francisco had supplied the dust, only the purser and Simeon Tyler knew about it. It had to be Tyler, somehow, and Jim's intention now was to get to Tyler as swiftly as he could.

His left shoulder and left side of the neck ached fearfully. A quick examination showed Jim that the flesh had been ploughed there by a bullet heavy enough to knock him loose from his saddle. He pressed his handkerchief against it and went on, roweled by temper.

As he narrowed the distance between himself and the glimmering lights of Portland, Jim pondered the situation. He began to glimpse what a tempting setup it would have been for Tyler. The man's personal express business was an unique improvisation on the West Coast. Lacking regular mail and with precious few other communication services, the stretched-out territory had need for Tyler's ilk, men who went anywhere on any sort of errand for a proportionate fee. And Simeon Tyler, if he were back of this, had completed his mission in all outward honesty, delivering the dust and obtaining a receipt for it. His responsibility was over and what happened to Jim Brannan, afterward, was none of his concern.

That must have been why Tyler had looked so shocked at discovering that it would be Brannan to whom he delivered the dust. He must have known that Jim would be immediately suspicious of nim, in light of past events.

There was the pounding of hoofs far behind him, and Jim clambered immediately from the road and pressed into the underbrush. If that were his bushwhacker, the man probably would prefer to see him dead. Jim drew out his pistol, then reconsidered. A fast-riding target would be a poor bet for his single shot. He probably could make better use of the little gun in town, later. The rider came past in a hammering of hoofs and disappeared ahead.

Plodding on through the night, still shaken and weak, Jim Brannan tried to make a plan. He had to wait for the ferry, and he paced the eastern river bank in goading restlessnesss. Crossed finally, he checked at two livery stables before he found one that had just had a saddle horse out for a couple of hours, getting it back hard-ridden and blowing.

"He was a short jigger, mister," the hostler said. "But built plenty wide in the shoulders. But what happened to you?"

Jim shrugged his blood-soaked shoulder. "Mosquitoes."

Jim turned up the street, frowning. He had known that it could not have been Simeon Tyler, who could not possibly have gotten out on the Oregon City road ahead

of him. Tyler had had help, and this short, thick man had spotted himself out there ahead of time and waited. Deciding on bold speed as his best help, Jim turned in at Tyler's hotel and ascended at once to the man's room. Though he was undoubtedly up against a pair of deadly rascals, he had rebelled against calling on the town's night marshal for help. His mission had been of importance to him and, if possible, he wanted to carry it out without yelling for assistance.

He walked quietly to the door of Tyler's room and paused. The hall was lamplit and he could not tell if there was light beyond the door. There was no sound. He palmed his gun, turned the knob gently, wheeled the door open and stepped inside.

It was not Simeon Tyler he saw there but another man, who sat by a covered table lamp, idly reading. He glanced up at Jim with an expressionless face. A second's confusion cleared out of Jim's mind. He kicked the door shut, lifting his gun into view and cocking it.

"So you're the short and thick, Almon Peel!"

Peel put down the newspaper, his face wholly expressionless, as it had been in a score of games Jim had seen him in in California's gold camps. An unsavory character. Tyler's man, who must have accompanied him to carry out the plot against the exchange company's gold dust. Jim's only uncertainty now was why Peel, with a guilty conscience, had now permitted himself to be jumped so easy, for if he had been listening he could have heard Jim's approach and made ready for it.

Peel said, at length, "Put the popgun away, Jim. You won't need it. I could have killed you when you came through that door. I don't dare right now, and right now you don't dare kill me."

Holding the gun steady, Jim waved an impatient hand. "Where's Tyler?"

There was a ghost of a grin around Peel's mouth. "Out with your girl. That's why you better put away that little frog-leg, Jim. It bothers me."

WEAKNESS hit Jim's knees. The easy confidence in Almon Peel persuaded him that he should pay attention to the man. "You'd better explain that, Peel."

"Sure, Jim. Sit down. And for Pete's sake put away that gun. We've got to work together real close for a while. I've got to explain it to you. Have a drink and let me fix that shoulder, man. I had a rotten light on you, or I'd have killed you, out there. I rode like hell trying to catch your horse, and when I missed it and didn't find you, coming back, I knew you must have walked away from it. We knew who you'd come to see about it, Jim, so we had to take steps."

"What've you done?"

Peel grinned openly, this time. "Right now Si Tyler's riding your pretty girl to Oregon City in a buggy. Hurrying her to your side because you got jumped by a bandit and shot up. She's plenty worried, I expect, but she'll be a lot worse if you don't show up to back our claim."

An icy wave traveled up Jim's back. "Keep talking."

Peel made a plea for reasonableness with his heavy hands. "Look, Jim, we knew who you'd suspect. When we realized you were still on your feet, we had to do something. Si's got an easy way with women. He got acquainted with Charity Wilmot on the ship. So Si went over to her hotel just now to tell her what you were taking back to Oregon City with you and that you'd been jumped and shot. By now they're making their dramatic dash so she can be by your side." The man grinned sourly.

"Don't you realize she'll wonder how Tyler happens to know?"

"He was going to tell her that you had an idea you might be jumped before you left, which is why you left her in Portland instead of putting her up in a handier hotel in Oregon City. So Si had me tail you a-ways, but I was too far behind to help any when you got hit. But I saw them, *three* men. I rode back fast as hell to tell Si, then lit out to take you on to Oregon City and tell the exchange people so they could start a search. We figured it ten to one she'd make Si take her up there."

"I expect she would." A sinking feeling was in Jim Brannan.

"See why you've got to show up there with us and persuade her it was exactly like that, Jim? If we don't, then she'll be suspicious as hell and just too dangerous for us to let live to marry you, tomorrow."

"How do you know she's going to?"

"She told Si she was coming to Oregon to get married. The way you hugged her down at the landing made it plain who she had her pretty eyes on. Catching on, Jim?"

"I guess so. But your movements and mine won't tally with any wild yarn like that. The ferryman saw me come in, and a couple of livery hands."

Peel shrugged. "If you back our story, Jim, who's going to investigate little things like that? We had to take a certain risk. You upset our plans plenty when *you* showed up to take over that dust. So put away that popgun and let me fix your shoulder. We got to be friends for a while. Si and I won't rest easy till you've backed our story, so you can depend on it I won't try to kill you. And you don't dare try anything with me. Understand, Jim?"

"I understand." There was a deep weariness in Jim's voice. He peeled off his coat and shirt and let Peel souse his flesh wound with whiskey and bind it with cloth torn from a shirt he took out of his valise. When it was over, Jim downed half a tumbler of whiskey, which steadied him and started strength stirring through him again. He did not doubt what Peel had told him. This pair had been left wide open when Jim Brannan had not died out on the road. They would not scruple against using a woman to cover up.

Half an hour later Jim and Almon Peel, remounted, crossed the ferry once more and went pounding south on the rough Oregon City road.

III

THEY rode through a sable night, while the sky had completely vanished. It slowed them down, and Jim was glad of this, for he needed time. Almon Peel showed no weariness at present, knowing that, for a while at least, he had rendered Brannan wholly impotent. On the other hand, Jim was not concerned about treachery from Peel; it would be considerably to his and Tyler's advantage to induce Jim Brannan to play along with them, helping them cover their snake tracks so that they could go on unsuspected in pursuit of other profitable business.

Either Simeon Tyler had got a considerable head start or the buggy was traveling as fast as the saddlers, for they caught no indication of it ahead. Yet Jim did not doubt that it was on the road, with Charity in the seat beside Tyler, for he could find no reason for them making a deception of this.

He knew that he had to go along with them until, if possible, he could get Charity out of their hands. For this reason he held down the fury that kept rising in him at their callous use of her. Yet once he lost his temper enough to rasp, "Cut it out, will you?" when Peel began to whistle softly.

"Jumpy, Brannan?"

"No, but you aren't musical, fellow."

It was around midnight when they rode into Oregon City, and the town was dark except for a few smoky lights on the streets. A buggy stood before the light lobby windows of the Palace Hotel.

"That's them," said Peel. "They waited for us in there. We'll take them over to your place. I suppose you and the girl will want a little privacy." Peel laughed.

Excitement was rising in Jim, and an unwelcome tension. The showdown was getting close, and he felt less optimistic even than at the start.

He said, "I'll go over to my place and get a light going."

"No you don't, bucko. We don't want to walk into any wild traps. You stay with me." They swung down behind the buggy and strode toward the hotel door.

Charity rose from a chair and ran forward when she saw Jim, giving a quick, small cry as she looked at his blood-stained coat.

"Oh, Jim!"

He gathered her close. "It's nothing, honey! I lost a little meat, but I'll grow more."

"Jim, why didn't you tell me you were riding into danger?"

He started to deny any knowledge that he had been, until he saw the warning flash in Simeon Tyler's eyes. He grunted. "There was no use worrying you, Charity. Fine of you to be worried enough to come, as it is. We'll go over to my place, and maybe you can make a pot of coffee for our fine friends here!"

"I'd love to, but your wound—!"

"Peel fixed it."

They moved across the street then and

down a block. Unlocking the side door which entered directly into the quarters he hoped soon to share with Charity, Jim went in first, flaring a match and locating a lamp. It struck him now with cogent force that he dared not try to signal a warning to her, could do nothing that would render her dangerous to Tyler and Peel. He could see from her easy friendliness that she had not suspicion of them, seemed even grateful for what she supposed to be a service. He had to keep her that way, and this knowledge placed iron shackles on his own wrists. He shrugged slightly and went to kindle a fire in the kitchen range.

He saw Charity's eyes take in his quarters with pleased interest, for no matter what the night's strain and worry, she had not forgotten that tomorrow she would have the right to come here to live with him. Jim put water on the stove to heat, temper spilling dangerously as he considered the men who had cast a shadow upon the morrow.

"Jim, what happened?" Charity asked.

Jim shrugged, wincing as his stiffened shoulder recalled itself to him. "I was just riding along when this man—"

"What man?" asked Peel, scowling. "How could you see on your face in the dust? I saw three of 'em. I counted their horses."

Jim got a grip on his temper. He had to play along with them, and the warning light in their eyes underscored this thought.

Simeon Tyler's gaze swept Jim in study. "These exchange people. We'd better get over there and tell them what's happened."

"Charity wants to give us some coffee." They were anxious to get him to commit himself to their lie to Linus Ravel. Yet how they proposed to hold him to it after they were gone, Jim did not know. The thing now was to keep their attitude toward Charity as harmless as possible.

BY THE time the water was boiling, Charity had found the coffee for herself, had found cups and saucers to set out. Jim watched the quiet, proprietary set to her head and a sickness hit the pit of his stomach. She had no idea of what was really taking place. Now that her worry about him was removed, she was just a girl who was going to be married in a few hours. The coffee done presently, she poured the cups full, filling the kitchen with fragrance. Jim noticed that his two unwelcome guests drank theirs with their left hands, keeping the other free to reach the guns he knew were hidden in each left armpit.

At last Tyler said, "Peel, you stay and keep Miss Charity company. Brannan and I'll go over and wake up the exchange man."

With a sigh, Jim climbed to his feet at the nod of Tyler's head. He stepped through the door ahead of Tyler, close to recklessness again. A few paces down the sidewalk, he said, "Simeon Tyler, the trusted agent!"

Tyler's voice was calm. "Brannan, it's too bad we had to find you on this end. It really is. Getting married tomorrow, and all. A shame. But the thing was too juicy to drop. We had to figure it good, and quick, but we figured it."

"How're you going to hold me when you're away from here?" Jim demanded.

"We'll hold you. It's plain as the nose on your face you're head over heels about that girl."

Jim's voice was desperate. "Listen, I'm the one who's dangerous to you. Why don't you just kill me and leave her out of it?"

"That wouldn't leave her out of it. She'd grieve, Brannan, for I guess she's crazy about you, too. Though damned if I can see why." Tyler laughed and heeled about, halting. "Wait a minute. We have to have a little talk before we go see your beaver money man." He fished into his coat pocket. "I've got a little paper here I want you to sign. We'll go down by that light so you can read it."

"What is it?"

"You could call it a confession. Your written acknowledgement that you were in this with us. A device that thieves have used since thievery began to counter-balance each other. It leaves you still able to ruin me, but it also makes me able to ruin you. No matter what you might try to claim later, Brannan, I'll simply claim you're disgruntled over your share in it. Your record in California would kind of back me up, don't you think?"

"The devil with that!"

Tyler's voice was suddenly low and deadly. "Listen, man, what have you got to lose? I'd never use this unless you

forced me to. You can go ahead and get married tomorrow and live here enjoying your sterling reputation as a business man. Nobody can blame you for losing that dust, because it wasn't your fault. Does your girl show any signs of blaming you? And if they never get it back, it still won't be your fault. I'll leave you alone, Brannan. After we make this deal, I'll be as afraid of you as you are of me, and we'll both like plenty of distance between us. Let's go down by that light, Brannan. I got a pencil."

It was more tempting than Jim Brannan liked to acknowledge, even to himself. He thought of Charity, back in his quarters, believing Almon Peel to be a helpful friend, totally unaware of why the man had stayed behind with her. If he tried to start anything with Tyler now, there was no telling what Peel might do to her. The more he resisted, the more they would use her as a threat. It would be so easy to consent and get her out of it and be done with them.

Yet he remembered her words, the day when she had promised to marry him even after hearing his frank account of his recent, unflattering activities. "As long as you're never tempted to take the easy way again, Jim, I don't care what your past has been."

Jim Brannan remembered this and drew in a deep breath. Again he said, "To hell with you, Tyler."

IV

THERE was a moment of quiet, then Tyler said softly, "I just didn't figure you'd be like this, Brannan." Thought silenced him again. "All right, we don't go see the exchange man. We go back to your place."

Tension was built high in Jim. Tyler and Peel had so far been unable to exchange confidences for the same cause that had held Jim silent in front of Charity. Mistrusting his power, back there, Peel had not tried to force Jim to surrender his little pocket gun. The weapon was still in Jim's coat, and though its single shot seemed a pitiful hope, it was the one slight thing he had in his favor. Even if he could beat one of the pair to the business, he dared not use it as long as Charity was in their clutches. He turned with Tyler, and they went back toward the store.

"Back quick," said Peel, as they came in.

"Found we had to figure a new angle," said Tyler, and he sent Peel a meaningful glance.

Suppressing a yawn prettily, Charity came over to Jim. "If you want your bride to look nice tomorrow, she'll have to get some sleep."

Excitement leaped in Jim. He said, "Sure. I'll take you over to the hotel."

Simeon Tyler's voice cut in roughly.

"Peel is a fine lady-walker, Miss Wilmot. Brannan and I've got some things to talk over, then Peel and I've got to get going. That right, Brannan?"

Jim nodded glumly. "That's right, Charity. Mr. Peel will take you over to the hotel." The small hope roused by the unexpected break died in him.

Peel left with Charity, and for a moment Tyler stared into space, seeming wholly unconscious of Jim. Yet Jim waited. Once Peel was back in this room, with Charity unmistakably out of it—! He tried to shake the tension out of his body. Then Simeon Tyler fished out a fresh stogie and spoke.

"Brannan, maybe it's better this way. I'm kind of soft-hearted, fellow. I just didn't like it holding a threat over that pretty girl's head. We'll leave her out of it. She can get her beauty sleep. Only, she won't be getting married tomorrow."

"I'll have to have a little more than that," Jim grunted.

"I'll explain. It'll be like this, Brannan. Back there in Portland when I saw who'd come to pick up the gold dust, I smelled something fishy. I had Peel tail you. He saw you meet some man and turn the dust over to him. Peel tried to stop you and shot you, but the other man got away with the dust. Fine. Peel tied you up and came back to tell me. Though I had a receipt for that dust and was technically out of it, I feel a responsibility toward my clients I trumped up a story to get the girl to Oregon City, thinking maybe she's in it with you. When I get the two of you together I see she's innocent as a new-born babe. I turn her loose, but I don't have the heart to tell her what you've been up to. That's the story we tell your exchange people, Brannan. Not bad, is it?"

"Perfect," said Jim sourly. "Meanwhile I'll be nodding my head vigorously."

"Meanwhile you won't have a damned thing to do with it. You won't be there. Huh-uh, Brannan. While we were working on you here, trying to find out who your helper was, you made a break for it. And got shot through the head."

Though he felt a touch like cold wind on his back, Jim met Tyler's speculative gaze. At that moment Almon Peel returned. He came in and locked the door behind him.

Tyler flicked ashes from his cigar. "Brannan, don't you think it's be better if you signed this little paper and we made it the other way?"

JIM BRANNAN was shaken in spite of himself. The first thing Peel would do, now that they were alone, would be to go after the little gun in Jim's pocket, which would precipitate the showdown. Jim knew exactly what his chances would be in such a thing. Yet there was a small, grim satisfaction in him. Jim had given little thought, in this time, to the doctrine that some strange help comes to those who elect the right course, however hard. But there was a live awareness in him suddenly that after he had told Tyler to go to the devil out on the street, Charity had been unexpectedly removed from this deadly situation. It was a thing in which he did not even yet believe, yet it was a possibility equally as good as the little stinger in his pocket.

Tyler had got out the paper again, and he flicked it open with an impatient wave of his arm. "Let's get it over with, Brannan."

Peel spoke then. "He's still got a gun on him, Si. I was scared to try and take it away from him, and I couldn't tell you." The man made a quick movement and brought his hand out from under his coat with a gun in it, a bigger gun than Jim's. A single-action, cap-and-ball revolver from a shoulder-holster. Jim emitted a sigh.

He kept his voice calm, letting it drop in flat dejection. "Let's see the paper you want me to sign, Tyler."

Tyler grinned and handed it over. Jim accepted it, held it to the light and read it carefully. There was tight ache on the back of his neck and down his spine. He considered the paper for an instant longer, then folded it and tore it to bits. Tyler mouthed a soft curse.

At that moment steps sounded on the sidewalk outside the door. A voice called, "Hey, Jim! Everything all right?"

It was Linus Ravel. Excitement leaped in Jim as he recalled Ravel's casual words of that morning, which he had forgotten until now. "Bring it over to the house when you get back tonight, Jim."

A warning look flashed in Tyler's eyes, and Jim's moment of elation died. They could still shoot him down and make their story stick. They could claim that Jim Brannan had not tried to make the break until he heard the voice of the man he had betrayed. Linus Ravel would not be armed, for men in Ocean City felt no need of such, and even if Jim could somehow get him to understand what was going on, the man would be no help.

Ravel rapped on the door again. "Hey, Jim! You asleep?" After a moment steps retreated and there was silence.

Neither Peel nor Tyler spoke, and Tyler's threatening eyes kept Jim silent, Jim watched the animations in the man's face as he adjusted to this, having little doubt that he would make it successfully.

"Who was that, Brannan?" Tyler demanded.

"One of the exchange members. How're you going to account for the strange silence in here when he called to me?"

"It's going to be that you were holding a gun on us."

"And you'd better take it before he tries it, Si," Peel cut in. "Get around behind him and feel in that right hand pocket of his coat."

Tyler stepped that way. "If he makes a funny move, plug him. It'll fit in to a T."

Jim hoped that his bunching muscles did not show through his clothes. The last thought that he might somehow survive this situation was extinguished. Anger burned in him, and even now he did not regret his refusal to enter into connivance with the pair. In outward indifference he let Tyler come around behind him. His back was to the wall. When he felt Tyler's hand slipping into his coat pocket, Jim heaved himself backward, fire from his stiff shoulder shooting through the red fire already in his brain. He smashed Tyler against the wall.

He heard the man grunt and dug his elbow violently into his side. For an in-

stant Peel was helpless, unable to shoot without danger of drilling two bodies. As he wheeled around, Jim saw nervousness tighten the man's short, blocky body. A fraction more of time, and the man would find his chance to shoot.

Some of the wind knocked from him, surprise and rage in his glittering eyes, Simeon Tyler tried to pitch himself aside to free Peel's hand. Jim crashed him against the wall again with his shoulder, trying to tangle him and hold him close, waiting for Peel's bullet. He heard the sharp sound of breaking glass, forgot it as Tyler's foot lashed out at him. Jim grabbed the foot, jerked and brought Tyler smashing to the floor. He landed on top of him, hammering with his right fist, savagely in the man's face, his back exposed to Peel now.

He heard the shot, concussion rocking in the room. He sledged his fist into Tyler's face again before he realized he had not been hit. There was another shot and then another, and it struck him oddly that there was a different pitch to them. Yet the raw fight was coming up in Tyler now as he battled Jim. The man kicked and lashed out, but Jim kept hammering his face and head. Tyler went slack all of a sudden, and Jim swung around on his knees to face Peel's gun and saw Almon Peel stretched bellywise on the floor.

He saw a gun knocking the rest of the glass from the window pane. He saw Angus McReady, the hostler at the livery, lifting himself through. Behind McReady he saw the round, grim face of Linus Ravel. Jim staggered to his feet and reeled to the door to unlock it.

Simeon Tyler was really out, for he still lay limp when Ravel and McReady came into the room. Blood was running out from beneath Peel now, and Jim saw it was the hostler who had shot him.

Ravel swept the room with his glance, then looked at Jim. "Who are they?"

JIM managed a thin grin. "Just a couple of fellows who thought they could make better use of that dust than you could." He told them about it, sparing no details about the hold Simeon Tyler had thought he held over Jim Brannan, explaining his own California experience. The dust would be in their hotel room, to be recovered at their leisure.

When Jim had finished, Ravel looked at him and smiled. "Jim, I figured it just like that girl of your does. You sowed your crop of wild oats. You got tired of it. The only question that left was whether you meant it or not. After this, I don't reckon anybody'd have much doubt about it."

"But you?" Jim asked. "What decided you to come in shooting?"

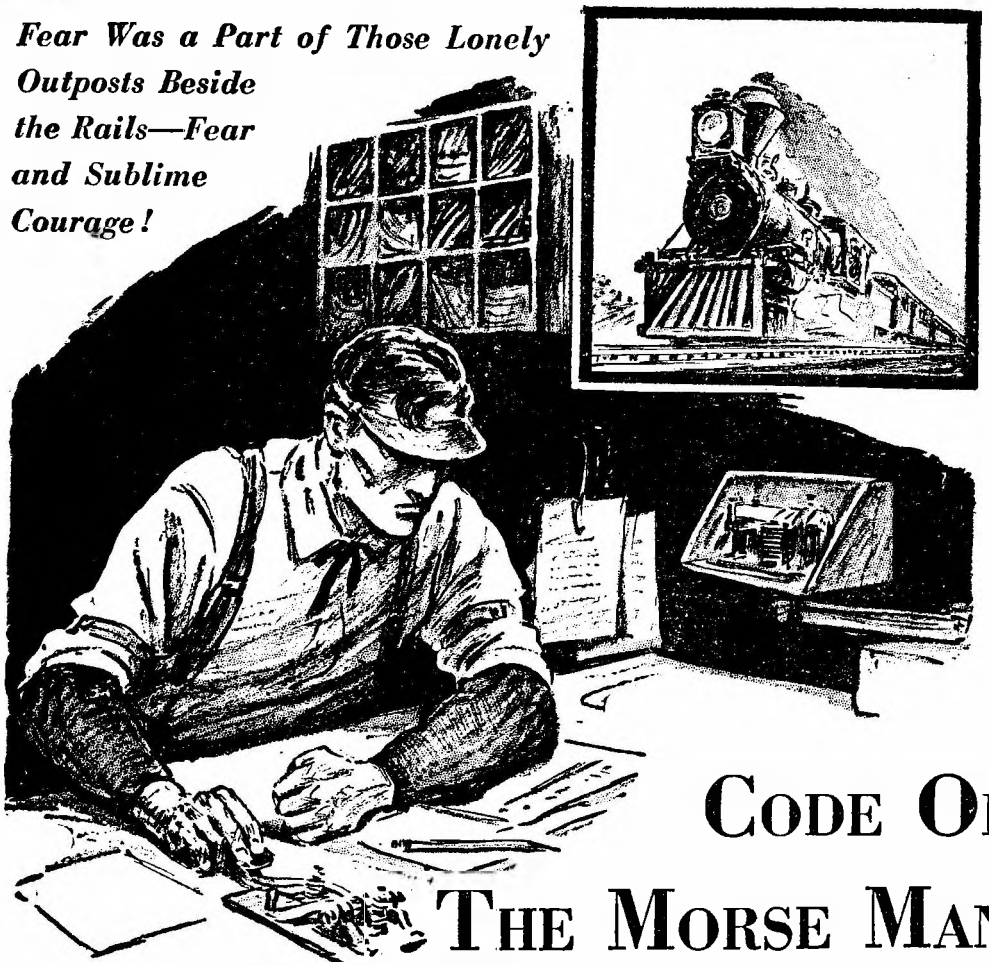
"Angus did the shooting, and it's a funny thing, Jim. I didn't expect you home early, under the circumstances, but I waited up. When it was one o'clock and you still hadn't got there, I was a little uneasy. It finally struck me that maybe you figured it was too late to come on down to my place. Figured I better come up to see if you had got back. When I saw the buggy and two saddlers on the street and the light in your windows I was relieved, but a little puzzled. I was more so when you wouldn't answer when I knocked."

"I was scared to," said Jim. "I knew you wouldn't be armed, and I didn't know what it might spook them into doing."

Ravel nodded thoughtfully. "And that's the strange part of it. I wasn't armed. And what kept me from going back home and made me go over to Angus' stable I'll never know. It was just a sudden hunch. Angus sleeps in his harness room, and when I woke him up he told me about your horse coming home with an empty saddle. He hadn't known that you had any special chore in Portland or he'd've raised an alarm. As it was he figured you'd maybe had too much celebrating about your wedding and let yourself get bounced off. But when we got our heads together we knew something was wrong over at your place. Angus got out his artillery and we were just getting back there when the place started coming apart. Now, what do you suppose made me go over to the livery?"

Jim shrugged, not wanting to answer that. But a quiet satisfaction came to him, then. He had learned something of priceless value to remember in future years. More immediately he recalled that it was now his wedding day. When he stood up with Charity, he would have the right to believe himself worthy of her.

Fear Was a Part of Those Lonely Outposts Beside the Rails—Fear and Sublime Courage!



CODE OF THE MORSE MAN

By CHARLES W. TYLER

Author of "Rails West," etc.

BILL PARDEE had come west with steel—a gangling, blue-eyed kid, hunting adventure beside the track. A railroad was building an empire and he wanted a part of it. He had seen match-box towns spring up like mushrooms from the raw prairie. He had heard the bark of six-guns and the yells of brawling Texas cowhands on the wheel-rutted streets of trail towns. He had watched the march of the Zulu cars, bringing the sod-buster and his plow.

Bill Pardee, at seventeen, had seen Dodge City in its swaddling clothes—a row of frame buildings north of the railroad tracks; vacant lots piled with buffalo hides and miles of bleaching bones on the prairie east of town. He had been raw material then, with homesickness gnawing at his vitals. He was old now, and wise—old at twenty-one, with a wisdom born of bitter experience on the ragged edge of things.

The steel rail was probing at the Colorado Rockies, spinning silver threads across New Mexico—laying a magic carpet down the trail of the *conquistadores,* an iron road of commerce to treasure worlds beyond.

Along this road men fought and died. Died and were buried and forgotten, almost between dawn and dusk. There had been the kid at Poverty Bend, this Pete Ayres, not a week out from the East.

"I'm scared." The words had clicked over the telegraph wire—a small voice,

whispering in the blackness of the prairie night.

"Steady, kid." Bill Pardee had formed the Morse dots and dashes slowly, wishing there was something a fellow could say to ease his fear.

A few nights later Pete Ayres had laid his head on his folded arms and died, there beside his telegraph key, a bandit's bullet through him.

Fear was a part of those lonely outposts beside the rails—fear of marauding savages, of outlaws. Fear that you would not measure up when the showdown came. The shadow of fear was in the heart of the youth at Picketwire at this moment.

The telegraph sounder on the table in front of Bill Pardee briefly opened the door that imprisoned the operator thirty miles east.

"Just the coyotes and the stars. Wish I was home in Missouri." Back where there were trees and greenness—and neighbors."

The operator at Mud Lake came in. "Lucky, that's all," he told Picketwire—the coyotes and the stars. "They say redskins are on the prowl west of here. Hang onto your hair, kid."

Bill Pardee smiled thinly. Mud Lake was trying to sound unconcerned, but Mud Lake wasn't fooling anybody.

The operator at Cottonwood Switch opened his key and called the dispatcher at Almagorda. "No. 3 by—"

No. 3, the westbound, carried a Wells-Fargo express car.

As the rails crept west, road agents had turned their attention from the stage coach to the railway express car and its safe. The train robber, his ranks recruited from gun-toughs of the trail towns, was exhibiting a new brand of ruthlessness. Recognizing the threat of the telegraph wire and its swift communication, he had frequently turned his gun on the operator as a means of silencing it.

Bill Pardee glanced at the clock. Nearly two hours yet before the headlight of No. 3 would show on the curve east of Broken Bow. He got up and went to the door, feeling restless, vaguely uneasy, making a dark silhouette against the dull glow of the coal oil lamp.

Across the tracks the false fronts of the town etched their pattern against the sky. Here and there were yellow squares of light. A tinpan piano jangled monotonously in the Stampede Saloon. Figures moved along the gallery in front of the Palace Hotel, lazy marionettes caught by the window glow. Tonight Broken Bow was silent, orderly; tomorrow or next week a trail herd would come smoking up from Texas and there would be longhorns on the flats and punchers whooping it up on the streets.

The loading pens stood dimly outlined west of the station. The windmill beyond the water tank lifted its skeleton framework, its vanes motionless in the still air, like a poised fan. A shooting star drew a scratch across the heavens. Somewhere off in the blackness a coyote howled, starting the town dogs to barking.

Bill Pardee's glance swung toward the Zulu car, set off on a spur track. A Zulu was a settler, and a Zulu car was the box car that contained his belongings, including livestock The glimmering switch lamp, keeping its vigil at the east end of the long siding, blacked out for an instant, indicating that something had passed in front of it.

Probably that sod-buster, coming back from town, the operator reflected.

THE telegraph instruments had fallen silent. Bill Pardee could see the operators, brooding by their keys—waiting for No. 3. After the train had gone they'd turn in. You would hear them signing off—"Goodnight."

A telegrapher out there on the prairie at least had contact with the outside world. A settler just had his wife and his kids and his God.

Mud Lake came in. No. 3 was by. The dispatcher acknowledged. "It's all yours, Picketwire," sent the Mud Lake operator. The kid at Picketwire didn't answer. Probably had dozed off, Pardee thought, and was dreaming of home and friends back in Missouri.

Bill Pardee had never been able to get Pete Ayres out of his mind. "I'm scared!" A few dots and dashes at the end of that day the kid had reported smoke against the sky to the south. Later he had shakily sent word over the wire of the burning of the settler's shack and the bloody horror riders had found out there. Indians were burn-

ing railroad trestles and looting way stations, too.

Bill Pardee had stayed on late that night. The kid had wanted somebody to talk to. Fifty miles. The distance had melted away in those midnight hours through the magic of the telegraph wire. Pete Ayres had forgotten his loneliness and his fear, his ear close to the chattering sounder, his eyes bright at finding a friend in a weary land.

They were both from Ohio, out Zanesville way, where the rolling hills folded close around town and village, holding them in friendly embrace.

"I miss them hills," Pete Ayres had said.

"I used to miss them too," Bill Pardee told him, "but I got over it."

"The country is too big," the kid said. "I'm scared of it. Was you ever afraid—Bill?"

"Plenty of times, Pete. Fellow told me once if you don't get scared you ain't healthy. You know who he was?"

"Who?"

"Bill Cody."

"I must be awful healthy."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"You got folks back there?"

"Ma and dad and brothers and sisters."

Pete had been the oldest. His dad had been a telegraph operator and Pete had learned the Morse code—to send, and to receive by ear when he was fourteen.

"My dad was with General Hooker in the War Between the States," Pete told Bill Pardee. "He was only fifteen when he joined the Military Telegraph Corps."

"How did you happen to come west, Pete?" Pardee asked.

"I wanted to see what it was like." The sending stopped; then picked up again. "My dad was brave—not like me. I got to stick it out—"

THE telegraph sounder told the story—the story of a kid who was afraid, but who wouldn't quit. His dad had set the pattern—a soldier. A civilian in the telegraph service, attached to the Quartermaster's Department. Three hundred of these telegraph operators had died in the line of duty. The war telegrapher received no pension; little notice had been taken of his deeds; no military salute was ever fired over his grave. . . .

"Dad says cowards die twice," the sounder rattled on. "I know what he meant now."

Bill Pardee had taken the boy at Poverty Bend under his wing, cheering him, steadying him—the kid he had never seen and never would.

Bill Pardee took a scrap of paper from a drawer and laid it on the table by the key. He had copied the message fragment the kid had sent that night, but the only thing he had been able to make out of it was a word that might have been s-c-a-r-e-d.

"I'm scared."

You couldn't blame Pete Ayres. The prairie was too big for him. Fear had gripped him from the first, but he had stayed on, doing a man's job in this empire the railroad was building. And then horsemen had come riding out of the night—outlaws. The kid suddenly had found himself looking down a gun-barrel, and that fear had crystalized into cold terror.

Bill Pardee glanced at that scrap of paper in front of him and his thoughts drew the picture again of the thing that had happened that night—the broken story the wire told.

He had been sitting here, half asleep. The sudden clatter of the telegraph sounder had roused him, and he caught the "Morse" identification of the box-car station at Poverty Bend; then, "No. 3." A long pause followed. Every operator on the division was hunched by his instruments, listening, waiting. Something was wrong out there in the blackness.

At last the dead wire came to life again, the sending slow, halting, laborious—hard to read. Then, with a final brief flutter, those little metal tongues of the telegraph sounders had stopped short. Pete Ayres had clung to the key to the end, was still clutching it when members of the train crew entered the telegraph office.

The sounder broke in on Bill Pardee's reverie. Picketwire was reporting the passing of No. 3.

One more station—McCarty's—and the chuffing little eight-wheeler would be past the last telegraph office east of Broken Bow. Nearly three-quarters of an hour before No. 3 was due. The tick of the clock was the only sound now. Bill Pardee yawned, settled back in his chair and closed his eyes.

THE door of the telegraph office eased open and a man in a derby hat and town clothes moved across the threshold. Bill Pardee stirred restively. The call of the sounder would have brought him awake instantly, but neither the cool night air that briefly flowed over him nor the creak of the floorboard penetrated his light sleep.

The intruder closed the door and set his back against it, his hard-sliced mouth toying with a smile. His lidded eyes examined the dozing operator; then moved to the clock.

"How's No. 3?" The words exploded in the silence of the small room with jarring abruptness.

Bill Pardee's head jerked and his eyes snapped open. He did not notice the gun at first; it was held low and close to the stranger's hip.

"What do you want?" Bill Pardee was surprised, startled; his voice had an edge. He did not like the looks of his visitor.

"I asked you how No. 3 was running?" The tone had a savage quality that held a threat as well as an interrogation.

Bill Pardee was shaking the last traces of sleep fog from his brain; still a little uncertain.

There was a waiting room for passengers; visitors were not welcome in the telegraph office. His lips parted, shaping a protest.

Bill Pardee saw the gun then. The black muzzle was centering him squarely. His eyes popped. He stared at it, stared at the man behind it. He must be asleep and dreaming —he'd been thinking too much about Pete Ayres. This thing could happen, had happened, at those lonely wayside stations on the prairie, but never in town. It was crazy.

The thumb of the hand that held the six-shooter tightened over the long hammer-piece, easing it back until it had the look of a rattler's fanged mouth, opened to strike.

Bill Pardee's stomach muscles drew into a knot; his tongue slid nervously across his dry lips. "No. 3 is about on time."

"Took you a long time to find your tongue."

Bill Pardee made no answer to that. He was thinking—thinking fast. Five minutes from now the headlight of No. 3 would show at McCarty's. If the train got by McCarty's it was headed straight for trouble —big trouble. His eye turned from the clock to the telegraph key—and back to that unwavering gun-muzzle.

The man by the door seemed to read his thoughts. "You reach for that key and I'll blow you wide open, sonny." The gun gestured menacingly.

Bill Pardee's heart was pounding hard. He swallowed, his nerves like singing catgut. There was a Smith and Wesson .38 in the drawer at his elbow. It might as well have been in his room at the hotel. His thinking became a maze of little twists and turns and tangents, with cold fear threading through it.

Bill Pardee heard himself saying, "So this is a holdup?"

The outlaw gave him a one-sided grin. "You're pretty smart at figgering things out."

No. 3 took water at Broken Bow. A few passengers would get off—a whiskey drummer, perhaps; a cattle buyer or two; a few settlers. There were those sealed money packages to sign for. The Wells-Fargo car would be wide open to attack.

A holdup! Bill Pardee saw the messenger, Tom Cooney, framed in the door of the express car, a fair target for the blasting guns of the train robbers. Tom had a wife and kids at Almagorda.

Bill Pardee's eyes moved slowly to the silent sounder, the dusty relay, the yellow message blanks, that scrap of paper beside the key—Pete Ayres last message. There must be some way out. There had to be. The ticking clock was a reminder that the minutes were running out. No. 3 was getting close to McCarty's.

THE outlaw moved forward and threw a leg across a corner of the telegraph table, coming into the full glow of the lamp. He was hard. Killer was written all over him. A crescent-shaped scar, starting at the mouth corner and curving upward across the high-boned cheek, accented the brutish features. His skin was the color of saddle-leather. His town suit was store new and not yet moulded to his lean frame. Bill Pardee had seen men like this in Abilene and Dodge and all of those other roaring towns along the way. They drifted in for their fling at the fleshpots. They rigged themselves out in stiff hats and loud suits, had their pictures taken, danced with the Lulu girls, got up-

roariously drunk and generally ended up in a shooting scrape. Finally they rode away, if they lived out their spree. Rustlers, road-agents, train robbers. Men who lived dangerously and died violently.

Lawlessness followed the trail town. It followed the railroad and the boom town. Broken Bow, growing in importance as a cattle-shipping center, was drawing roughs, renegades and the camp-followers, as a fresh-killed carcass drew green flies.

No law west of Dodge. No God west of Broken Bow. There were too few Earps and Mastersons. The town marshal became the target for every drunken gun-toter and he was soon either dead or famous. The Broken Bow town fathers had appointed a Dave Mathers marshal a month ago. He was durable and tough, but still untested in that crucible that tempers a man, or breaks him.

The bandit rested his gunhand across his leg, still keeping the operator covered. "Has No. 3 passed McCarty's Siding?"

Bill Pardee did not answer at once. He was staring at that gun-muzzle, wondering how long a man's brain functioned after a .45 slug hit him. "Not yet."

The other eyed him narrowly, his eyes ashine with wickedness. "You lying to me, Bub?"

"What would I lie for?" Bill Pardee remembered the first man he had seen killed. It had been back in Abilene and was still a sickening thing in his mind. Old Man Death played no favorites when the chips were down. You won or lost on the bat of an eyelash; the flip of a card. Wild Bill Hickok. Aces and eights! Johnny-Behind-the-Deuce killed by Pony Deal. Gun-fighters. The best of them got it.

Bill Pardee stole a glance at the key from the tail of his eye—almost under his hand. A few breathless seconds to flash out those few dots and dashes. "Hold No. 3." McCarty's would understand—if the kid out there was awake.

In just a minute now. Just a minute . . . Suddenly Bill Pardee found his courage oozing from his finger-tips. The threat of that black gun was too much for him. He didn't have the nerve. "I'm scared!"

The chatter of the sounder ripped through the graveyard stillness of the room, briskly cheerful. "No. 3 by—" It was the operator at McCarty's reporting the going of the train, the busy-puffing eight-wheeler and its swaying coaches. The old headlight, a dim spark in the night, hurrying on toward Broken Bow.

Bill Pardee shook his head, the last bit of color draining from his face. Fear! Fear that you wouldn't measure up when the showdown came. He'd had his chance and he had quit cold. He might not have lived to put the warning on the wire, but he could have tried. You never got away from the things inside of you; you had to live with them. Forever and ever.

The outlaw scowled at the racketing sounder. McCarty's was signing off, his day's work done.

"What the hell is that thing saying?"

Bill Pardee looked at him, his eyes slowly turning angry, defiant. Rage was building inside of him, a reckless fury that swept the last bit of saneness aside. The voice he heard wasn't his; it couldn't be. "It says the wind's in the southwest. Take a deep breath."

The outlaw cursed him. The gun-muzzle jogged up and down. "When the time is ripe, my young friend, it's going to be a pleasure to shoot you in the belly."

WELLS-FARGO AND COMPANY special agents had followed the train robbers' trail south from Poverty Bend into the Nations, and lost it. There had been no description of the bandits, nothing by which they might be traced, once the sign—the hoofmarks of their horses—had been fouled out by a trampling trail herd.

The train crew had seen only dark shapes and the flash of guns in the blackness. But one person had had a close look at any member of the gang. That person was the operator. And he was dead. Pete Ayres had carried away the secret to the place he had gone. There had been nothing, except that last broken message. A few dots and dashes, which Bill Pardee had interpreted as best he could.

Right along he had felt that there was something there, if he could only put his finger on it. He looked at the bit of paper again. The letters, for the most part, had been made up of dots. You could make several combinations out of those Morse characters when they were run together, as they had been that night. Queer, the kid

stubbornly fighting off death long enough to click out that final message.

A second outlaw came into the telegraph office. His skin was weathered; he was dressed in a pattern similar to the man with the scar. A hard hat, a checkered suit and ornate vest. He looked at the operator, his eyes cold as a blue norther. "A little pale around the gills, kid."

"Everything set?" asked the first outlaw.

The other nodded. "Jake's out by the water tank. He'll take over in the cab when the engine stops. Link is at the end of the platform, ready to pull the coupling pin behind the express car. I'll take care of the express messenger."

It was the same formula train robbers frequently used, Bill Pardee thought. The Wells-Fargo car was cut off, while the outlaw who had climbed into the cab forced the engineer to move on to some point down the track where other members of the gang waited with horses. They'd be out of Broken Bow before anyone knew what was happening.

The man with the six-shooter glanced at the telegrapher. "Keep your eyes and ears open, Bub, because what you find out is going to stay with you, a long time."

There was no mistaking the significance of the remark. The gang had no intention of leaving a witness who might later testify against them.

The train robbers had left little to chance, apparently. They knew the night that No. 3 brought those money packages for the banks at Broken Bow and Almagorda, together with the money for the pay rolls out at the end of steel. They knew the Wells-Fargo messenger took those packages from the safe and handed them to the operator, who signed for them there in the square of light that shone from the door of the express car.

Members of the gang probably had been in town some time, checking, planning the holdup and the getaway. There would be a few scattered shots, the quick pant of the locomotive's exhaust and the bob-tailed train slipping away in the gloom.

Bill Pardee's thinking ran in cadence with the ticking clock, unhurried now, but persistent. It hadn't occurred to him that these might be the men who had held up No. 3 at Poverty Bend, so firmly was established the belief, held in general by everybody he had talked to, that they had quit the country. But now that smouldering spark in the back of his head presented the idea to him.

The second outlaw went out. The opening of the door let in the faint sound of the banging piano in the Stampede Saloon, the lilting melody of a hurdy-gurdy in a dance hall, the creak of the windmill, astir in the breeze that came sighing off the prairie. The door's closing shut him off again from the world.

THE weight of silence pressed down. The outlaw swung his leg, glanced now and then at the clock, whistled tonelessly through his teeth. He spun the cylinder of the six-shooter, watched the operator, his eyes as cold and as expressionless as a rattlesnake's.

Bill Pardee, hunched in his chair, thought of the kid at Poverty Bend, buried out there beside the track. Pete Ayres. A mound and a cross. Seemed like he could hear the kid's familiar "Morse" coming over the wire, over the long, long miles. Phantom fingers at the key.

Bill Pardee's gaze went to that scrap of paper on the table again. He stared at it a long time. He didn't know how many times he had studied it in the past month or so. The language of the Morse code, made up of dots and dashes and spaces, could easily be misunderstood. The veteran telegrapher read entire word combinations rather than individual letters and it was easy to misinterpret the significance of like words. Bill Pardee's eyes lifted to the face of the outlaw then, giving it a careful scrutiny. Suddenly he found the solution of the thing he had been searching for. Pete Ayres had not cringed in the face of death, as they had thought, but had died gamely, bravely—the son of a soldier.

"You killed the operator at Poverty Bend that night!" Bill Pardee's voice was flat-toned, grim. He was picking up where Pete Ayres had left off. The telegraph key was unlocking the gates of an empire, smashing the barriers of time and distance, and the operator beside the westward reaching rails was having his part in it.

There was an almost invisible contraction of the muscles of the hand that held the gun. "What in hell are you talking about?"

"The holdup at Poverty Bend. You murdered that kid!"

The outlaw's lids dropped their awnings over eyes aflame with a killer light. "What makes you so sure of that?"

"The kid put it on the wire. I wrote it down." Bill Pardee pointed at the paper beside the key with his chin.

The door opened briefly and the voice of the outlaw outside said, "I can hear the train. Get ready in there."

The curiosity of the bandit facing Bill Pardee overrode his immediate interest in the approach of No. 3. He tipped forward a little, squinting at the letters spelled out on the message blank.

"I'm scared." He grunted contemptuously. "Hell, that don't mean anything—"

"It means plenty to me," Bill Pardee said savagely.

The gunman suddenly stepped back. The gangling operator was in motion, fear a dead thing behind him. The sound of the outlaw's six-shooter roared through the station.

Dave Mathers, town marshal, making his rounds, pulled up and turned, his eyes searching out the yellow square of light in the black wall of the railroad station at the end of Depot Street.

THE bullet from the outlaw's gun turned Bill Pardee half-around and sent him crashing over the chair.

East of the depot, the train whistle shouted, calling for brakes. The door of the Wells-Fargo car slid back and Tom Cooney stood there, waiting for the train to make its jolting stop.

There hadn't been much time for Bill Pardee to shape any coordinated course of action; he had been too engrossed with that stunning revelation—the thing that so certainly linked this outlaw with the killing of Pete Ayres.

He found himself surging to his feet, pivoting to slap at the lamp. The six-shooter vomited fire and something sledged him hard in the shoulder. A second bullet drove past him to smash at the back wall of the telegraph office. He could hear the outlaw's furious oaths, miles away in the background of the tumult that roared through his head.

Something had happened to his left arm, leaving it dangling useless at his side. He partly regained his balance and snatched at the overturned chair, bringing it up and around in a wild arc that wiped the coal-oil lamp from its bracket with a crash.

The blackness was Bill Pardee's ally now —a blackness streaked with hot muzzle-flame and filled with the reek of powder fumes and ear-jarring concussions. He groped frantically for the drawer in the telegraph table, the drawer that held the precious Smith and Wesson.

The door burst open and a voice bawled something that was drowned out by the clanging of the locomotive bell. Across the tracks guns were crashing in the gray gloom of Depot Street. Down the platform a high-pitched voice was shouting, but its frenzy was lost in the series of quick whistle blasts from the engine.

Bill Pardee's searching fingers found the Smith and Wesson and his hot palm closed tight around the grips. The headlight of No. 3, a blob of whiteness, came on toward the depot, and against this spreading glow the figure of the outlaw took pattern before the open door.

Bill Pardee, crouched close under the edge of the telegraph table, fired. Once. Twice. And the derby hat swayed, began a slow dip forward. The man with the scar on his cheek was bowing out, like an actor taking his final curtain call.

Guns were still pouring out their fury somewhere along the platform, their yellow lances stabbing wickedly in the pale light, writing history at Broken Bow. Another page in the story of a railroad empire. Bill Pardee hoisted himself erect and swayed against the telegraph table, staring through the window at the dim-lit coaches crawling past. He saw Tom Cooney, the messenger, in the door of the Well-Fargo car, bringing a sawed-off shotgun to his shoulder. The bellow of it obliterated the clatter of trucks and draft rigging, as No. 3 ground to a shuddering stop.

Trainmen's lanterns danced beside the cars. Voices yammered on the platform and men clotted around the two sprawled figures. Dave Mathers came across the open vestibule of a car from Depot Street, a six-shooter in his hand. Figures hurried toward the telegraph office.

Someone brought a lamp from the waiting room and set it beside the telegraph key. Bill Pardee, feeling weak and a little sick, sank into the chair they placed for him.

Tom Cooney pushed into the room. "What happened here, kid?"

"Started out to be a holdup."

The marshal said, "You're hit, boy." And to one of the others, "Get the doc."

"I—I'm all right." Bill Pardee smiled wryly. "More scared than anything, I guess."

Dave Mathers turned the dead man on the floor to get a look at his face. "I've seen this hombre around town."

"Somebody knife-branded him," said Tom Cooney, noticing the scar.

"He was one of the gang that held up the train at Poverty Bend," Bill Pardee told them. "The man that killed Pete Ayres."

"What gave you that notion?" the marshal said.

"The kid put it on the wire that night."

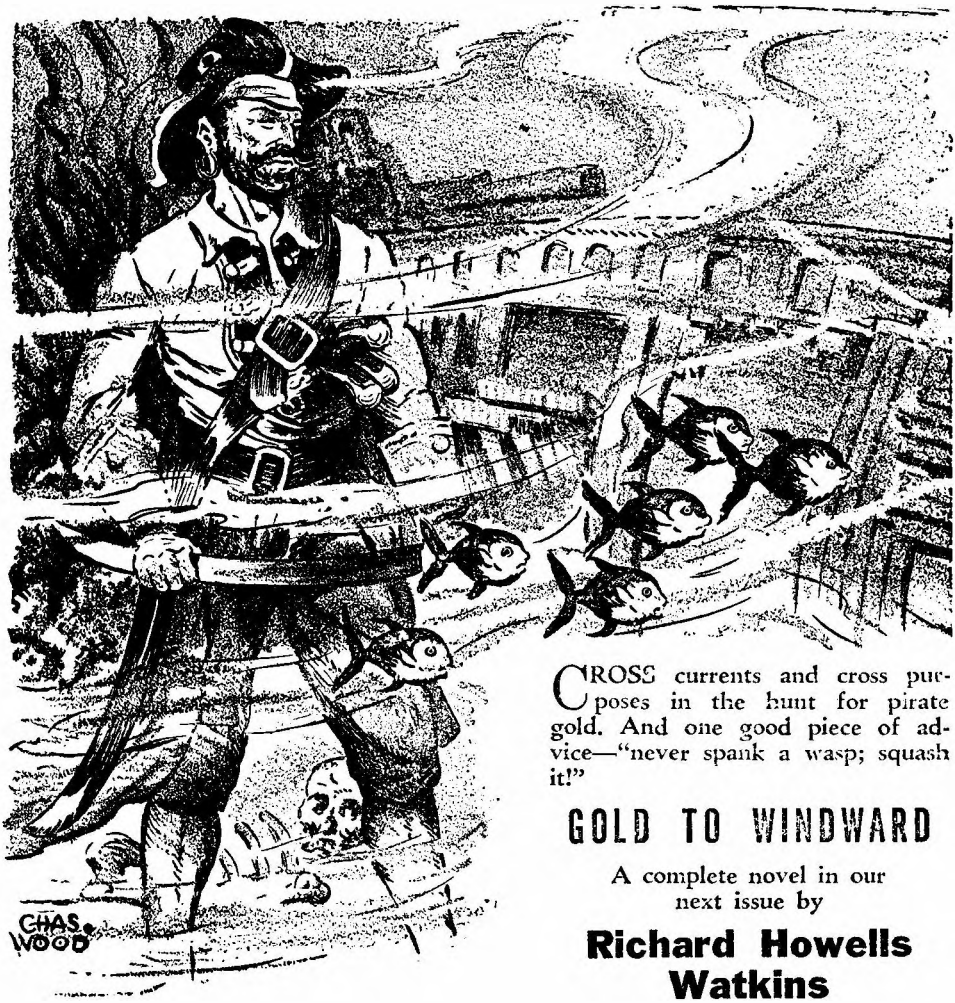
Tom Cooney frowned. "I never heard that."

Bill Pardee looked into the faces crowded around, his eyes shining. "We all had the kid figured wrong. We thought he was too scared to know what he was saying. But he knew all right. Pete came from fighting stock."

"You mean he identified this outlaw?" said Dave Mathers.

"That's right. The kid was dying but he stayed at the key, because that's the code of Morse men. His sending was bad; but he was just hanging on, stalling off Old Man Death. We thought he was saying 'I'm scared,' but that wa'n't it. What he was trying to put on the wire was—*"Man scarred."*

Bill Pardee glanced at the clock, reaching for the telegraph key. He called the dispatcher at Almagorda, the sounder rapping out the Morse dots and dashes. "No. 3 at Broken Bow."



CROSS currents and cross purposes in the hunt for pirate gold. And one good piece of advice—"never spank a wasp; squash it!"

GOLD TO WINDWARD

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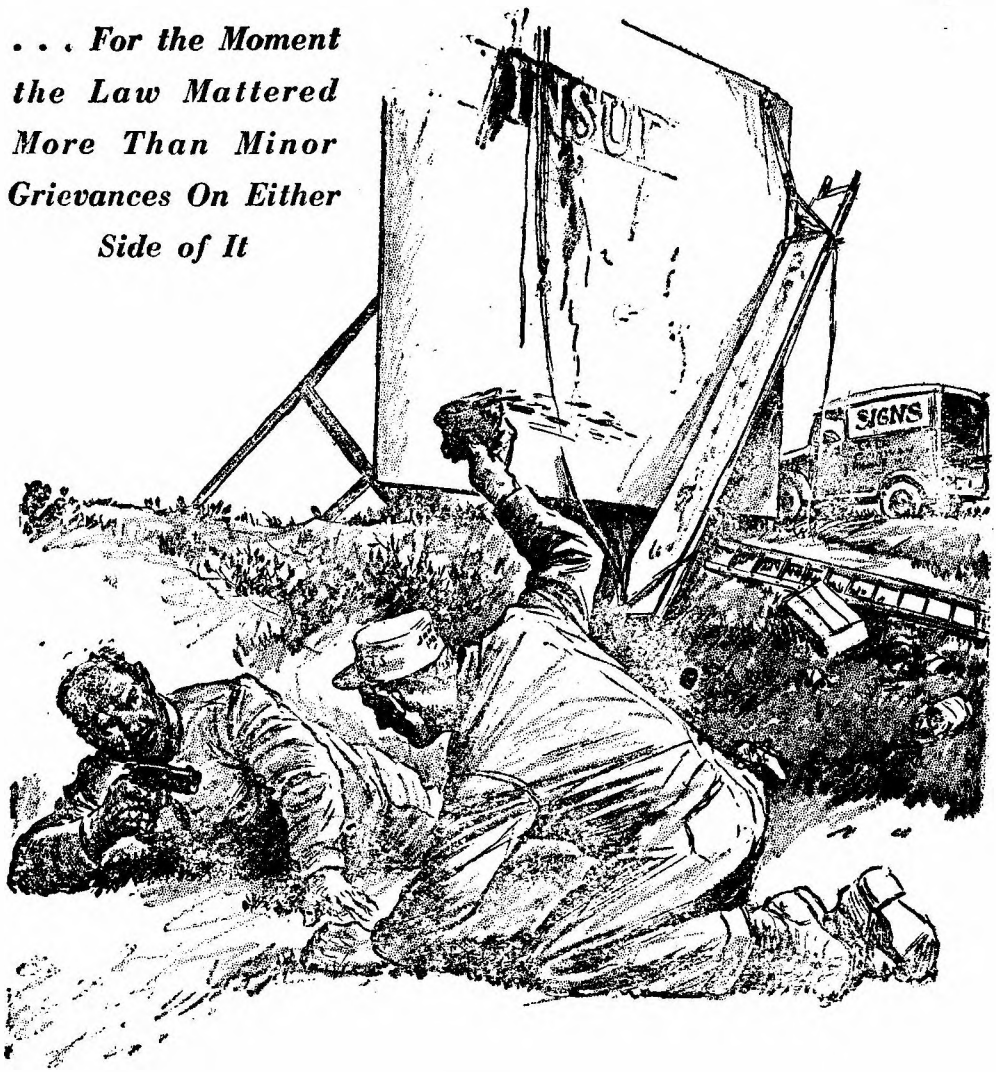
. . . For the Moment the Law Mattered More Than Minor Grievances On Either Side of It



STICK TO YOUR TRADE, GUNSEL

By LYNDON RIPLEY

PULL over to the curb, Brush," squawked a radio loudspeaker. "You're nailed square this time."

I gave the matter brief thought. I'd jooked the rural law long enough. Regretfully I tooled my dilapidated sign truck to the highway shoulder and whipped dead with a squeak, dripping oil.

The familiar dust-gray sedan with its flagpole aerials cramped in ahead of me. Big, barrel-shaped Sheriff Winters stepped out flat-footed, tailed by half-pint Deputy Underwood.

"What's the hot idea, Conway," the sheriff snapped, juicing his chewed cigar in thick gray lips, "of giving me the run-around?"

I grinned and killed the ignition. "Why? Have I pulled a proxy on prixy?"

"Don't answer a question with a question—and no smart cracks," shot back Winters. He jerked the snap brim of his tan crusher, trying to look that slightly mussed "efficient public servant" way. "The warden at Quentin," he cracked on testily, "says you know Northern Cal, near the Oregon line, like a book. We want you to help us."

I kept grinning for I knew I had a clean bill and a legit trade now, well learned from Bristle Van Dyke while in stir. Just because a broker like myself had a chiseling partner such as Goldtouch Latimer, and had taken a companion rap through circumstantial conniving, is no reason I was henceforth to be considered a side glance ex-con. Maybe letter daubing was peanuts in this tank town but I was happy for the first time in my clumsy, groping life.

"An honor—I hope," I said finally. "How?"

"Questioning again," Winters snarled, his blue five o'clock shadow edging crimson. "A guy in your position—"

"A guy in my position is a valuable citizen," I said pointedly, through my fixed focus front. "I'm not on probation, I would respectfully remind you. Don't jump salty. At least I'm tending to *my* business. And I would also like to point out that a little honey, Moose old conk, usually catches more cooperation than ammonia."

"Nuth," muttered Underwood in a lisping nasal tenor. He took off his too-big black Stetson as if a flea bothered him and scratched thinning corn silk hair. "Tell 'im wath you wanth, Mooth an'—"

"Shut up, both of you!" Winters stared down his deputy, then swung on me. He hitched his shiny gabardine pants, planked a tan number twelve brogan on my bent running board. "You heard, I take it, about this shotgun killer up on the Sutro River? We've hunted him all over Northern California for a week. You had a cabin near the Forks for ten years, didn't you? Finally we tracked the guy up past your place, along the North Bench, but no farther. So I'm making you a deputy and making you responsible up river, from there on in. We'll be near the highway—give you free rein for three days without hindrance."

My grudging grin did a fadeout. I'd read about the killing of old prospector Flechter by some agate brained prune picker. I was especially interested because the homicide had occurred on familiar ground, association of which I'd given a rain check pass.

"I'm sewed up on repaints," I said, reaching for the ignition key. "Get yourself another monkey chaser, Sheriff. I'm a peaceful drupe, period."

Moose Winters spat his slavered cigar butt on the new but gritty black paint job of my Chevvie's hood. "You'll be covered with soil replacement," he returned sharply, meaningly, "unless you change your brain cell sequence. Report at the office at ten tomorrow. You're the best man for the job. It's an order!"

Late the next afternoon—the fifth of May to be exact—we rolled through country just south of the Orgen line. I say "we" because with me was Hank Tindel, my apprentice helper. Hank was horse-faced, had a speech impediment and was slightly gummed above the ears. But he was doggoned good on alphabets and fast with a brush.

The panel delivery under us was half there too. A bakery in South Bay, my home port, had used the heap for a dozen years, and a hundred bucks for the heirloom had been an auctioner's over-zealous gyp.

But I didn't beat my guns on gall. Right now we had a top heavy load of sliding ladders, falls, platforms planks, paints and brushes, so watinell. I was combining business with duty, as it were.

Moose Winters, I might add, hadn't given me much to go on. He told me, in a few bitten words, old Pete Fletcher, the hard scrabble prospector, had been stinko on canned heat when he'd been shot. The report of the murder had come in by phone to the sheriff's office from a woman neighbor on the rugged Sutro. She'd been too hysterical to be of much help.

It was growing dark when we clattered across the Coast Highway bridge and turned right on the north bank road, heading up river. Right then the days were lengthening and the extra light welcome, for pounce and fill-in work on highway bulletins takes time.

I had two billboards on the way up to the "4-Pines" cottage. It was about three miles beyond the newer ritzy shacks in the toity Eaton's Bar colony. I'd planned on whiting out old copy going upstream, do my deputy duties up river, then re-letter on the way down.

Consequently it was noon, on the following day, when we reached the junction of the North and South Forks. Near the main highway we'd passed an undersheriff's green car, parked under some nutmeg pines, so I knew I was under prod. I'd thrown our sleeping bags behind the first board, and in the morning, after collaring a hot with flapjacks, cackles and Java, and after dew had dried on the tin for right paint "stick," we did our blocking out chores.

Just to get the scene straight, I didn't belong to 4-Pines, the summer cottage to which we were going, any more. Dingle Paroni who had glaumed onto the place to help me out when I really needed lettuce, used it only in June and August. But having known Dingle in cell row nine, I was certain that roosting here was eight rock okay by my friendly and reformed bubble gum mobster.

Getting into the place was no job for a fellow who's battle hammed a few things in a six year stretch. We brought in provisions and wood and made ourselves millionaire Mex in rustic style. Hank, as might be expected, thought he was in a buckskin paradise.

Well, I admit it *is* nice on the Sutro shore most of the time. But this wasn't one of those times, or I wouldn't be dipping this quill to scrawl the indigo.

I CHANGED from paint daubed white coveralls into brown cords, green-and-cream checkered wool shirt and calked, high cut mocs. "Stay here in kitchen police," I said to Hank, picking up my tan Mitcher cap. "I'm going to mooch a ways up the North Fork. Get that steak on while I'm gone."

"Hot damn—I do that!" Hank said, grinning an earful. "This is strick—hunh—strickly off tha snozzle. Better'n paintin'—hey?"

"Yah-yah," I agreed at the oak door. "And if you encounter any stranger pulling a phinagle, use that under and over twelve gauge on the mantel rack. I checked it. It's loaded. But be damned sure you don't take me for no stranger, coming back. It may be dark when I boomerang."

"Oiky-doiky," Hank said like a dizzy goose as I swung my ride-cramped vertebrae into the clearing.

I started up the North Fork, since it was nearest to the 4-Pines flat. At the river bank I checked my ivory-stocked, .45 Match Target Colt. It was a sweet mamma awaiting a call, and was dead-eye if you knew its foibles. I slipped it back into the black-belt holster, made sure my extra clip was loaded, that a dozen more stingerees nestled like golden capsules in my shirt pocket.

I mention all this because it's the little factors that count on a man hunt, as I'd learned long ago from the wrong end. This time I was brother man-to-man but definitely a bull skater to Dame Nature.

Ever have a day when everything stacks up to test your patience and sand? Well, for young Brush Conway, as I'd pointed out, today was a Beluthahatchie.

First off I stepped into a leaf-covered hole full of sink-ooze mud. Then I hit a patch of biting nettle as I skirted western junipers and knob-cone pines near a pebbly rapids. Under a dead fir a frayed swallow's nest came down and smeared me with a couple of eggs too old for hatching.

But in spite of these and other discomforts, I spotted prints of the gut-footed guy I was after. One broken arch shoe, the other club-footed. This refugee, I observed, was shoving up river. I saw how far the sheriff's trusties had gone, then turned back. I couldn't mistake those cigarette butts and shredded cigar left behind.

The temporary release from paint slinging gave me hunting fever. I followed up to Ten Mile Shallows, then lost the trail at a rosemary hedge, near a burned out cottage site. The human fox, whoever he was, had waded in mid-stream, then hit off cross country.

Accidentally I found spoor again. I tracked into the wooded south foothills, then back to the ice watered North Fork, a dozen miles east and and up against a canyon cliff.

Either mister killer was a woods circler or he was damned hungry. Maybe he had a

hunch there were no people due south for twenty miles over the mountains. Maybe the ritzy colony below 4-Pines flat looked like a soft touch to a half starved worm, especially under the cover of night. It's the way I'd have figured it, anyhow.

And so figuring, I started back. My shirt was mucky with charcoal and sooty bark from burned over slashing through which I'd crawled. Bow cobwebs, pine needles and bud stickers clung to my cords and hair. I was trying to pick off a couple of the burrs, under the lee of the towering cliff, when I heard the ominous rumble.

I scrambled then, scrambled fast, but there wasn't enough pick-up in my calks. Sand and brush from the collapsing shelf caught my legs, worked up to my waist, then my shoulders, stopped at my chin. Then a small juniper whammed down on my head, giving yours truly a sudden and effective kayo.

I HAD one heck of a time that night. Sand got in my mouth. Ants off the brush crawled in my burr-matted hair. As fast as I gained an inch in moving an arm or leg, the heavy granule rock anchored me tight again.

It took hours to twist my way out to my hips, then to my knees. The sky, over the uprooted tree, was finally lightening when I dragged my boots clear of the slide, staggered away and fell on the rocky bank of North Sutro. It had taken plenty of starch, believe me.

I lay there then for a good half-hour, favoring my side. It felt as though a rib had been cracked under the excessive pressure. It stabbed like a needle when I twisted, slowly getting up.

I was a long time getting back to the cottage, how long I don't rightly know. Finally I was at the back door, then on the low porch steps. Stepping into the kitchen I collapsed on the linoleum.

"Hey Hank!" I called weakly. "Hank! Come 'ere!"

There was no answer. I got to my hands and knees, crawled toward the living room. Fire was crackling in the fireplace. The appetizing odor of fried bacon lingered in the low beamed room. And there was the sweet fragrance of something else in the rustic chamber that bothered me for a couple of minutes. Then I had it. Rosemary! But how did it get here?

"Come in, frien'," said a soft, mealy voice from the shadows beside the rock fireplace. "Come in an' join the pahty. An' don't reach fo' yo' gun, frien'. You're covered with two barrels, both loaded with buckshot. Ah wouldn't like to have to shoot yo' too."

"Too?" I blurted, for this wasn't Hank's stop-go phlegmy voice. "What's the big idea of—"

"Kindly ca'm yo'se'f," said the big fellow, stepping out into the dancing light, kicking Hank's sprawling foot out of the way. "Theah's nothin' to git 'cited 'bout. Ah ate a spell back, but ah'm hangry agin. These hills is *so* tirin'. Ah think ah need mo' food. Yo'all was maghty kind to bring some."

I snapped a quick take of the set-up. My past forced confinement with shady citizens gave me character howdy seconds fast.

This young gunsel, as indicated by his deceptively apologetic voice, was from swamp country, probably Louisiana or Florida. He held the rusty, double-barreled shotgun loosely but ready for instant mayhem. He was about twenty-eight, six-foot-plus, beefy under dirty, torn denim dungarees and jacket. It was hard to see his eyes, deep sunk in the high cheekboned, straw-stubbled face, under a mop of sun-streaked brown hair. His head, oddly, appeared too small for his hulking, wedge-shaped body.

Then I noticed his feet. One flat, broken arched muddy oxford, the other a side-turned, heavier boot, hockey club style. From them my eyes traveled to my helper, lying on the floor, his long head towards the fireplace hearth. Firelight glinted on a large reflecting pool of blood, wide under his sweatered armpit.

"Yo' don't seem much talk'tive, frien'," said my unwelcome visitor. "Ah'll have to bothah yo' to turn 'roun'. Hands ovah yo' head, please. Ovah theah, 'gainst the wall. Yo' gun is fah too heavy fo' yo' to carry."

I did as ordered. It was suicide, I saw plainly enough, to do otherwise. Six Foot—as I had mentally tabbed this ape—deftly removed my automatic. Then he frisked me with quick, jerky fingers. He overlooked the clips and loose rounds in his zeal to uncover something more with a trigger.

"Now yo' can turn 'roun'," he said,

sticking my honed Colt under his rope belt, tearing the sleazy black sateen shirt underneath. 'Ah'm very sorry to intrude, but it seems yo've bin expectin' this little ol' boy. Ah di'n't quite git yo' in that sand slide. Yo' is pretty much alone up heah, ah see—outside a' him." He jerked his hottentot head toward Hank's still figure on the floor.

"Not entirely," I said resignedly, still sizing up my antagonist. "The sheriff is at the highway cut, bottling it up. You can't make it south or north. The east is impassable due to the heavy, icy sweep of the forking river."

"Yo' don' say!" exclaimed Six Foot, seeing a piece of rope near my suitcase, and helping himself. "Mah luck was held, yas suh. Ah've hit the jackpot, Ah di'n't know yo' was in the sheriff's pahty. In that case ah'll have to tie yo' up. Turn roun' agin, please."

I turned. As he jerked my wrists fast behind my back, his elbow prodded my side. My broken rib gave me sharp jets of pain. I gritted my teeth and inwardly swore at my stupidity.

"Now yo' kindly sit in that theah chair, where ah can see yo' from the kitchen. Ah'm goin' to eat now. Yo' is tho'tful."

So I sat there, in the doorway, passive outside, boiling inside. I sat there until dawn broke, while Six Foot helped himself to choice morsels that I had selected for myself and Hank.

The thought of Hank Tindel made me glance guardedly around. It was full daylight now and I could see the raw effects of a shotgun blast at close quarters. Young Hank wouldn't have to puzzle over life's problems any more. The ragged, bloody hole under his heart gave proof of that.

Sunlight was lacing in through the east windows when Six Foot clumped through the litter he'd made on the kitchen floor. He took hold of the chair back and dragged me into the middle of the living room. Navajo scatter rugs behind the chair legs skidded on the waxed oxblood planking.

"Well, frien'," said my captor, sucking yellowed buckeye teeth, "ah've bin thinkin'." He considered me like a pensive goon, standing spraddle-legged nearby, exuding a grubby, unwashed smell. He jiggled the gun in the crook of his muscled right arm where the sleeve of the cheap garment was too tight. "Yo' is goin' ta git me outa heah. It was mos' consid'rate fo' yo' to come. Ah made yo' helpah tell me 'bout yo' work, 'bout bein' a sign paintah. So yo' is goin' to lettah yo' bo'ds as yo' go down rivah. That right?"

"Right," I said, inwardly fuming, for denial was useless. No doubt Hank had talked his well intentioned gibberish when faced by a prodding, deadly weapon such as teetered in front of me now.

"Thank yo'."

SIX FOOT shifted his gangling weight, leaned over and helped himself to a crumpled pack of cigarettes that were sticking half out the side pocket of Hank's dirty khaki pants. He wiped off the spot of thickening blood with his sleeve, helped himself to a fag, pocketed the remainder. He hobbled to the mantel without effort, the club foot bothering him but little. He stripped a wood splinter from the wood box and lighted his smoke.

"Now," he said, cotton mouthed, exhaling, "we might's well undahtake ouah depahtyuh. Make usea oppo'tun'ties, ah say. So, frien', ah'm yo' new assistant. Ah'll he'p yo' lettah yo' bo'ds, then leave the country heah'bouts. Yo' know, ah've always had a strong desiah to be a sign paintah."

"Then let's go," I said, seeing no need of prolonging the present torture. "Nobody's getting anywhere this way."

"Ah admiah yo' good sense," Six Foot said, nodding "Ah'll untie yo' han's so's yo' can go 'bout yo' trade. Ah've looked ovah this heah automatic. Ah'm suah glad to git it. Ah've always wanted one. Ah'll have it right handy to use on yo' though, frien', cause ah'm leavin' the shotgun heah, as a remindah of mah visit. The shotgun would be too suggestive to undah sheriffs if they should happen by while we all's paintin'."

"You're too generous," I said, getting to my feet. "The kid's body there should be quite sufficient. Won't you feel undressed without your pepperbox?"

"Heh! Heh!" grunted the young fugitive. "A man a' spirit. Much aftah mah own hea't, as it were. It appeahs yo' bin 'roun'."

"A little," I said. "In time one learns to stay on the right side of the law."

"Sho, frien'. Theah's 'vantages an' dis-'vantages. But now let us go fo'th undah

the nose a' the bloodhoun's. Be careful how yo' move. I'm goin' to watch teachah very close indeed."

"See that you do," I shot over my shoulder as bonds loosened and fell away. "Do you mind if I change to coveralls? I like to work comfortable."

"Go right ahaid," agreed Six Foot. "Yo-'all's 'fo'ded me much wanted food and sheltah. The favah is returned."

"Thanks," I said, picking up the paint daubed work togs, untying my boots to slip them off. With tennis shoes possibly I would have a better chance of survival. It was now each man for himself, with no holds barred. This guy was velvet covered nitro and wouldn't take much jarring. In spite of myself I was very skeptical of the outcome.

I GOT into the old truck and Six Foot slid in beside me. My .45 in his hammy fist was no consolation. He sat half-turned toward me, big knees touching the dash. His gray-green eyes—I could see them now—watched my every move like those slitted orbs of an Everglades water moccasin.

The antiquated Chevvie growled, then started with a bang. I tooled the heavily loaded truck down to the river road. Quart paint cans, stacked in a five-gallon bucket, banged around behind us, as we bumped down the graveled lane. We passed the Eaton's Bar colony of newer cottages. Six Foot never turned his unkempt round head to either side as we rattled through. Then we drew up at the first of my two billboards, set back off the road some ten yards uphill and across the road from a swanky cafe.

"First we put up the ladders," I explained uselessly, as I killed the engine, got out, started dragging the extensions. "Then we add the other equipment. It all has to be carried over to the board. Come. I'll show you."

"Now yo's jukin'," said Six Foot, glancing warily, for the first time, down the road. "Jus' carry on thataway an' yo'll keep yo' li'l ol' toes wigglin'."

It took about a half hour to haul the equipment through the slippery green grass into the field beside the road. There is a regular routine, I might point out, through which a bulletin painter goes, when setting up to work.

Sometimes a pictorial or letter man uses side ladders, hangs folding platform hooks on the high rungs, then lays a working platform from one to the other of the steel supports. But in this case I was using ladders merely to get up aloft.

From the top edge of the board I hung my two two-foot hooks. These in turn supported pulleys and rope tackle. Tackle hooks in turn held a triangular iron frame, through which was placed the ends of the platform extension plank. On the plank went an orange crate holding the cans of brightly colored bulletin paint. Beside the box was placed a bucket full of outline and filler fitches, these latter being durable brushes soaking in paint thinner.

I had to do the installation mostly by myself because Six Foot knew nothing about rigging a pulley rope so the working platform could be raised or lowered on the face of the billboard, yet be safe.

There is quite a trick in the way a pulley rope is brought down to the triangle frame hook, slipped under the top supporting V and twisted with a double hitch out and up the hook point. The pull of the rope tightens and wedges itself, providing the twisting hitch has been made correctly.

The wrong twist deceivingly binds the rope for a time. Some damned devil in the hemp waits for the moment when the sign mechanic is completely absorbed in his work and off guard. Then the hitch slips as if it was greased, the rope goes zipping up and through the wooden pulley. The working platform takes a sudden nose-dive and mister sign man, along with his paint box and brushes, heads earthward under full gravity pull. More than one painter has taken the plunge, and the higher up he happens to be the worse it pays off.

I HAD to be careful as I rigged the ropes and hitched over the hooks. Six Foot watched me fix my end, then his. His slitted, snaky eyes never left me as I unrolled the perforated wrapping paper pattern, pounced on the letter outline with a bag of powdered blue chalk. I felt his steady, steely gaze as I selected a cutter, snapped it clear of skulch, then opened a can of Chinese Red.

I started outlining the letter "I" of the two-by-eight-foot word "INSURE." Some South Bay optimist evidently thought that

there was money up the Sutro and was advertising accordingly.

"Better come over on this end," I said to my unwelcome assistant, where he stood on the right-hand ladder. "I'll outline and you fill in. Take one of those wide brushes in the bucket and shake out the juice. Filling in is an easier job to start with."

"Suits me, frien'."

Six Foot backed down the ladder, crossed the grassy ground beneath me. Then he came clumping up the left ladder rungs, shaking the whole board. My steady letter outline went ragged but I couldn't say a word.

I raised my brush off the tin in the jarring sway, as Six Foot warily stepped out on the grill-like platform. It was some sixteen inches wide and fourteen feet long and made of limber, laminated ash. It sagged under the combined weight of my hundred-eighty and his two hundred plus.

Six Foot braced himself with his dirty left paw on the whited board face, smudging it. He shuffled sideways, reached the brush bucket. Transferring my .45 to his left hand, he finally found a three-inch filler with his right. Then he backed away a little and shook it vigorously. Dirty soup spattered all over me and my board. But did Brush Conway say a word? Not me not then, you can depend on that.

I noticed that Six Foot didn't get too close to me as I finished the "S" and started on the "U." He looked at the can of red paint in my hand, as I stood outlining, started to move over, then changed his mind.

"Got any mo'e a' that color, frien'?" he asked. "We both don' hafta work outa the same can, do we 'uns?"

"No," I said. "You might as well have your own mix."

I got an empty tomato can from a corner of the crate and poured some of my color into it. Six Foot backed away toward the steadier ladder behind him as I put the can on the plank, then went about my work. The young fugitive was taking no chances of having to use both hands at the same time.

AS I edged to the right, he began filling in. He didn't know how to use a brush, I saw at once. The red pigment dripped down the blocked out tin below us, ran back into the handle of his brush. It smeared his hand and he wiped it on his jacket. He swore once when he tipped the can and paint drizzled down over his tight dungarees.

A few minutes later I happened to look past Six Foot, down the road past him. A green car was coming up the river road. A chill ran up my spine and hair on my neck stood up.

"Don't get excited," I said, trying to control my brush hand, "but I think this bus coming up the pike belongs to Undersheriff Ratliff. No doubt he's breakfast-minded and is going to feed his gut."

But inside I wasn't so sure. Maybe the guy was coming up to check on me. Seeing I was working instead of hunting, he'd come over and, under the circumstances, pull a *faux pas*. Anything might happen. Maybe Six Foot was collected enough outside, but inside—

It was Ratliff all right. His short, chunky figure got out of the sedan, some two hundred yards away. He started toward the beanery, stopped, swung around and gave us the eye. He sized up the board, my assistant and myself. Then he turned back and went in through the swing door.

I heaved a sigh of relief that came from down deep. I didn't care any more for this Ratliff than I did for Sheriff Winters, or for this coyote on the board with me, for that matter. But I was working on the side of the law, wasn't I? The law mattered more than minor grievances on either side of it.

I went on outlining. Six Foot slyly waited to see if the sheriff's stooge was going to come over. Observing that Ratliff was more interested in his stomach, Six Foot turned and continued his own sloppy fill-in.

Work went on. I lowered the board three feet, after the word "INSURE" had been finished, by adjusting the rope, first at my end, then near the ladder opposite.

I was cinching the rope when Ratliff came out of the café and stopped to watch us again, meanwhile picking his teeth. After a couple of minutes he finally walked over to his car, got in, and swung it around and went on back, downriver.

Six Foot looked at me, paint brush dropping red, like gore. "It's a good thing that li'l ol' guy di'n't come ovah," he said mean-

ingly in his mealy voice. "Don't he know youah helpah a'tall?"

"Some of these deputies are pretty dumb," I said, as I thinned my color with a little turps. "I don't think they ever noticed the kid who helped me."

Six Foot nodded. "That's the way ah figu'ed it," he agreed. "If he knew yo' helpah, he woulda come ovah. That woulda bin bad all roun'. Ah'd hadta used this heah gat, ah would."

"Yeah," I said, my skin creeping. "Sure."

We finished the middle left of the board, a plain cream base. I started to lower the platform still more, to finish up the bottom left, then decided against it. Instead, I pulled the ash plank high again, shifted the hooks more right, to work down from the top.

This time, as I quickly adjusted the pulley rope, on Six Foot's end, I decided to make a change. I knew full well that old Winters or his understudies couldn't lift a finger to help me now.

"Give you free reign for three days without hindrance," Winters had said, hadn't he? *Okay, Conway,* I said to myself. *It's your reign now and strictly up to you. Handle it with kid gloves, sonny. You know the consequence if you pull a square-head boner. . . .*

I was beyond the point when a fellow hesitates to take a chance. The set-up called for one. So, putting thought into action, I made a change. I was either going to kill myself or put a good solid crimp in the operations of this transplanted swamp adder.

Deliberately, crouching over the triple-stretched rope and lower pulley, I adjusted the special hitch the wrong way. I pulled the rope under the top of the triangular frame, up and over the outwardly extending hook, but not locking it in a regular reverse under and over hitch by the pull of the relayed rope. It was hand wedged.

Any kind of a sudden jerk would now wrench the inch strand loose. The whole platform and everything on it would go tumbling down the released end. As the working plank was a good twenty feet off the ground, such a move as I'd made would ordinarily be considered plain, hundred-proof suicide.

I backed carefully but businesslike toward my secure end. I knew full well that if Six Foot's loop gave way, I'd go tumbling, too, unless I made a lucky grab for the zipping rope as it flipp-flupped from bottom pulley to top and back again.

Proceeding with the pattern, I laid out another pounce with smaller words. I chalked in an arrow, pointing down to where the insurance man's signature would later be scripted in.

"Here," I said, finding it hard to control my trembling knees. "These sub lines are to be in black. After we get them filled in I'd like to have something to eat. That deputy with his big *derriere* reminded me I didn't have any breakfast. Okay by you?"

"No lunch, frien'," Six Foot said, giving me a smirk and level look. "When we finish this heah bo'd, we all's goin' straight down the road an' no stoppin'. Yo' can eat latah, frien', if yo' watch yo' step. If yo' don', yo' won't need no co'n pone an' grits, or side a po'k, none evah."

I glanced at the Colt in his damned gobbed hand. My cocked Match Target, which I'd kept so well-oiled and been so careful with, was now a mess of smeared red and cream paint. The sight of it burned me up and touched off a spark. The spark was just what I needed to make me jump.

I jumped, as if I had lost my balance. I made it almost too good. I stumbled against the paint slick billboard, staggered back, balanced precariously on the grill-like plank as it swung out and back. Six Foot swayed too, catching his balance I'd thrown him off of. The sudden wrenching motion, with our combined out-size four hundred pounds behind it, was enough to set things moving.

They moved.

The pulley rope at Six Foot's end let go with a snap. I'll have to give the guy credit. His reflexes were super. In a flash he realized that this release was no accident. He snapped up the .45 and fired full at my teetering chest.

As in a standstill of time, I noticed the knuckles not paint smeared whiten under tension. The 230-grain copper-clad bullet tugged at the loose belt of my coveralls, under my left arm. Smokeless powder burned into my face in the deafening roar.

Six Foot, as I had suspected, didn't know the personality of the automatic any more than he knew how to paint. Any punk who'd been in the army could have told him

that he should never clutch a .45's stock so tightly when firing. *Hold it loose and relaxed,* he should have known. Then, in the powerful recoil, he wouldn't have shot below and to the left of his target, as is invariably the case when the grip is strangled.

It all happened in a flash, faster than mere words can tell it. Six Foot tumbled against the board, grabbed for the whipping rope, clawed for the leaning ladder farther away. The paint-heavy box followed after. I tried to leap over to the zinging rope but missed completely.

Due to the sloping ground, Six Foot lit in the long, slippery grass and scooted toward the road on his back. I landed on one leg, whirled and sprawled flat, too, sliding after. The platform plank rasped free of the secure iron support and banged down, showering me with paint and dirty skulch. One of the heavy-leaded cans cracked into one leg, knocking it senseless. My head got a glancing blow from the whipping ash plank.

Six Foot rolled like an alligator as he slid, brought up the Colt and fired again. The slug tore into the flesh of my left shoulder with the wham of a baseball bat. By now my feet were near Six Foot's head. Dizzily I rolled sideways, felt my right hand slap into a pancaked can, into goo the consistency of honey.

My frantic fingers closed around the mess and I heaved it. Six Foot saw it coming and tried to duck. He fired wild as he ducked straight into the flying gob. It caught him dead center. The thick green bulletin color smeared his face like a bilious egg.

I spun quickly on my thigh and rump, grabbed for the gun and missed. I slipped, grunting; on the messy grass, trying to connect again. Then I forgot about the weapon and concentrated on this killer who was trying to wipe his snaky eyes free of the sticky, blinding mix.

Still lying on my side I tried a cramped right hook to the jaw. I merely sloughed the air. There was another roar in my face, again a hot stinging of powder but no shocking slug tore into my anatomy.

I couldn't use my fists at all, I realized suddenly. There was no necessary space, no solid footing. I'd have to resort to science, and fast. Some cell in my brain told me to use the edges of my hands, a la Judo.

There are nerves in a hombre's body, came the telegraphed message, *that can be paralyzed if you know where to connect. And you know, Brush old boy.*

Having knocked around a little in assorted gutters, I caught the reminding tip hot out of the idea popper. In desperation, I managed to raise to my knees.

I connected.

Backhand chop across the Adam's-apple, with full body weight behind it. Each side of the neck under the ears. Under the forearm near the wrist.

My Colt went spinning.

Six Foot managed to weave to his knees, too. His club foot seemed to help on the grassy slope like a bracing wedge. He swung a Sunday punch, coming up in a long, whistling arc. I ducked sideways and slid closer, sliding downhill.

Needles in my side were stabbing. There was a burning iron in the skin of my shoulder. Some demon was pounding an anvil in my head. Grunting and wheezing, I slid farther down, in under his guard, inside the powerful flailing arms.

Then I scissored my knees, whammed a right-hand back chop to his left kidney with all my strength. Six Foot's clawing fingers were headed for my eyes when I ducked again, cut back-handed to his right side.

Done with enough vicious abandon a whizzing rabbit chop to the lowest rib will cripple a man's coordinating nerve system, ruin his insides, bring about slow death. Right now I was concerned only with the cripple department.

THE iron flowed out of Six Foot as if I had drained his veins of blood. He sagged limply, fell over on his side in the slimy grass. He lay there, gripping his left side, trying to stifle the moan that bubbled to his Emerald Green lips.

I crawled away from him then, finally staggered to my feet. A little sensation was coming back into my paralyzed leg. I circled, stumbling and slipping, finally found my Match Target. With my handkerchief I wiped off most of the paint. Then I exchanged the half-spent magazine for the fully loaded one in my pocket, and swung on Six Foot's hulk.

"Come on, louse," I said, still panting from weakness and pain. For emphasis I

kicked him in his mucky reception room. "Your try for three killings didn't quite jell. Whatever it is, you should really stick to your trade, gunsel. The way you look now should prove you shouldn't mess around in messes. On your feet pronto or I'll burn you right here. Scramola, killer!"

Then for emphasis and to vent a little of my pent-up feelings, I sliced one leg of his dungarees where they were too tight anyway. My little old Colt could still place her thunder and lightning down the groove, in spite of a dirty nose.

I WAS about to prod Six Foot into some sort of life with another denim-ripping slug when a car's worn brakes shrieked on the road nearby. Tires came to a skidding, gravel-throwing halt. Undersheriff Ratliff leaped out, right hand stabbing inside under the left armpit of his brown leather coat.

"So you got him!" he yelped in his clipped, metallic voice, a wide grin on his good-natured, weathered face. "Boy! Will Winters be glad to see this squirt get what he deserves! I knew you were up to something, Coway, seeing you painting when you should have been hitting the trail. I hung around in the cypress down yonder. My hunch was right."

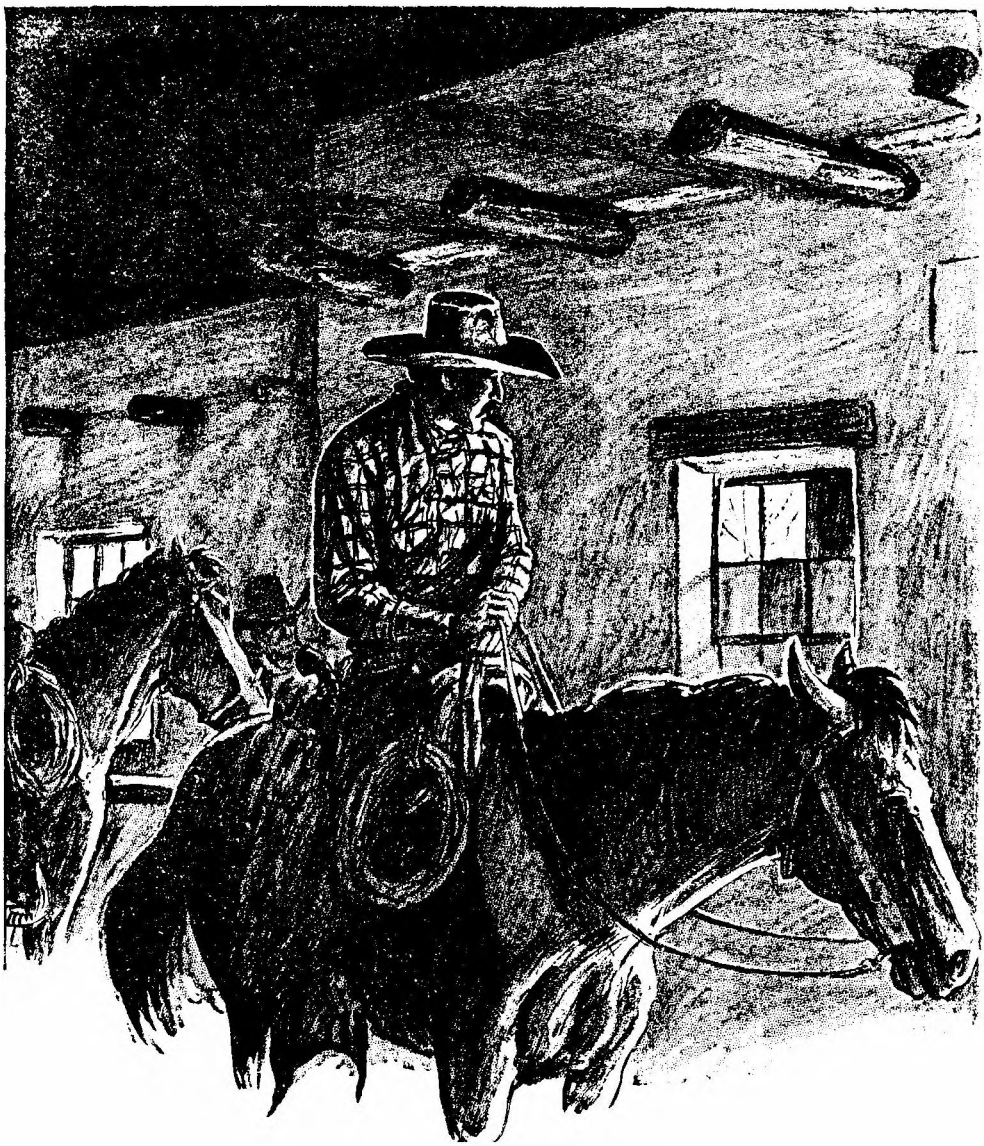
"Yah-yah," I said disgustedly, all of a sudden feeling downright weak and useless. "Just take this jail bait off my hands and be on your way. Better send up the coroner 'cause my helper got killed. At the 4-Pines cottage. Tell you about it later. Right now I'm hungry and worn out and still have work to do. Interruptions are always so damned annoying."

"Okay, Conway, okay," said Ratliff. "Mighty sorry about the boy. Go over to the café, if you don't need first aid first, and have a jumbo rib steak with all the fixin's. Go the limit. I'll pay the check. I understand how you feel. I'm going to see you get full credit. Old Moose is really a right guy, down underneath. Don't let him, or us for that matter, bother you. We have to buck crime all day long and we get sort of callous."

"Oh, sure," I said, starting off rather weakly toward the café. "I can see your point, well enough. But if you'll excuse me, I'll try that steak and a few cups of jamoke. Maybe some victuals will ease my headache and stop this broken rib from gnashing its teeth. So long."

"So long," returned Ratliff absently. His brown eyes, hard now, regarding his prisoner as he jerked out a pair of jingling handcuffs, meanwhile covering him with a stubby Terrier.

A Gun Debt



By WALT COBURN

I

IKE POE reined his horse up at the hitchrack in front of the Longhorn Saloon at Three Trails and leaning a little forward with his hands on the saddle horn, he listened to the wild ruckus that had broken loose inside.

His horse was streaked with the white salt marks of dried sweat, leg weary, head drooped, and only something of vital importance would hold up a cowhand like Ike Poe from caring for a horse that had packed him.

Traces of weariness showed on the man as well as his saddle horse. The sagging

GATHERS INTEREST

Ike Poe and the Giant, Colorado—Two Names That Conjured Up Tales of Sinister Trails, of Swashbuckling Adventure and Finally—of Heroic Legend

droop of the rawboned shoulders, when his long back lost its ramrod stiffness. Fatigue etched deep in the weathered skin at the corners of his deep-set eyes and where a drooping black mustache hid the hard-bitten corners of his thin-lipped mouth. Marks of hunger and thirst and loss of sleep hollowed the sweat-stained, dust-powdered skin under the high cheekbones to accentuate the long, lean wolfish line of his jaw. And near-exhaustion turned his weathered skin a blackish, gray color like old cracked leather. And from this hawk-beaked, lean, gray mask of weariness burned a pair of

bloodshot eyes that were as cold and bright and hard as splinters of steel.

There in the eyes of Ike Poe, deepest and sunken in black sockets under craggy, black brows, could be read the reason why such a cowman would postpone the watering and feeding of the horse that had packed him a long, grueling distance. They were the cruel, bleak eyes of a killer.

Six-foot Ike Poe rode a long stirrup. And there was a deceptive looseness about his rawboned build that belied the tenseness of rawhide muscles and tautness of nerves that were thin, steel wires. He could move swiftly and without a lost motion. And he was fast and deadly with a gun.

Right now Ike Poe took the role of spectator. Listener. With more than normal interest in the glitter of his gray eyes, more than idle curiosity in the sideways tilt of his head as he listened to the sounds of the ruckus inside.

It was night. Moonlight shed across the wide, dusty street of the tough little New Mexico cow town called Three Trails. And the inside of the saloon with its wild, loud free-for-all fighting was lighted by the big, swinging kerosene lamps. And from where Ike Poe sat his horse he could see in above the swinging half-doors and watch the men who battled and cursed and fought and shouted their defiance or snarled out their hatred. Grunted or groaned or screamed out their mortal pain.

Ike Poe's slitted eyes found every man inside that smoke-laden lamplight. As if searching for a face he wanted to find. And when he failed to find what he sought, he relaxed a little and his eyes lost something of their intense glitter and under the drooping, black mustache, his hard, thin-lipped mouth spread in a faint grin. He gave himself over to a momentary, amused enjoyment of that wild ruckus. Though he had witnessed countless such free-for-all fights and taken his own part in more than a few, he took an unusual enjoyment from this particular fight.

It was one-sided. Decidedly one-sided. There were probably a score tough men in there. Cowhands, bullwhackers, mule skinners, tinhorn gamblers, frontier men of all kinds. Milling around in a tangled, wild confusion. The big, red-faced, pot-gutted saloon keeper behind his own bar, a bung-starter, wooden mallet gripped in a beefy fist, the only non-combatant in the house.

Every other man in there seemed individually bent on the annihilation, the dragging down and tromping underfoot of the biggest, wildest, mightiest, two-fisted man Ike Poe had ever seen.

This giant of a man stood almost seven feet tall in his moccasins. A giant in dirt-glazed buckskins. With a wild mane and beard of fiery red hair that was coarse and wiry. A jutting nose that flowed blood into the red whiskers. A pair of eyes as hard, bright green as bottle glass. And from the red-bearded mouth came a mighty, roaring bellow of defiance. In a pair of huge hands was gripped a big, heavy barroom chair. And he lifted the chair as if it had no weight and his powerful arms swung it like a flail and it came up and flailed downward and sideways in a swift, sweeping motion that felled any man in its swinging path.

"Come on, ye spalpeens!" bellowed the red-maned giant. And the crash of the heavy chair punctuated the fearless challenge. "Come and git it, ye scuts!"

There was something untamed, unbeaten, wild and splendid and a little terrifying there in the bellowing roar. And because there was no real hatred there, no cold-blooded craving to kill or maim, no murder lust in the mighty challenge, it was all the more fearsome. And the big, blood-spattered giant in hard, worn buckskins stood with his great back against the wall so that no coward could get at him from behind, and he roared his battle cry and fought with the joy of battle firing his blood and shining greenly in his eyes. Discounting the odds. Without fear. And those who came within the radius of his mighty flailing reach went down with cracked skulls or broken bones and lay there senseless or crawled away out of reach with the fight gone out of them. And half a dozen of these luckless combatants lay sprawled at his moccasined feet where he stood on wide-spread, massive legs that bulged the dirty-fringed buckskin pants.

His battle cry as wild now as a banshee wail. And the men nearest were stepping back onto the feet of the packed crowd behind them and were shoved roughly forward into the flailing reach of the heavy

chair that sent them sprawling and left them maimed in its wild, savage wake.

One-sided as it appeared at first sight, the battle was going to the red-maned buckskinned giant and his banshee howl had the keening note of victory in it.

A MAN came crawling out through the swinging half-doors. On all fours and head lowered and blood spilling from his mouth and smashed nose. And behind him staggered another, reeling like he was drunk, bloody and whipped and the fight licked out of them, and Ike Poe grinned faintly as he saw them get away in the dark shadows, skulking, gone to lick their wounds of defeat.

Then Ike Poe stiffened a little. His slitted, gray eyes narrowed. One of that milling pack of sweating, cursing men was skulking at the back edge of the crowd. He had a long-barreled six-shooter in his hand and there was something sinister and cowardly furtive in the way he crouched in behind the milling pack and peered over them and through their broken pack when an opening came and then closed too quickly. The skulker was a buckskin man. Small and wiry and dirty-looking. His long hair drab colored and stringy and greasy with sweat and dirt and his buckskins glazed with it. A dirty, black-nailed thumb on the gun hammer and a clawlike forefinger crooked through the trigger guard. Crouching and dodging and skulking at the back edge of the milling pack, pale eyes bloodshot in a face that was bearded almost to the eyes with dirty, drab-colored whiskers. Watching for a murderer's pot-shot at the battling, red-maned buckskin giant. . . . The only man in the saloon with a drawn gun.

Ike Poe slid his long-barreled six-shooter from its holster and was out of his saddle and around the end of the hitchrack and in through the swinging half-doors. Tall, rawboned, quick moving. Spurs jingling faintly. The fringes of his leather chaps lifting and falling with each quick, short step of his high-heeled boots.

His left hand reached out and caught the dirty, long hair of the buckskin skulker. Yanking the man up straight from his crouch and lifting him and twisting him around. Ike Poe's thumb was on his gun hammer. Another second and he would have gut-shot the would-be murderer.

"Save the stinkin' coyote!" bellowed the red-maned buckskin giant. "Don't kill it!"

Ike Poe had to act with split-second speed. Without thinking. The wiry, little buckskin skulker's gun was cocked and pointed at him. Ike Poe's long-barreled six-shooter came down on the man's wrist. The heavy Colt gun, cocked and ready to shoot, exploded as the trigger finger tightened. The explosion kicked the gun loose from the paralyzed hand. The lead slug tore a splintered furrow in the rough, pine-board saloon floor. The gun explosion sounded cannon-loud in the eardrums of the milling men and it froze them where they stood.

The man would have ducked and run. But Ike Poe's gun barrel came down with another swift, clubbing blow that traveled no more than a foot to crash down with a dull, sickening thud on the dirt and sweat-matted head. The little buckskin skulker went down and lay there.

THE heavy explosion of that gun changed the temper of the pack. From a cursing, shouting, wild melee into a silent, frozen, sinister wall of men. Men with drawn guns and knives. Their eyes, bloodshot from whiskey and the fire of fighting lust, now chilled and tempered by something ugly and far more deadly. And those eyes turned from the buckskin giant to stare, narrowed and cold, at this stranger who had horned in.

Ike Poe stood facing them. Tall, rawboned, gray-faced. And they were looking into the bleakest, coldest eyes they had ever seen. Eyes that chilled their guts. The eyes of a killer.

Then the red-bearded, red-maned, blood-spattered buckskin giant tossed aside what was left of the splintered, heavy barroom armchair. He came over the pile of men who lay around in front of him, shoved the crowd apart with long, powerful arms and mighty hands, and he stood towering head and shoulders above the crowd, and his green eyes looked down into the bleak, gray eyes of Ike Poe and the red-bearded lips flattened back to bare, big white teeth.

"Oscar Wendall, the Coyote." The giant's moccasined foot pushed the dirty,

bearded face on the floor, "wouldn't have missed. The cowardly little scut's a dead shot. I'm beholden to ye, mister, for my life. And such as that misspent life might be, I place a certain value on it. Ye'll find the debt paid in its own coin one day. For despite the damned, malignin' ugly talk that's swept the country like a prairie fire, Brian Boru the Red, called Colorado, is a man of honor who pays off all debts, good or evil, in their own coin."

He wiped the sweat and blood from the palm of a mighty hand onto the tight, buckskin thigh and held it out.

Ike Poe still had his gun gripped in his right hand. And he made no move to shove the long-barreled six-shooter into its holster to take a grip of a hand offered in friendship and gratitude.

"I am Ike Poe." He spoke in a flat-toned voice that matched the bleakness of his eyes.

As if that name explained his refusal to shake hands. And that seemed sufficient explanation for his unfriendly lack of manners.

Because the red-bearded buckskin giant gave him a long, searching look and the proffered hand was withdrawn.

"You are Ike Poe." The big voice subdued to a barely audible tone. "And I am Colorado."

The crowd backed away. Silent. Awed. And for tough, hard men, they seemed almost fearful out of their silent respect for these two men.

Two men whose names were becoming legendary in the West. And the mention of either name could conjure up, as if by ugly black magic, the wild and confused and conflicting tales of their sinister travels. Tales that were grim and fearsome and dreadful and spattered with blood.

To behold and witness a meeting of these two fabulous men was something to carry away and remember and tell about and retell and each repetition of the tale would gather a more vivid blood-splashed coloring. For that is the way of such tales and from incidents like this are fashioned great legends to build up the man into heroic stature.

Now if these two men, Ike Poe and Colorado, were to tangle in death grips—by the eternal hell, this crowd would witness a bloody chapter, the final chapter, if the Devil in Hell had his way, to the sagas of the deadly Ike Poe and the bellowing, swashbuckling, red-maned buckskin giant Colorado.

For this was Ike Poe, Texan and trail boss, who had lost one of the biggest trail herds ever to come out of Texas. He had lost his long-horned cattle, his remuda of saddle horses, his mules and wagons, to his own crew of cowhands when they mutinied and turned cattle rustlers. They had shot Ike Poe and left him for dead, unburied and prey for varmints and buzzards, somewhere along the Chisholm Trail. But Ike Poe had been too tough to kill. He had come back to live. And when he was strong enough to lift a gun and fork a saddle he had dedicated his life to the killing of those men. And he was hunting them down.

One by one. Killing them where he found them. And the name of Ike Poe became a sinister legend. And this man was that Ike Poe.

The buckskin giant. Who claimed the name of Brian Boru. And thereby claimed the title of the Last of the Irish Kings. Mountain man, plainsman, scout, whose name was spoken along with the names of Jim Bridger, Bill Williams, Liver Eatin' Johnson, the great Kit Carson their mentor, brought up and self-reared according to the grim rules of the survival of the fittest. Kit Carson, Bowie, Daniel Boone, such fabulous men their buckskin gods to pattern from. And each of those buckskin men was mighty, each sufficient unto himself and blazing his own trail in the wilderness. Heroic. Making names to go down in history. Hard-drinking, hard-fighting men. Fearless of heart. Living within the strict code of their own making. Their honor as great and high as the eternally snow-capped peaks of the very mountains they had found in an unexplored wilderness. That honor as vast and great in scope as the northern prairies, the sun-baked deserts of the Southwest. Honor as clean as the wind and as blazing as the unclouded sun. The honor of the free-masonry of their buckskin men was a thing to fight for and defend with their last gasping breath, the last drop of their hot red blood.

And there was an ugly, black stain on the name of the buckskin giant called Colorado.

Colorado, in the Mexican tongue, meaning Red.

For it was claimed that this giant buckskin man with the flaming red beard and red mane worn shoulder length, had turned traitor to the code of the buckskin mountain men and plainsmen. It was claimed that the red-maned giant Colorado had piloted a great wagon train across the plains and delivered them to the Indians for wholesale massacre. That the war-painted Indians had massacred the men and older women and children and taken the younger and more comely women into captivity far worse than death. And the buckskin giant Colorado had done that. Thus forever damning himself in the eyes of his own buckskin kind. And now the giant Colorado was an outcast. Condemned by his own tough breed. But allowed to live that this black disgrace might eat into his vitals like cancer. Poison him slowly. So they had cast him out and forbade him at their campfires. And up yonder in the mountains where the piñons grow, at Taos, where the great Kit Carson had dwelt, Colorado was outcast. For him the cork was never pulled on a jug of that fiery and potent liquor so aptly named Taos Lightning. The buckskin giant Colorado was a renegade and outcast. And this man who stood here was that Colorado.

FOR a long moment these two legendary figures stood there. Looking straight and deep into the eyes of each other. Probing deep and deeper. Neither man revealing what he found in the other man's innermost heart. While the crowd pushed back, watched and waited.

Then the giant Colorado stooped. He picked up the senseless, limp body of the buckskin man lying on the floor. With one hand and an effortless heave, he flung the unconscious man up on the bar, knocking over empty glasses and half-filled bottles of booze. From an Indian-made scabbard the buckskin giant took a bone-handled Bowie knife. Its blade shining, the cutting edge whetted, honed and stropped to razor's edge.

The crowd thought they were about to witness the brutal, wanton scalping of a man not yet dead and they stirred uneasily and a muttering of sound came from their tight throats. Beads of sweat broke out on the face of the saloon keeper behind his pine-board bar and his whiskey-red color took on a mottled look.

Colorado's white teeth showed in a mirthless grin and his eyes were glass green. Then ignoring the pack, he took the unconscious man by his long dirty hair and tilted the head so that the left side of the dirty-bearded face lay upward on the bar. And the Bowie knife in his other hand slid down through the beard and along the skin beneath and the knife blade flipped off the shaved dirty whiskers to show the skin beneath shaved clean. Colorado was giving the little buckskin skulker a clean dry shave.

"Oscar Wendall—The Coyote." Colorado's voice was a low growling rumble.

The Coyote's pale eyes blinked open. Undoubtedly the inside of his skull was pounding with pain from the blow of Ike Poe's gun barrel. But the pain of this dry shave he was getting was sharper, clearer defined, more excruciating. He let out a snarling whimper and would have twisted free but the giant grip on his long dirty hair held his head down.

" 'Tis costin' ye nary a penny, ye stinkin' scut. If ye kin recollect so much as the small word av a prayer from your evil childhood, offer it up to the Goda'mighty ye've cursed, that it's yer filthy whiskers and not yer dirty throat I'm whittlin' at. Ruinin' the clean edge av a true steel blade. Move and the knife might slip and ye'd wake up in Hell with yer throat cut from ear to ear. 'Tis a scar I'm lookin' for, my little stinkin' Weasel. Bad cess to ye if I come upon it beneath this unwashed crop of stinkin' whiskers. 'Tis a man with a knife scar along his jaw that I'm roamin' the earth till I find. May the Devil in his Hell have pity on such a knife-scarred man. He'll git none here on earth from Colorado. And he'll beg and he'll slobber and he'll die slow and when he dies he'll stand there in all his depraved black sins to be judged by the emigrant men and women and children, aye and the innocent babes in their mithers' arms that died massacred at Green Meadow. . . . May the Devil in Hell have mercy on your soul, Coyote, if I come upon such a knife scar while I'm barberin' ye now."

The green eyes were glittering. The giant's low, deep growl, an ominous thunder as if the wrath of God himself was

voiced here in this Longhorn Saloon at Three Trails in New Mexico. Within sight of Fort Sumner.

One side of the dirty, bearded face dry-shaved until the skin was hairless and smooth, and a jaundiced yellowish color. But there was no scar revealed there.

Colorado wiped the whetted, shining steel blade on his buckskin thigh and shoved the Bowie knife into its Indian-made scabbard. He used nothing but the one-handed grip on the Coyote's dirty, long hair to drag him bodily off the bar and stand him on his moccasined feet. Then he turned the half-shaved man towards the half-doors and kicked him. It was a brutal, powerful kick. It sent the man hurtling out through the swinging half-doors and into the outside night.

"To drown my disappointment." Colorado reached for a partly filled bottle of whiskey and the neck of it went between his big, white teeth and the raw, potent corn whiskey went down the bearded throat in great gulps. And Colorado threw the emptied bottle crashing against the far adobe wall.

"I've got a horse to water and feed," Ike Poe spoke his reply to the invitation in the green eyes to drink with him.

"I'll go along, Ike Poe."

"Come along then, Colorado."

There was no sign outside of the man named Oscar Wendall, better known as the Coyote.

Not until Ike Poe had watered and fed and left his horse stabled and the two men stood in the black shadows of the barn and they were under the stars, did either man break the silence. Then it was Colorado who spoke and his voice was barely audible in the night.

"There is an old and unwritten law of the sea. That a sea captain goes down with his ship. Even though his sailin' ship be scuttled by a mutinous crew."

A long silence. While the buckskin giant whittled shreds from a tobacco plug and tamped the shredded tobacco into the blackened briar bowl of a pipe.

"Since I first heard it as a lad," said Colorado, "I've never held with it. A trail boss loses his trail herd. . . . I've heard it told that Ike Poe shot himself when he woke up drunk and his trail herd gone. . . . That he was found, more dead than alive, by a beautiful girl, who persuaded him to live for her sake—" It was a half-question. And it hung there unanswered in the night.

"I've heard a story," Ike Poe broke that black silence. "It tells how Colorado got drunk on Taos lightnin'. That he was dead drunk when he come awake. And the Green Meadow massacre was on. That he sneaked away durin' the thick of the shootin' and arrows and spears and the scalpin'. That he saved his own big, red-maned buckskin hide. That there was a white girl in that emigrant wagon train who had fought him off when this Colorado tried to make love to her. That this white girl was taken prisoner by them Injuns. That she's still alive. But her mind is a blank. That she is beautiful and has golden hair that touches the ground. Eyes as blue as the sky after a rain. That she is the mother of this Colorado's children. Married to him accordin' to the Injun marriage ceremony. And that she is kept hidden up in the old cliff dwellings."

"A man's ears," said Colorado's low-toned voice, "if they listen long enough, kin hear almost anything. He hears many lies. He hears a little of the truth. But what he hears mostly is a misshapen product of the lies and the truth. . . . A man hears such a tale that concerns himself. It leaves him wide open and without his guard up or a weapon for his self-defense. Only a fool would voice an answer to the tale they've built up from their lies and that small bit of God's truth. . . . And whatever men may call us, nobody was ever heard to brand either Colorado or Ike Poe for a fool."

Ike Poe's teeth were bared in a flat-lipped grin. "You talk well."

"An Irishman's birthright. A sea captain has his ship. A trail boss has his trail herd of longhorns. A buckskin scout has his wagon train. On many a black night I have envied the quick and easy and heroic end of that sea captain who went down with his mutiny-scuttled sailin' ship."

"Amen to that." Ike Poe spoke quietly.

But even in the black shadows the bitterness seeped through in the quiet tone of the Texas drawl.

There sounded the hollow cluck of a jug cork pulled. The jug thrust into Ike Poe's hands in the dark.

"Taos lightnin'—the proper stuff to pledge such a renegade pair of outcasts as Colorado and Ike Poe. Though you refuse my hand."

"I've never shaken hands with any man."

"But you'll pledge this in Taos lightnin', Ike Poe?"

"I'm drinkin' from your jug, Colorado."

There was the ghost of a chuckle in the red-bearded throat as the fiery whiskey gurgled down the gullet of Ike Poe.

II

THEY made a strange pair. Fearsome and dangerous. A good pair to let alone. A hard pair to beat at any game they took a notion to tackle.

"Workin' together"—the Taos lightning was mellowing the giant Colorado, loosening his tongue, setting fire to his tremendous dreams—"workin' together, we kin hamstring the world."

But the potent booze that put the red-headed buckskin man in an expansive mood, seemed to shrivel Ike Poe's heart. Making him silent and suspicious and wary. His eyes got colder.

"I travel a lone trail," he said.

"And how many of that trail herd outfit that hamstrung you," Colorado's voice lowered, "have you tracked down and killed?"

"Not a one." Ike Poe's steel-gray eyes stared into the narrowed, glass-green eyes of the buckskin man.

"I could have answered my own question." There was a cunning glint in the green eyes. "So much for the legend built up around Ike Poe."

Suspicion glittered in the steel-gray eyes of the black-haired Texan.

"The trail was cold when I picked it up. And damned well covered. I'd come on what looked like a sign. I'd follow it. And it would lead me into a bushwhacker trap.

"And I'd shoot my way out of it. But when I took a look at the carcasses of the men I'd killed, they weren't the men I was after. You guessed that?"

"I don't guess at it. I know the facts."

"Then you know too damned much." Ike Poe's voice was deadly quiet. "You better keep talkin'."

Ike Poe's hand was near the ivory butt of his six-shooter. The buckskin giant's green eyes looked at the Texan's gun hand. The red-bearded grin died slowly.

"Don't," he said, and he measured each word, "ever pull that gun on me. Because I'll make you use it."

"Then spread your cards face up."

"Scoutin' is my trade. I kin read sign where you'd never find it. I will tell you this. Now. Without me, you'll never locate your stolen cattle. You'll never get within gun range of the men who stole your trail herd."

"That's big talk, Colorado."

"It comes from a big man, Ike Poe."

"From a buckskin man. There was a buckskin man mixed up in that cattle rustlin'."

"That there was. Without that buckskin man to pilot 'em, they couldn't have pointed a big trail herd over the skyline and made a trail outfit disappear like a black conjurer's trick and nary a track to show where three thousand head of longhorns, a remuda of horses, a chuck wagon and bed wagon and a crew of twelve men had passed. It took a buskskin man to pilot your trail outfit into oblivion, Ike Poe. And when you heard the story about how Colorado had guided a big emigrant wagon train into the massacre trap at Green Meadows, you picked Colorado for the renegade buckskin scout who turned the conjurer's trick. Eh, Ike Poe?"

"Keep talkin', Colorado. You ain't told me a damn' thing."

"Tell me where and how you lost your trail herd."

"I lost it here at Three Trails. Here where three cattle trails branch out. From the campground on the Pecos. There's the Goodnight and Loving Trail north to Pueblo, Colorado. East of it and also north to Cheyenne is Goodnight Trail to Albany and on to Cheyenne. The third trail is the Jim Stinson Trail that points west to Magdalena and on to Arizona Territory. I camped here on the Pecos. Cattle and horses and mules and men needed a week's lay-over. Every man in the outfit went to town that last night. Slipped away from camp. While I was on night guard.

Three men on guard with me slipped away. I was ridin' alone around the bedded herd that was layin' good on the bedground. I suspected somethin' was wrong. I quit the herd and rode to camp. Not a man there. I headed for town. And rode into a bushwhacker gun trap. They shot me off my horse. Shot the hell out of me. And left me for dead.

"Days, nights later I came alive. I was in a 'dobe cabin somewhere. Weak from the blood I'd lost. Too badly wounded to move. I was well cared for. Nursed back to life. I gave my promise never to tell anybody where I'd bin hid-out or who took care of me. It was months before I could ride away from there. I went in the night. But I didn't go alone. I was blindfolded. My horse was led. We traveled all night, and by the dark of the moon. At daybreak the blindfold was taken off. When I looked around I knew I was at the campground on the Pecos. A few miles from this cow town of Three Trails. I was right back where I'd bin bushwhacked.

"The trail should have bin easy to pick up, even after six months. But it wasn't. Nobody knew Ike Poe had bin shot. My trail herd had traveled on. I was told the trail herd had gone up the Goodnight and Loving Trail to Pueblo. That it had gone west over the Jim Stinson Trail. Others said the trail herd had bin pointed up the Goodnight Trail to Albany and on to Cheyenne—no two men told the same story. I had to make my own decision.

"I did. I've gone up each of them three trails. Alone. Each trail was set with a bushwhacker trap. I had to kill the bushwhackers. When I took a look at the men I had to kill, not a one of 'em was a man who had bin in my trail outfit crew of cowhands.

"I never found any of those cattle in my P road iron. Never found a horse or mule that wore my POE brand. Never come face to face with a one of my cowhands. That trail outfit had disappeared like the big earth had opened up and swallowed that trail outfit and closed over it.

"Only one thing did all the stories of that vanished trail herd have in common. They all hinted that there was a buckskin scout who piloted the trail herd away from Three Trails.

"A few months before I lost my trail herd, an emigrant wagon train had bin wiped out, massacred by Injuns at Green Meadow, not a hundred miles from Three Trails. The blame for the massacre was put on a buckskin scout called Colorado; I was left to add up my own tally. They hinted that it was Colorado who had pointed my trail herd over the skyline and into the Big Nowhere."

Ike Poe and Colorado had taken the jug of Taos lightning to a brushy place along the bank of the Pecos and they squatted there on their hunkers with it and their tobacco.

"You didn't own that trail herd," said Colorado. "It was a pool herd. You was hired to trail them cattle to market. You furnished your own horses and mules and wagons and men. That's why they say that Ike Poe never actually lost his trail herd. That he was in cahoots with the cattle rustlers and that the men Ike Poe has bin killin' are the Texans that owned them cattle in the pool herd. Texans that's picked up Ike Poe's trail and that Ike Poe did the bushwhackin'. That he has bin killin' off the Texans that have had the guts to come after their stolen cattle. The cow country claims that Ike Poe is the head of the cattle rustlers. That Ike Poe is a cattle rustler and a bushwhacker killer."

"You believe that, Colorado?"

"I'll spread my cards now," Colorado evaded the question. "I piloted that emigrant wagon train. Through the Mormon country in Utah. Through dangerous Injun country where there was war parties of Utes and Piutes, Comanches, on the prowl. And never a real skirmish. I camped that wagon train on good feed and plenty water at Green Meadow. Though they had planned on travelin' on much further, they liked Green Meadow. They voted to stay there a week or two, until they could make up their minds.

"I left that wagon train camped there. Told 'em I'd be back in a week or ten days. To see if they needed my services as scout and wagon train pilot. Or if they decided to colonize Green Meadow. But before I left I warned 'em all that it was wild country. Claimed by cattlemen. And the cattlemen's claim to the free range was disputed by cattle rustlers who preyed like a

wolf pack on the trail herds goin' north or west. And I left that warnin' with 'em when I rode away.

"I was trail weary. Lonesome for the company of mountain men. I needed to git drunk on Taos lightnin'. In the drink' company of my own kind. Roar songs and swap lies and match myself in rasslin' and fightin' and target shootin'. I found such company at Santa Fe and Taos. I got roarin' drunk for a week. Then slung a couple of jugs across my saddle and I headed back for Green Meadow.

"What I found at Green Meadow in a dawn-streaked blood-red is a picture that will stay with me 'til I'm dead. Dead, scalped men. Older women with gray scalps lifted.

"Kids with their brains smashed out against the iron rims of the wagon wheels and the wagons burnt. Till you've seen the burnt, blood-spattered remnants of such massacre carnage, mister, you've seen nothin' of the handiwork of human beings gone locoed for the taste of blood. And by the eternal hell that is the hellish thing that's put the bloody black brand on the name of Colorado."

"I've heard tell of Injun massacres," said Ike Poe.

"Injun massacre, hell! There wasn't an Injun within fifty miles of Green Meadow that night those men and women and children was massacred and their covered wagons looted, then burnt. That was the work of white men. White men stripped to breech clouts and their white hides smeared with black axle grease and Injun war paint. I got there at daybreak. I read the sign. There wasn't a dozen arrows or spears there. The killin' had bin done with guns. And Injuns can't shoot as straight as those bullet holes in the dead emigrants showed. The Green Meadow Massacre was white men's murder work. And they was led by a buckskin man. The same buckskin man that pointed your trail herd into Nowhere."

The silence that fell upon the two men was heavy. Each man had told his story. The jug on the ground between them remained untouched.

Ike Poe stood accused by the cow country of being a cattle rustler and a cold-blooded killer.

Colorado was accused of leading the emigrant wagon train into the massacre at Green Meadow. Further accused of having taken everything of value from the covered wagons before they were burned. Still more blackly accused of having taken a sixteen-year-old girl prisoner and the girl demented from horror of that night's terrible carnage.

Now Ike Poe and Colorado had each told his own story. Each man had left out something.

Ike Poe would not reveal the identity of whoever had found him, bullet riddled and more dead than alive, and had carefully and slowly nursed him back to life and strength.

Colorado left out any mention of a fair-haired sixteen-year-old girl he had taken prisoner and married according to Indian custom and that she had borne him children. Perhaps those evasions weighted the silence between them. Neither man reached for the jug. They must drink together now from that jug of Taos lightning. Or not at all.

IKE POE was silent now. His heart shriveled with bitterness and suspicion. And yet he believed every word spoken by the giant red-maned, red-bearded buckskin man. It was what Colorado left unsaid that now made Ike Poe wary.

Even as it was Ike Poe's refusal to tell who had nursed him back to life that sobered Colorado and caused him to shrink back into the black shadow where his huge bulk melted into the darkness. So that he no longer made a target for the deadly gun of Ike Poe.

"You could be in cahoots with the renegade white men who massacred those emigrants at Green Meadow." Colorado's voice was low toned in the darkness. "They're cattle rustlers. Outlaws. Renegades. They are holed-up back in the mountains. A hidden valley. Called Superstition Valley. To get there you cross the Black Mesa. Black lava rock. Even the shod hoofs of horses and mules leave no track on the black lava mesa. The only trail down into Superstition Valley is guarded day and night. That's where your trail outfit went. That's where the renegades who massacred the emigrants at Green Meadow took their loot. That's where you could have been hidden out and nursed back to life. That's

where you live if you are the renegade they have branded Ike Poe."

Ike Poe let the silence fall. Then his voice broke it, flat toned.

"Superstition Valley. That's where Colorado would live if he led that emigrant wagon train into a massacre trap at Green Meadow."

"And if Ike Poe is in cahoots with the buckskin man called Colorado," said the red-maned giant, "then we're the dirtiest pair of murderin' blackguards unhung. And that, by the eternal hell, is what they're sayin' this minute in the Longhorn Saloon at Three Trails. Thanks to your savin' my big hide when Coyote Oscar Wendall was goin' to put a lead slug through this tough red-headed skull of the last av the Irish Kings!"

The giant buckskin man was on his feet now. Bulking huge against the star-filled sky.

"I owe ye my life, man. If ye can't take my word, then use your gun. Ye'll be takin' what I owe ye."

Ike Poe got slowly to his feet. He stood there, stiff-backed, on long-bowed widespread legs.

"There's no gun in my hand," he said.

"We're outcasts, Ike Poe. You and me. It needed only what happened tonight to link us together in their damned malignin' talk. Unlucky or lucky for the pair of us, we're forced now into a pardnership. From here on it's got to be Ike Poe and Colorado, back to back. Against any and all odds. Fate pulled our trails together. This night at Three Trails.

"Though it's not the first time I've cut the sign of Ike Poe."

"What do you mean?"

"The night you rode into a moonlit ambush on the Goodnight Trail to Albany. Recollect there was a warnin' shot fired. It gave you a fightin' chance for your life. And did you ever stop to figure out that your gun alone could not have accounted for six dead men that lay on the ground when the shootin' was over and done with?"

"I've wondered about——"

"The gun trap somebody sprung for you on the Goodnight and Loving Trail to Pueblo—six of 'em dead on the ground. The gun of Ike Poe killed no more than four men that time."

"Then it was you that——"

"And when they laid for Ike Poe along the Jim Stinson Trail," Colorado went on, "a shot sprung the trap before you rode into it. From then on it was a two-three hour bushwhacker fight. You found men dead that your gun never shot. Did ye think your guardian angel packed a saddle carbine or a long rifle to side Ike Poe?"

"Then it's my life that's in debt to you."

"I had my own personal selfish reasons. A dead Ike Poe was of no value to me. I've bushed up many a night near your lone campfire. Hunger gnawin' with rat teeth inside my empty belly while you cooked and ate your grub. I've shivered and shook in wet buckskins when I'd trailed you across a swollen river and you dried out beside a roarin' campfire. I've bin on your trail since you took up the cold trail of your cattle rustlers. Not once has that trail of yours crossed the Black Mesa. If you knew the location of the Superstition Valley, you shunned it like a plague hole."

"Why," Ike Poe's voice was hardly more than a harsh whisper, "why was you on my trail?"

"Like as not, if your story is true, your hide is bullet-scarred. But there is a scar along your jaw. Like a knife scar. It stands out like a thin white bone or gristle. You could have worn buckskins. The man I want is a buckskin man with such a scar along his face."

Ike Poe ran his hand along the scar. It ridged his lean tanned jaw like white bone. He grinned faintly.

"I got that from a Mexican's knife. At a baile one night down in Texas when I was about eighteen. I danced too often with some Mexican vaquero's best gal."

"That knowledge would have saved me some black thoughts. But e'en so, I was bound to trail you. To prove, one way or the other, if you were the renegade they branded you."

"You're satisfied now—which way?"

"You'd be dead a long time," said Colorado, "if you had made one wrong mistake. But you didn't. Those bushwhackers came from Superstition Valley. Not from Texas. Unless they had voted to kill their renegade leader, you were the man you claim to be. Ike Poe. Trail boss. Who lost his trail herd and nearly lost his life to the cattle rustlers

from Superstition Valley. You stand clear of that charge in my book."

"Anything else stickin' in your big red craw?" asked Ike Poe.

"There is." The red-maned buckskin giant spoke quietly. "And when that time comes, it may be that you and I will face each other and only one of us will be left alive. Or perhaps the both of us will be dead."

"We'd better settle it here and now," said Ike Poe flatly.

"No. You've got a black stain to wipe off the name of Ike Poe. Mine is a bloody blot on the buckskins of Colorado. Together we stand a fighting chance against big odds. We need each other. God willing, and in spite of the Devil, we'll get that job done together. When it is over with and if we are both alive, then you and I will fight it out. Man to man. The world will be too small to hold Ike Poe and Colorado."

"What is it that you're holdin' out on me?"

"I left something out at the end of my tale," said Colorado. "Even as you left out a chapter of your story."

Again a heavy black silence. Now it was a tense sort of hush. Taut and dangerous. Ike Poe, his hand on his ivory-handled six-shooter. The giant buckskin Colorado gripping the bone handle of a whetted Bowie knife that he could draw and throw with the speed and deadly accuracy of a fast gun slinger. That black silence now was a deadly thing. Black and tense and ugly as sin.

Then from somewhere in the starlit night came a sound of a song. Sweet and liquid clear as the song of a nightingale. A young woman's voice that sang to the stars. Sweet and clear and plaintive and sad.

"There's a land that is fairer than this—"

IKE POE pulled in his breath with an audible sound. Then the voice of the giant buckskin man, a breathless whisper.

"As your mother believed in a God in Heaven, man. Hold your peace."

"Amen to that." Ike Poe spoke in the same hushed tone.

It was too late for either man to get away from there, even if one of them had shown any willingness to leave the other there. Because the singer came into sight.

THE moon was rising and she walked into the moonlit clearing on the river bank and for a long moment she stood there. A tall, slender, fair-haired girl in her late teens. Her tawny yellow hair parted in the middle and plaited in two heavy braids that fell below her slim waist. A girl in shabby buckskins. Divided skirt and a fringed blouse. Bare-legged. Her feet in moccasins. Her skin was tanned. Accentuating the golden color of her hair.

"Lassie." The giant buckskin man breathed it aloud. "Only living survivor of the Green Meadow massacre. She remembers nothing of it. The horror of it blanked it from her mind. I pray to God she never gets back her memory."

"Amen to that, again."

"She's the one who found you. And nursed you back to life, then?"

"Yes. I'd kill any man who harmed her in any way."

"So would I."

"Meanin' that's why you aim to kill me when we don't need each other's help any longer?"

"She's the reason why. She's a woman grown. But her mind is that of a child. God's pity. But she can never be the wife of any man."

"That's why you'd kill me?"

"That's why, Ike Poe."

"I could kill you for that," said Ike Poe.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You think you're the only man on earth with decency in his heart? Yours the only pair of eyes can see that Lassie is a child in heart and mind. You think I'd say or do a thing to harm that child?"

Then you understand—I didn't know. I was gone on the trail of the renegades who'd done the massacre. Huntin' for a buckskin man with a fresh knife scar along his jaw. I was gone a long time. I had to leave her with a Mexican family that live down the Pecos a few miles from here. When I got back they told me the story. How Lassie had found a dying man and they'd fetched that dying man to their little ranch and Lassie had nursed the man back to life and he was almost strong enough to handle a gun and ride a horse and his name was Ike Poe.

"I had you blindfolded. Led your horse that black night. Your hands tied to the

saddle horn. I led you all over the country and back. To where you'd bin bushwacked. Cut your hands loose from the saddle horn. And rode away. I was gone by the time you'd got your blindfold off. And found yourself alone. I've dogged your trail ever since."

"Afraid I'd find Lassie."

"Afraid you'd find Lassie."

"I've never shaken any man's hand," said Ike Poe. "But if you want my handshake on it. There's two of us now to fight for that child. And no need to kill each other." Ike Poe held out his hand.

Colorado shoved the jug into Ike Poe's hand. With a soft chuckle.

"I'd hate to bust that record of yours. No need to shake hands. Taos lightnin' will pledge it. And likker is more satisfyin' than shakin' hands."

The girl still stood there, watching the moonlit river. Her song gone. She was listening to the whispering river. Unaware of the two men hidden back in the black shadows. Watching her and the picture she made there in the moonlight. Men with love for her in their hearts. A love that must be forever kept guarded and hidden. A hopeless kind of love.

Then Colorado corked the jug. A worried look in his eyes that was hidden in the darkness.

"I've had her hidden with the Ortegas. Fetched her along when I came to Three Trails. Left her at the Mexican's ranch down the river. They've let her wander off. I'll take her there. You might as well come along. They'll be glad to see you again. Tough old Paco and his good fat wife Rosa. Lolita and the younger kids. Lolita's burned a thousand candles for you. If you believe in prayers, then thank the prayers of Lolita Ortega that you're alive. Lighted candles and prayers and——"

Colorado's whisper broke off. His huge hand gripped Ike Poe's shoulder. In the darkness the Texan saw the long shadow of the pointing buckskin arm. Then Ike Poe saw it. A faint shadow skulking in the dark brush along the river. Not far from where the girl stood facing the river.

"Stay here."

Then the buckskin giant was gone. Without a sound. Ike Poe, his hand on his gun, eyes squinted, watched the skulking moving blot in the shadow of the brush. Seconds lengthened into minutes. Minutes that seemed like hours. The skulking shadow was gone. Then from down the river came the sound of shod hoofs going into the distance.

"Got away. Damn his stinkin' Coyote hide. I don't like it, Poe. If that sneakin' Oscar Wendall ever locates the Lassie."

III

LASSIE. She had no other name. Colorado said he was afraid to tell her what her real name was for fear it would jog something in her mind that would bring back the horrible memories of the Green Meadow massacre. And that would be hell.

The big red-maned buckskin man had found her among the dead and scalped. She had been clubbed over the head and her tawny hair was blood-matted. She looked as dead as the mutilated corpses of the others. Only she hadn't been scalped. And gripped in her hands was a Bowie knife. And Colorado was bending over her to lift her and carry her to the grave he'd dug for her when her eyes came open and stared at him, wild and shining, and she'd screamed. A thin brittle scream that matched the wild look in her staring eyes. It had scared the hell out of him. And then he had to manhandle her to get the knife away. Her slashing at him and screaming. He got the Bowie knife twisted from her hand and her screams subsided and she found words to describe him, only she didn't recognize him but in her crazed mind Colorado was the buckskin man who had led the massacre. And she had knifed that buckskin man when he laid hands on her. Grabbed the Bowie knife from the buckskin man's scabbard and slashed his face with it. And the fury of her knife attack had run him off with his beard red with blood.

"She didn't know me, Poe. She thought it was blood that dyed my hair and whiskers red. She'd slashed and cut that buckskin man's face till his own blood dyed his beard."

Then she'd swooned, fainted, passed out cold. And Colorado had shoved the blood-stained Bowie knife in his belt and he'd carried her away from there. To Paco Ortega's ranch below Three Trails on the

Pecos. Leaving the dead to bury the dead, there at Green Meadow.

And it was God's mercy, Colorado told Ike Poe, that her mind was a blank when the girl came alive. And that was three years ago—and this nineteen-year-old Lassie had never regained her memory. She lived her waking hours back in her childhood. But sometimes at night she would have wild nightmares and she'd scream and somebody had to be close by in case she ever came out of one of those horrible nightmares with the memory of the massacre vivid and terrifyingly clear in her mind. Or there was the off-chance that something would jog loose that block in her memory even during her waking hours. So there was seldom an hour out of the twenty-four that one of the Ortegas wasn't somewhere near Lassie. But she had a habit of slipping away from them. As a child slips away from older folks. Like tonight. Without a black rebozo hiding the golden glory of her hair. For the eyes of such men as the Coyote, Oscar Wendall to see.

Though Three Rivers and nearby Fort Sumner had seen that golden hair when Lassie had upon a few occasions taken off the black rebozo and with the shawl off her tawny golden hair had been revealed. And fierce tough-grizzled Paco Ortega and his fat senora Rosa had lied gallantly and sinfully to claim the girl as their own relative —a cousin. Paco's matched or whetted knife showing naked steel to deal with any man who called him a liar. Rosa mothering the golden-haired senorita as her own, a fat black hen with a yellow chick from some golden pheasant brood. And Lolita who sang and danced at the Cantina at Three Trails, somewhere near to draw the attention of men from Lassie to herself. Pretending jealousy of her blonde "cousin." Calling Lassie a palomino with pale water for blood in her veins and Lolita knew all the countless tricks of attracting men—and how to keep them at arm's length when those men became too amorous to be held off by words. Lolita's thin-bladed dagger could cut and stab.

So Lassie had been protected. So far—

"That damned Coyote."

"You should have let me kill him at the Longhorn," said Ike Poe.

Colorado shook his red mane. "Coyote Oscar Wendall knows somethin' about the Green Meadow massacre. Even if he don't wear a knife scar put there by Lassie. He left his Coyote tracks there at Green Meadow. And I've kept him alive so that he might, sometime, lead me to the buckskin man with a knife-scarred face. Don't kill the Coyote unless it's your life or his. He's worth more alive than the bounty on his hide."

LASSIE was still standing there when Colorado and Ike Poe walked into the clearing and across it to where she was watching and listening to the river. She greeted Colorado with childish joy. Throwing her arms around his neck. And he lifted her and swung her high and set her down like he'd play with a child. Both of them laughing.

Ike Poe stood there. The color drained from his face to leave the weathered skin an ugly gray and his eyes glittered with jealous hatred for the red-maned buckskin giant. And in his black jealous hatred he recalled the wild rumors how a golden-haired girl was the mother of Colorado's several children. But that was a lie. And it was gone as swiftly as it had come into his jealous heart. And it was only the close familiarity between the red-bearded giant and the grown woman with a child's mentality that stirred the lust to kill the buckskin man. And Ike Poe felt the cold sickness crawl inside his belly to sour the Taos lightning he'd drunk and the gall-bitter taste of it came up into his mouth and he spat it out.

Then Lassie saw him. She twisted away from Colorado and came over to where Ike Poe stood. Timidly. Shy as a small girl.

A little smile playing around her mouth. But with all the ripe beauty of womanhood in her lithe body and her tanned face. The black-fringed dark gray eyes the color of campfire smoke. And then with the shy boldness of some precocious child she stood so close to him that the odor of her golden hair was in his nostrils.

"I remember you. You are my Ike. I made you well. Lolita teases me about my Ike. But when I blew out the candle she lighted to the blue Madre de Dios in the nicho in her room, where she prays for you, Lolita slapped me, she was so angry. Then she cried and she hugged me and cried and

she let me light a candle like hers to the Virgin in the blue dress. You heard the prayers, then, my Ike—and you have come back to us."

She reached out and took Ike Poe's hand and held it in both hers and then she moved his hand to her golden hair.

"Like when you were so sick, you would always like to touch my hair. Remember?"

"I remember." Ike Poe's voice was a harsh-sounding whisper.

As if a man could ever on earth forget. Hair the color of red gold. Soft and heavy and the touch of it cooling the fever that burned his bullet-ripped body and drove away the delirium as bright sun shines through gray sky.

And towering nearby was Colorado, his huge fists clenching and his eyes narrowing to slivers of green glass.

All the Taos lightning ever stilled could never thaw the cold suspicion in the heart and mind of Colorado.

Ike Poe's hand trembled a little as he stroked the golden hair. Lassie smiling like a pleased child.

Above that golden head the eyes of Colorado and Ike Poe met and held. And the pledge they had drunk in Taos lightning was canceled. They were two men in love with the same woman. Two men of violence. The woman a beautiful thing with matured body and the mind of a child. But if ever her memory returned, if Lassie became all woman. Then Ike Poe and Colorado would face one another and only one of them could live on this earth to claim the love of this golden-haired woman. And if her sanity was tortured by the nightmarish horror of the massacre at Green Meadow, then Lassie would need the strength and understanding and love and protection of a strong man.

But Lassie gave them no time to think further. She had them each by a hand and was leading them back down the river to the Ortega ranch.

THEY had gone but a short distance when they were halted by the sound of somebody running. Running breathlessly and crashing headlong through the brush. Ike Poe's gun was in his hand. Colorado's drawn Bowie knife glinted in the moonlight as he lifted it, poised for a swift throw.

A girl in torn Mexican fiesta dress came stumbling into sight. Her high-heeled red slippers in her hand. Heavy black hair, blacker than black, tumbled wildly about a frightened white face with red lips and eyes that were wide and black with fear.

Lolita Ortega, cantina dancer, halted breathlessly. Staring at them. Then a sob choked in her throat. And as if the giant buckskin man and the golden-haired Lassie did not exist, she had eyes for only Ike Poe.

She swayed there as if she were going to faint. Her voice a taut sound that was both laughter and a sob.

"Madre de Dios!" It sounded like a prayer. "Ike!"

All the coldness inside Ike Poe melted. The bitter taste gone from his mouth. And when she came running, stumbling in her haste, bare feet torn and bruised, Ike Poe met her and took her in his arms. And her red lips were warm and clinging against his mouth. Her arms tight around his neck. Her tumbled black hair in his face. Her perfume cloying in his nostrils, heady as strong drink. And he held her close. Forgetting that Colorado and Lassie stood watching.

Nobody who watched would ever have believed that this was their first embrace, their first real kiss. To any watcher it would have been the meeting of a pair of lovers, long separated.

There was a glitter now in the hard glass-green eyes of the red-bearded buckskin giant that was a strange mixture of hatred and relief and a sort of contempt. Hatred against a man like Ike Poe who claimed the love of two beautiful girls of about the same age and same exciting beauty, though one was fair as sunlight and wild roses and the other's a midnight moonlit beauty and dark-petaled as the dusky red rose that still clung in her blue-black tumbled hair. . . . Relief because not even Ike Poe could claim and keep the love of two such women. And Lolita would kill the man she loved before she would give him up to any woman on earth. Contempt because Ike Poe was such a man who would make such ruthless claims in the name of Love and thus defile its decency and his own manhood.

"The Blessed Virgin," Lolita whispered it against Ike Poe's hard-lipped mouth, "has

answered my prayers. She has sent you back to me. Never, never leave me. If you must go, take me with you."

Whispered low. So that only Ike Poe heard. And he had no answer then. Then or later. Only his arms holding her. His mouth giving back her kisses. And it was only later that he had time to wonder how a man could love two women at the same time. Each in a different way. Yet willing to fight to the death for either.

Colorado had taken Lassie away. And Ike Poe and Lolita were alone. Then she let go of him and his arms let her down and they stood there looking into each other's eyes. Then Lolita laughed. A small, soft, husky, gay little laugh with a sob in it. She held onto his arm and lifted a small bare foot that was bruised and the slim bare leg thorn scratched, to put on a red-heeled slipper. Then the other slipper.

"Papa came to the Catina with the news that Colorado was fighting and that Ike Poe had come back and had helped Colorado in the fight. Papa was a little drunk. I quit in the middle of a song. I run home. I think I will find you there. I run all the way. But you not there. And Mamma is crying because Lassie has run away again. So I come. And here you are. Like the answer to many prayers. Many, many candles. One for each day and night. I can count all the candles I burn. I think now I count each candle with a kiss, no?"

Lolita had both red-heeled slippers on. Laughter in her dark eyes. Teasing him. Loving him. Loving him as no other woman on earth could ever love such a man as Ike Poe. Ike Poe, who was not made for love. Ike Poe, cowhand and gunslinger. Ike Poe, killer. A woman had to have fire in her blood to melt the cold steel core in the hate-poisoned heart of such a Texan.

Lolita Ortega had that fire in her blood. And a prayer in her heart. That he had killed men, that he must kill again, only heightened the fierceness of her love and made her prayers the more fervent.

Ike Poe read that in her dark eyes. And it made the blood pulse in his throat. They were well-mated. Ike Poe and Lolita Ortega. Without words they understood each other's thoughts. His hands were on her slim bare shoulders. He bent his head and kissed her. Quietly. Her lips warm with their answer. Sealing a silent vow. They belonged to one another now.

Then he felt her go tense. Her eyes darkened and the laughter was clouded.

"Almost," she whispered fiercely, "almost I forget. Those drunken hombres at Three Trails. They are getting together a drunken mob. There is much wild talk. They swear they are going to hang Colorado and Ike Poe. Before sunrise they will hang you!"

IV

THERE was no law at the little cowtown of Three Trails, New Mexico. A man was his own law. A man stood with his gun in his hand. As Ike Poe now stood. Or with a Bowie knife, if such be his choice of weapons. As the giant buckskin man called Colorado stood. Against any and all odds. Back to back.

There were men with fear in their craven hearts and guts who skulked in the shadows and waited for a cowardly shot at an enemy. As Coyote Oscar Wendall skulked the black shadows along the main street of Three Trails that was not actually a street but a widening of the three cattle trails and the adobe buildings scattered hit and miss and the thick dust lay in the moonlight and blobs of yellow showed the lighted windows of the scattered adobe buildings.

And beyonl the tough wild little cowtown was its boothill graveyard. The end of the trail for the luckless who went down with their guns smoking and their spurs and boots on. Three Trails buried its dead as they fell. With their spurs and boots on and the guns that had failed them in the end.

The mob had gathered there inside the Longhorn Saloon. Swilling down its rotgut booze. The whiskey talk a low mutter that swelled with its drunkenness to an ominous growl. Men with guns. Their mob blood-fired by booze they demanded and drank and threw away the empty bottles and not a drop of it paid for.

"Who the hell knows how to tie a hangman's knot?"

New rope. Rope an inch thick and soft twist. Well-rope. Rope the color of Lassie's fair hair. Taken unpaid for from the mercantile store. New rope, roughly, hastily

yanked from its sacked container and measured off and severed by whetted knife blade.

"Long enough," shouted a drunken voice, "to sling up over the ridge log outside the Longhorn Saloon. Two lengths—damnit, don't short-cut it, you drunk. We gotta do the job right."

"Reckon a inch rope's stout enough. Colorado's bigger'n a skinned mule. When his horse is quirted out from under 'im, man a-mighty, he'll hit the end of that rope like a ton of kickin' wild ox."

"It's Ike Poe I'll enjoy watchin' when he takes the slack outa the rope."

The new ropes coiled and flung down on the stained pine-board bar at the Longhorn Saloon.

"Don't none of you savvy how to tie a hangman's knot?"

The crowd shoving and pushing and tromping each other. Guttling forty-rod booze from the bottle. Cursing and snarling and getting drunker. Eyes bloodshot. Mob lust in them fired by the booze.

"Who's gonna pay fer this likker?" The red-faced saloon man wanted to know.

"Ike Poe an' his pardner Colorado. Who the hell you think is givin' this necktie party, you damned booze peddler?"

"Damnit to hell, can't nobody tie a hangman's knot in them ropes?"

"It takes plenty practice."

The flat-toned voice of Ike Poe cut like a knife through the drunken confusion.

IKE POE stepped in through the swinging half-doors. He stood there, tall and lean and gray-faced, his eyes slivers of glittering steel. The long-barreled six-shooter in his hand seemed to cover every man in the mob that lined up deeply at the long bar.

Those in front were lifting empty hands. Slack-jawed. The whiskey courage souring inside them.

"Ye gutless scuts!"

The bellow of the red-maned buckskin giant called Colorado came from the rear of the saloon. He had come in the back door and shut it behind him and he stood there, towering savagely above the mob. A Bowie knife in one hand, a six-shooter in the other. His slitted green eyes glittering in the tobacco smoke-laden lamplight.

"Human scum!" roared Colorado. "They're a pack av hydrophobia skunks. A lynchin' bee—and nary a one av the thick-skulled scuts with brains enough to tie a knot in a rope. Look at 'em sweatin' out their booze. Can ye pick one from amongst this pack av misbegotten mongrels, Poe?"

Ike Poe's slitted, hard, gray eyes fixed their cold stare on a big long-geared man with a drooping yellow mustache.

"Long time no see you, Tolliver." Ike Poe's voice was toneless.

The man's hands were lifted. "Don't shoot me, Poe! Gimme a chance fer my taw!" His voice a snarling whine.

"Step out, Tolliver. Then use your gun. Or throw it away."

The crowd shoved the lanky Tolliver out. He stood there with the cold sweat glistening on his face and the fear of death in his pale eyes. Slowly, very slowly, his right arm lowered.

"Don't shoot me, Poe." His snarling whine sounded, "I'm throwin' it away."

He slid a long-barreled wooden-handled six-shooter from its holster and dropped it as if it burned his hand. And backed against the bar, hands up.

"Tie a knot in one of the ropes, saloon man," said Ike Poe. "Any kind of a slip knot. Drop it over Tolliver's head."

"Hangman's knot, Poe?" The saloon keeper's hands got busy. There was a mirthless grin on his whiskey-veined beefy face.

He worked fast. Tolliver's hat was slapped off. The noose with the hangman's knot in the new rope, slid down over his sweat-matted dirty yellow head. The lanky legs hinged weakly at the knee joints.

"Help yourself to the free booze, Tolliver," grinned the saloon keeper. "This last 'un is on the house."

He shoved the bar bottle into the man's unsteady hand. Tolliver had to use both hands to lift it to his slack-jawed mouth. When it warmed the cold crawling nausea in his belly he lowered the bottle.

"Lemme talk, Poe!"

"Nobody wants to hear your drunken slobber, Tolliver." Ike Poe's voice was flat-toned. "Choke 'im off, saloon man."

The noose tightened a little. Tolliver's shifty pale eyes slid in their sweaty sockets.

"They got two hangin' ropes cut," Colorado shoved his gun into its holster. His free hand reached out. It grabbed a bearded

man in dirty grease-slick buckskins. The Bowie knife slid along the bearded jaw, peeling off chunks of whiskers and taking little nicks out of the skin. The man would have fought but the dull-back edge of the Bowie knife slid hard across his throat. His eyes rolled with fear. He was drunk. But he was sobering up fast.

There was no knife scar on the crudely shaved side of the long lantern jaw. Colorado flung the buckskin man over across the bar like an empty sack. He lay there on his belly, buckskin legs dangling.

"Fix him up with a rope necktie," said Colorado. "No use in wastin' that purty new rope."

Colorado's voice had a growl in it. His green eyes glittered dangerously.

"You hydrophobia skunks is so hell-bent on a double hangin'. Git at it—or by the eternal hell Colorado and his pardner Ike Poe will turn this Longhorn Saloon into a damned slaughterhouse. You deef? Take them two things outside and hang 'em!"

Colorado's mighty bellow filled the saloon. His Bowie knife glittered in the smoky lamplight.

Ike Poe moved to one side of the swinging half-doors. The mob dragged Tolliver and the half-shaved buckskin man outside. The ropes were thrown up across the long protruding ridge log of the adobe saloon.

Tolliver was whining and begging for a chance to talk his head out of the hangman's noose.

FEAR overrode the dirty buckskin man and his croaking voice was begging Colorado for mercy.

"I ain't the man you want, Colorado. So help me, Gawdamighty! Ask Coyote Oscar Wendall. Make that Coyote tell what he knows about that Green Meadow massacre. Don't hang me, Colorado!"

"You was there, Snake. Don't die with a lie in your mouth. You taken a part in that Green Meadow massacre!"

"They made me go along. I was holed-up in Superstition Valley, gittin' over a Taos lightnin' drunk. They'd a-killed me if I hadn't went along. But I never killed no wimmin' ner kids. Only the men—"

Colorado's green eyes blazed. In the light that came from the saloon the giant red-maned buckskin man strode over to where the man he'd called Snake stood in his greasy buckskins. Colorado yanked something from the man's belt. And held it high for the mob to see.

It was an ugly sinister thing to look at. Half a dozen human scalps, tanned and strung on a buckskin loop. White men's scalps.

"String him up!"

Colorado's voice had a croaking awful sound.

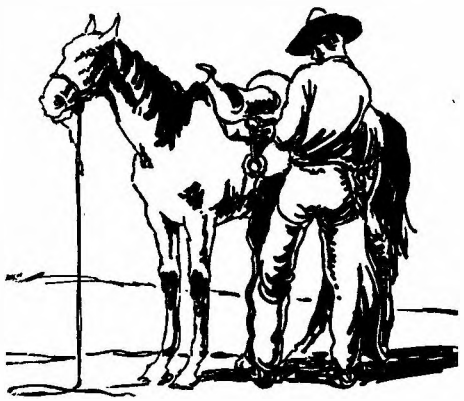
"Where's my outfit, Tolliver?" Ike Poe's flat voice knifed through the muttering of the mob.

"In Superstition Valley, Poe. They sent me to locate you. Don't let 'em hang me. I'll take you there, Poe."

"I kin git there. You're a Texan. Die like one, Tolliver. Hang him!"

The two new yellow ropes tightened.

"Time we got away from here, Poe." Colorado's voice had an ugly sound. They walked away from the mob, and as they went down the wide dusty street and towards the feed barn at the far end, they kept cutting looks into the black shadows and they walked side by side with their guns in their hands.



But nobody stepped from the black shadows of the adobe buildings to block their way. No shots streaked fire from ambush.

Deep back in the black shadows Coyote Oscar Wendall crouched. There was a saddle carbine gripped in his two hands. The palms of his hands clammy with sweat. Sweat that glistened on his half-shaved bearded face. Cold sweat that oozed from every dirty pore to dampen his buckskins with clammy chill. His gun sights lined on the huge bulk of Colorado as the two men

strode past. But Coyote Oscar Wendall lacked the guts to squeeze the trigger of the cocked gun.

Long after Colorado and Ike Poe had saddled fresh horses and ridden away, when the mob had surged and shoved back into the Longhorn Saloon, Coyote Oscar Wendall still crouched there. His pale eyes stared at the motionless hanged men. He stared, shivering in his sweaty buckskins. Then he thumbed down the gun hammer. And like some stinking animal, Coyote Oscar Wendall skulked off into the New Mexico night.

He got his saddled horse and rode off. Headed for Superstition Valley. Coyote Oscar Wendall had news to carry to the renegades there. News to take a tall buckskin man with a yellow beard that hid a long knife scar that ran the length of his jaw.

News of a double hanging. News of the pardnership between Colorado and Ike Poe. News of a girl with golden hair, who sang an old Scotch song:

"There's a land that is fairer than this—"

V

PERHAPS if Coyote Oscar Wendall's horse had not lost a shoe and gone lame, that evil little buckskin man would have gone straight to Superstition Valley. Though he was the bearer of evil tidings and he shrank inside with fear at the thought of taking any kind of bad news to the tall buckskin renegade whose yellow beard hid the knife scar.

Coyote Oscar Wendall had been witness to what had happened to other messengers who fetched bad news to the tall yellow-bearded man who ruled the renegades at Superstition Valley with cold-eyed, quick-triggered, sharp-knifed leadership. And the Coyote had no stomach, no guts for such cruel punishment.

A lame horse gave Coyote Oscar Wendall an excuse for delaying. He was glad for a real excuse to postpone his return to Superstition Valley. He turned back and off the trail and headed for Paco Ortega's horse pasture on the Pecos. He'd steal one of those good horses Paco kept pastured there.

The Coyote was a good horse thief. It was an easy trick to rope one of the horses. Make the change to a fresh horse. He was mounted on one of Paco's top horses when he saw the tall slender girl with the golden hair.

SHE was standing there at the pasture gate. A hackamore in her hand. Tall and slender and her golden hair in two heavy braids.

The Coyote pulled up in the black shadow of the brush. Watching her, as he had watched her earlier in the night when she had come up along the river trail from the Ortega's ranch and stood there watching the river. And the Coyote had been about to approach her then when some strong instinct had warned him off and he'd got away before Colorado had caught him.

That mystery girl. The blonde "Cousin" of the Ortegas. The Palomino Mexican senorita—said to be locoed—said to be the only living survivor of the Green Meadow massacre, found by Colorado and hidden there at Paco Ortega's place and kept under close-herd day and night.

Coyote Oscar Wendall watched. His tobacco-stained teeth bared in an evil grin. He had recognized her earlier in the night. He was certain of her identity now. Though she had matured. And her skin was deep-tanned. And she wasn't wearing the long gingham dress she'd worn when she was with the emigrant wagon train party. She'd worn a big sun bonnet then. Driven one of the teams. Helped with the care of the younger children, when the wagon train camped at nightfall. The Coyote had seen her then on more than one occasion when he skulked in the night's shadows to spy on the wagon train gathering information to take back to the tall yellow-haired, yellow-mustached renegade ruler of Superstition Valley.

The golden-haired girl stood there at the pasture gate with a hackamore in her hands. And whistled. A birdlike liquid whistled song in the moonlight. Like the warble of some night bird. And from a short distance away a horse nickered. And then a gelding came up out of the brush and towards the girl. And muzzled her hair and face and she fed the gelding biscuits. It was a black and white pinto. But no cayuse. Small, but short-coupled and well-muscled and built

like a fast quarter horse. Probably a three-year-old. Raised as a pet by the girl.

She slipped on the hackamore and opened the gate and led the paint pony through and was closing the gate when Coyote Oscar Wendall took a chance and rode out of the brush. And to where she was holding the gate open.

She greeted him with the shy boldness and the smile of a small girl caught doing something forbidden.

"You won't tell Paco or Rosa?" she smiled at him. "Lolita got mad at me because I kissed and hugged Ike. And I said I loved him. And when Ike and Colorado rode away Lolita scolded me. She let me run away. I'm going for a ride. Maybe I'll meet Ike and Colorado. You won't tell on me?"

"I won't tell nobody. What's your name?"

"Lassie. What's your name? You smell like skinned animals."

"Lassie what?"

"Just Lassie. Why do you smell like skinned animals?"

"Because I'm a fur trapper."

"What's your name?"

"They call me the Coyote."

"Coyote. You won't tell Paco or Rosa I went for a ride?"

"I'll take you to Ike Poe and Colorado. Shut the gate and fork your pony, Lassie."

Coyote Oscar Wendall's eyes were crafty. He was taking one hell of a dangerous chance. But it was worth the risk if he could take this girl with him to Superstition Valley. That would more than square him for the bad news he had to take to Buckskin.

It took a while for Oscar Wendall to fully realize this grown young woman had the mind of a child. His cautious questioning finally convinced him. His coyote cunning came into full play now—treat her like a kid. Baby her along. She was talking about wild animals and birds. How she made pets of them. Fed them. And he told her that he wouldn't trap any more animals. He kept her talking as they rode along. He was in a hurry to put a lot of miles behind them before daybreak. But she wouldn't travel fast.

And when they had gone no more than a few miles she pulled up the paint pony she rode bareback as if she'd been born a-horseback.

"I have to go home now."

No coaxing could dissuade her. She was obstinate as some child. Oscar Wendall was in a cold sweat now. He'd made up his mind to take this child-minded beautiful young woman to Superstition Valley. Hand her over to Buckskin. Put in a claim for some reward.

She was turning back when he grabbed the braided horsehair hackamore rope. Fear darkened her eyes. She was staring at him with childish fright when he grabbed her.

Her shrill scream of terror knifed through the night's silence. Coyote Oscar Wendall felt the scream in his guts like a sharp knife. He lost his cunning then. He had to stop that damned screaming. She fought him now with a child's fear and a grown woman's lithe strength. Clawing and tearing at his half-shaved beard and greasy, dirty, long hair. Her wild terrified screams filling the night that flung back its echoes. He clawed for his six-shooter and its long barrel clubbed down on her head with its golden hair now tossed wildly. The girl's screams stopped and she went limp in his grip and slid from the bare back of the paint pony.

Coyote Oscar Wendall was breathing hard and cold sweat drenched him. Her wild clawing had ripped his face and half-blinded him and his pale yellow eyes kept shifting furtively, bloodshot. He was cursing.

She looked dead, there on the ground in the moonlight. Blood oozed from her ripped scalp and stained the golden hair red.

Let them find her dead here on the trail and Colorado would follow the trail of Coyote Oscar Wendall as far and through the hot-hinged gates of hell. Then rope her on the paint pony and take her like that to Superstition Valley. Fetch her there dead, if that's how it had to be. His hands fumbled clumsily at the strap that fastened the coiled rawhide reata on his saddle.

Then he heard the sound of somebody on horseback coming. Panic gripped the Coyote and he got away from there as fast as his stolen horse could carry him. At a run. Looking back across his shoulder, even when he'd covered miles and there was no

sight or sound of Colorado or Ike Poe following him. He had to slow his blowing, sweating horse down to a slow trot. He had to go on now to Superstition Valley. Take the bad news to the tall renegade leader called Buckskin. But he'd leave out any mention of this girl who called herself Lassie—and his miserable failure to take her captive. Oscar Wendall rode on into the night in his sweat-sodden buckskins, sick with a coward's fear.

While miles behind him Lolita Ortega, white-lipped, eyes dark-shadowed by another kind of fear, held the golden-haired Lassie in her arms and her hands sticky with blood as she stroked the bloodstained tawny hair. And Lassie was sobbing and whimpering like some hurt thing and terrible shudders racking her lithe body from head to foot.

Sobbing. Her spoken words incoherent. Horror-stricken. Her mind no longer that of a child. Her blanked-out memory returned. Living again through that hell on earth of the Green Meadow massacre, but remembering also that these last months and few years with the Ortegas. But with a vague memory that meant no more than the feeling of security and being cared for and sheltered and loved by the Mexican family. Remembering the red-bearded, red-maned buckskin giant, remembering a gray-faced man called Ike who had bleak eyes and a gray dark face. And Lolita held her close as she sat there on the ground.

It was a long time before the shuddering quieted and the incoherent sobbing stopped.

"I'm all right now." Her voice toneless. Its music gone.

"You—you remember—things—Lassie?"

"Lassie—Colorado called me that. My father used to call me Lassie sometimes. My name is Jean McGregor. My father was Angus McGregor. It was his wagon train—they weren't Indians. White men, painted like Indians. Shooting—cursing. My father and the other men, when they realized there was no escape, did what they had to do. What the women begged them to do. Death was far better than capture. They died bravely and without fear, praying to God. The men with tears streaming down their faces. It was a horrible thing. The children screaming or whimpering—not understanding.

"Then those painted white men closed in on us. One man in beaded buckskins. He wasn't wearing war paint. He had a yellow mustache. Yellow hair—like mine. The McGregors are fair complexioned. This renegade buckskin man was a McGregor—a second cousin. He had been with the wagon train—in charge of it. Until he quarreled with Colorado. The quarrel concerned the route the wagon train should take. Buckskin McGregor wanted to stop at Green Meadow. Colorado said Green Meadow was dangerous because it was claimed by cattle rustlers.

"Buckskin McGregor and Colorado had quarreled from the start. When my father, Angus McGregor, hired Colorado to pilot the wagon train.

"Buckskin had some kegs of whiskey hidden in his wagon. He bluffed it out when my father discovered it. He said it was trade-whiskey. For the Indians. That he meant to open a saloon. He pulled a gun and threatened to kill my father if the whiskey kegs were smashed. My father gave in to him. Not because he was afraid—because it was put to a vote. All the younger men and some of the older men voted to let Buckskin keep the whiskey. They'd all been sampling it secretly, at night. They said it was good whiskey.

"Like the gambling. Buckskin had cards and dice and at night he ran a gambling game. There was nothing Angus McGregor could do to stop it. They were men. With men's taste for whiskey and gambling. So Buckskin McGregor sold his whiskey by the bottle and won their money.

"The quarrel between Buckskin McGregor and Colorado ended in a terrible fight. The evening the wagon train camped at Green Meadow, I was the cause of it. Colorado came up on us when Buckskin, a little drunk, was trying to make love to me. Colorado could have killed him. Perhaps he would have killed him. But I begged him to let Buckskin go.

"Buckskin McGregor rode away from Green Meadow. My father would have killed him if he stayed. Buckskin said he was coming back for his wagonload of whiskey. I heard him tell that to my father. The way he said it made it sound like a threat. And it turned out to be a terrible threat. Buckskin McGregor came back. A

week later. At daybreak. With those painted white men, shooting and cursing and drunk. That was the Green Meadow massacre.

"Colorado had gone. He told Angus McGregor he'd come back in a week. To pilot the wagon train on to a better, far safer country. If Angus McGregor and the other men decided on taking his, Colorado's advice—

"Colorado came back—I remember seeing his red beard and green eyes. Then everything went black and blood red. And now I remember waking up in an adobe cabin and you were there. And Paco and Rosa. And Colorado. I remember it all now. I'll remember it till I die—"

Her voice faded in a whisper.

"Then it was your cousin, this Buckskin McGregor, you knifed?"

"Yes. When he took hold of me I got his knife. I slashed his face open. That's all I remember. Till I saw Colorado's red beard and his green eyes and heard his voice telling me he loved me and I must live and nobody would ever hurt his Lassie again—to shut my eyes and rest—forget."

"I'll take you home now, Lassie," Lolita said. "Who did this to you?"

"He said they called him the Coyote—"

"Colorado and Ike Poe will take care of that Coyote. They left for Superstition Valley."

But Lassie did not hear her. She had passed out cold.

VI

"THERE is an old saying," Colorado's voice was a low chuckle, "that all things come to him who waits. Eh, Poe?"

Ike Poe's teeth bared in a wolfish grin. He poked Coyote Oscar Wendall in the small of his sweat-sodden buckskin back with the barrel of his six-shooter.

"Mebbe not all things. But this thing will do. You made up that Coyote mind of yours?" He poked the gun muzzle deeper into the soddy buckskin shirt.

"I'll take you into Superstition Valley," Coyote Oscar Wendall croaked.

They had caught him in their trap on the Black Mesa. Colorado said not to kill him, yet. That the Coyote knew a hidden trail into the Superstition Valley. A trail that wouldn't be guarded because only a very few men, buckskin renegades like Snake and the Coyote knew about it.

Oscar Wendall had a desperate need now for all his Coyote cunning. If he could keep Ike Poe from shooting him, keep Colorado from slitting his throat, he'd lead this pair into something they'd wish to hell they'd never got into.

"I'll take you there—gimme your word you won't kill me. That you'll turn me loose when I git you into the Superstition Valley. That's the deal. Take it—or kill me now."

That took all the craven guts he had. The brief seconds of silence that followed brought the cold sweat out of his hide in rivulets.

"It's a deal," said Colorado. "We ain't got all night. But any mistake you make, Coyote, it'll be your last mistake on earth. Take us down there."

Coyote Oscar Wendall's relief sounded in a dry sob. They'd sweated him. Until fear crawled through his guts like maggots. He'd lied about his clawed face. Claimed it was thorny brush that had scratched him. And he'd stuck to the lie. Tell them a hint of the truth and Colorado would scalp him alive.

He said they'd have to leave their horses. Go down off the high black lava mesa into the deep valley afoot. Down a trail that it took a goat to travel. The surest-footed horse in the world couldn't go down it.

That was no lie. It was no marked trail. Ike Poe had to take off his high-heeled boots to get sure footing in his sock feet. The moccasined feet of the Coyote and Colorado gripped each step. More than once going down that treacherous steep slope that was like a cliff, Ike Poe would have fallen to his death far below. But Colorado had roped Ike Poe to his own huge sure-footed bulk with a length of rawhide reata. Like Alpine mountain climbers.

Before they quit the high Black Mesa, Colorado made a small fire of piñon sticks he carried there. The piñon pitch caught fire and burned with a bright flame. While Colorado squatted fanning the blaze with his hat and his green eyes staring far out across the high black lava mesa.

From a distance showed a pinpoint of

bright light. Hardly bigger than a star. Colorado blotted out his signal fire and stood erect.

The Coyote had watched in sweating silence. Breathing heavily.

"That'll fetch the mountain men," Colorado spoke quietly. "It'll fetch every damn' buckskin man within a fifty-mile ride when the signal is relayed. They bin waitin' a long time. Three years. Mountain men from Taos and Santa Fe. Some that still believe in Colorado. Others that's turned thumbs down on me. But they'll all come. As fast as men kin travel. Some of 'em are closer than this Coyote would believe. Mountain men that still want to believe that one of their breed wouldn't lead a wagon train into that Green Meadow massacre. But they'll believe it only when Colorado shows 'em proof. And God willin', I'll have that proof when the sun rises."

"Amen to that," said Ike Poe who was not a man of religion but hoped to learn the meaning of a prayer from a Mexican girl named Lolita.

IKE POE was thinking of his stolen trail herd. Hoping to line his gun sights on the treacherous cattle-rustling cowhands who had shot him and left him for dead and trailed his herd of longhorns into Superstition Valley. There was no prayer in his heart. Only the sworn vow to kill.

Dawn was streaking the sky when they reached the floor of the valley. But down there under the high cliff wall of the Black Mesa the dark shadows of night still clung to the brush and boulders.

"I kep' my end of the deal," croaked Coyote Oscar Wendall. "You keepin' your word, Colorado?"

"Hell, yes."

Colorado had the small buckskin man by the hair. Deftly, swiftly, he tied the Coyote's wrists and ankles and gagged the slavering mouth.

"Somebody might find you before you die, Coyote. Locate you by your stink, anyhow, dead or alive. Let's git along, Poe."

Ike Poe squeezed his bruised aching feet into his tight-fitting high-heeled boots. Reminded of the bare-footed Lolita and her redheeled slippers.

Then he followed as silently as he could behind the crouched, swift-paced moccasin tracks of Colorado who moved without a sound.

Until they heard the sounds of men and in the dim uncertain light of breaking dawn they made out corrals and cabins and horses being corraled and men moving around. The smoke of the breakfast campfire.

About a dozen or sixteen men, altogether. The horse wrangler fetching in his remuda. The cook in his floursack apron lifting dutch-oven lids with a long pothook. Cowhands with tin plates and cups helping themselves to the breakfast grub when the cook hollered "Come an' git it!" Just like any ordinary cow camp. Unless you were looking for something underneath the ordinary. And then you could see it. As the narrowed eyes of Ike Poe and Colorado saw it. A sort of coiled-snake tension.

It was getting daylight enough now to make out their faces. Ike Poe watched, slit-eyed. Crouched, his saddle carbine gripped in both hands. Motionless. His gray face a poker mask.

Poe and Colorado were not more than a hundred yards from the corrals and cabins and the men who squatted around eating breakfast. They had found a spot where the brush and boulders made an ideal hiding place. They could peer out through the brush and watch without being seen. And they were within earshot of most of the talk. Giant boulders all around them furnished a natural fortress. Brush screened them from sight. And they had crawled into a place where no man could ride a horse on top of them.

Ike Poe's eyes glittered and his lips flattened back to bare his white teeth. He had recognized three or four of the tough cowhands who had stolen his trail herd. He had needed tough cowpunchers to help him fetch that big trail herd up through a wild lawless country where cattle rustlers prowled. They had turned out to be too tough. They had talked it over and decided to kill Ike Poe and steal his trail herd. That's all there was to it. They'd got the cattle rustling done. But Ike Poe had been too tough to kill. Those renegades yonder knew that Poe was alive and on the prowl. They had poured the cattle and remuda down there into Superstition Valley. Thrown in with a yellow-haired, yellow-bearded buckskin man who had contacted them at

Three Trails and talked them into shooting Ike Poe and stealing his trail outfit.

IT WAS the buckskin man who had sent out the bushwhackers to kill Ike Poe when he took up the trail of the cowhands who had turned cattle rustlers. Ike Poe got his first look at that buckskin man now in the gray dawn.

Buckskin McGregor. Blackleg, outcast from a proud clan. Renegade. Tall and powerful, he cut a handsome figure in his fringed and beaded buckskins. With his long yellow hair and trimmed beard that hid the knife scar. Gambler, adventurer, outlaw, killer. He ruled his tough renegades with steel. The blue steel of his guns. The whetted polished steel of a Bowie knife. A ruthless, cold-blooded killer, he held his renegade pack together and ruled them through fear. They might hate Buckskin McGregor, but they took his orders. Disobedience had its one punishment. Sudden death. And when Buckskin McGregor struck, he struck without warning.

Strickly speaking, McGregor was not a buckskin man. Neither plainsman nor mountain man. He wore buckskins because they pleased his vanity. Because the garb showed off his splendid build. And because the beaded fringed buckskins set him apart from the drably rough-clad renegades he ruled. He stood apart from them now. His back against a huge boulder. He never turned his back to that renegade outfit.

IKE POE stared at Buckskin McGregor. There stood the buckskin man who had talked Poe's not-unwilling cowhands into turning cattle rustlers.

"The foulest man unhung on this earth." Colorado's voice was barely audible as they crouched side by side. "Till now when I see him with my own eyes and know him for what he is, I gave Buckskin McGregor the benefit of the doubt. Blackguard, tinhorn, whiskey peddler. But a McGregor, kin to old Angus McGregor, as fine a man as ever lived. Kin to Lassie. Would ye believe that man yonder would smear his renegades with Injun war paint to massacre his own kin? No, ye'd never want to believe it of such a fine specimen of manhood as Buckskin McGregor yonder. That's why, by the hell, I've dry shaved the beards of a score of buckskin men in the desperate hope one of 'em would have the Lassie's knife scar hidden under his whiskers. Yonder stands the man with that knife scar covered by that handsome yellow beard—Buckskin McGregor, the blackguard who led the Green Meadow massacre. The same buckskin McGregor who stole your trail herd, Poe. May the Devil have his hot fires blazin' in hell and ready for Buckskin McGregor."

Ike Poe was tallying the men he had to kill. He hated them worse than he hated Buckskin McGregor. There had been a dozen men in his trail outfit. He could count no more than four among this renegade pack.

"There should be more of 'em," he muttered.

Colorado knew what Ike Poe meant. "They've killed one another off. Whiskey fights. Poker fights. Or just plain hate. Same with the renegades Buckskin McGregor recruited to paint theirselves like Injuns to massacre men, women and kids. He fed 'em whiskey, dealt 'em poker, rolled 'em loaded dice, and ribbed the fights that killed 'em off. I'll bet there ain't half a dozen of that massacre outfit left alive. But yonder's the same breed of hydrophobia skunks. Don't shoot to miss any of 'em when the big jackpot's open. And Coyote Wendall should be showin' up before they ketch their saddle horses. Coyote will open the jackpot—"

"Huh?"

"I didn't tie the Coyote so's he'd stay tied."

Colorado cocked his red-bearded, red-maned head sideways and upwards. Then pointed to the high-up rim of the Black Mesa. At a place where the big open trail started down into Superstition Valley showed a thin high column of smoke. Signal smoke. Colorado's big white teeth showed in a red-bearded grin.

"That whittles down the odds in our favor, Poe. That smoke means the buckskin men are on the way down. The renegades on guard up yonder are no more. Not a shot fired. A Bowie knife makes no noise. Now pick your cowhand renegades. But leave Buckskin McGregor to the tender mercy of Colorado. Yonder comes the Coyote!"

COYOTE OSCAR WENDALL was blowing like a spent runner. Sweat sodden. His voice harsh and brittle and saw-edged.

"Colorado and Ike Poe!" It was a Coyote yelp. "They're both here in Superstition Valley!"

Tin plates and cups clattered, spilling grub and black coffee. Every man who had been squatted on his hunkers was now up on his feet. The blued steel of their drawn guns glittered in the dawn. Tense, every renegade, as coiled rattlesnakes, and ready to strike.

Buckskin McGregor had a six-shooter in each hand. He had pale yellow eyes and they glittered like the eyes of a trapped wolf.

"How did Colorado and Ike Poe get here?" Buckskin McGregor's voice snarled. "*You* must have fetched 'em down your hidden trail!"

"They had me—they had me. I've led 'em into your gun trap, Buckskin. There's only the two of 'em. Hell, all you got to do is tromp 'em to death."

"Where's the Snake—and that Tolliver?"

"Hung. Ike Poe and Colorado made the mob at Three Trails hang the Snake an' Tolliver to the ridge log of the Longhorn Saloon. Don't kill me. I got good news—that yellow-haired Lassie, I know where she is. I talked to her—she's locoed. Talks like a young kid. I tried to fetch her along but she got spooked—she was ridin' bareback on a paint pony. . . . I had to tap her acrost the head with a gun barrel. I'll take you to where she is—at Paco Ortega's place."

The gun in Buckskin McGregor's right hand spat flame. Coyote Oscar Wendall went down, a sodden stinking buckskin thing without shape on the ground.

Colorado's voice rumbled like an ominous thunder through the gun echoes.

"I've come to shave ye, Buckskin McGregor! Ye'll be dead when I dry-shave that purty yellow beard—and find the scar of Lassie's knife beneath. I've come to shave ye, Buckskin McGregor!"

The man stood frozen there in his moccasin tracks. Tall, handsome, a splendid figure of a man in his bearded fringed buckskins. With his yellow beard and tawny yellow mane. Yellow eyes glittering. A six-shooter gripped in each hand.

"Smoke him out, men!" Buckskin McGregor snarled.

"Fill your hands!" Ike Poe's voice had a toneless, deadly sound. "I'm Ike Poe. Four of you know who's punchin' your one-way tickets to Hell!"

Then a silence. The awful hush that comes before the crash of lightning and thunder.

"Remember Green Meadow!" Colorado lifted his mighty voice.

"Remember Green Meadow!"

It sounded as if the high cliff walls of the Black Mesa were throwing back the echoes across Superstition Valley. But those were the buckskin men giving voice to the battle cry. Buckskin men gathered to wipe out in blood the ugly stain that Buckskin McGregor had splashed on the buckskins of mountain men and plainsmen. To besmirch the gallant memory of their brave dead. The Buckskin men called Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, Bill Williams, dead in their graves but their memory everlasting.

"Remember Green Meadow!"

The red-bearded, red-maned buckskin giant called Colorado quit the safe shelter of brush and boulders. Rather die fighting out in the open than to do his killing from ambush.

The gun in Colorado's hand spewed fire. The true-aimed slug struck Buckskin McGregor's right shoulder, shattering the bone. The six-shooter in his right hand slid from paralyzed fingers and struck the ground. But before the gun hit the ground Colorado

shot again. The second slug shattered Buckskin McGregor's left shoulder. The gun in his left hand slid to the ground.

Buckskin McGregor had been knocked off balance by each shot. Now he was standing, legs braced, his back against the giant boulder, blood spreading across both smashed buckskin shoulders. Crippled in both arms, helpless as a man crucified. The shock leaving him stunned, then the pain tearing through both maimed shoulders and through his whole body. The magnificent muscles powerless, useless. The man who had led the Green Meadow massacre stood there helpless and defenseless and at the mercy of that great red-bearded, red-maned giant. And there was no mercy in the slitted, green eyes of the man called Colorado. He stood there, giant statured, a smoking saddle carbine gripped in his huge hands.

Not a shot was fired. The echoes of Colorado's gun died. And there was that awful hush.

"Let no man kill Buckskin McGregor." Colorado's voice had the sound of Doom. "Let him die like that. Slow. Ye'll soon be facin' that Last Judgment, Buckskin McGregor. There'll be Angus McGregor and his good wife. Men—women—children—tiny babies. They are the dead ye murdered. Die slow, ye blackguard scut. 'Tis not for Colorado to be damnin' ye into Hell. Die slow—Buckskin McGregor."

IKE POE stood beside Colorado now. His carbine ready. Dwarfed by the buckskin giant. Then his gun began spewing streaks of flame and each shot he fired hit its human target and killed. The eye that squinted to line his gun sights was a sliver of shining steel. Bright and hard and glinting as the blued steel of his gun barrel.

The gunfire was deafening now. The high walls of the Black Mesa flinging back the echoes to swell the crashing din. From brush and from behind rocks the guns of the gathered buckskin men took deadly toll.

Bullets whined like hornets around Ike Poe and Colorado who stood there in the open. Then when Ike Poe's carbine went empty, Colorado handed his gun to the Texan.

The four cowhands who had turned cattle rustlers and stolen Ike Poe's trail herd were down. And no more than one leaden slug to the man. Deadly, cold-nerved, cold-blooded, Ike Poe had kept his vow to kill. And his job was done.

Some of the renegades tried to run and were shot down. Those who stood their ground died there. Those buckskin men were dead shots. Trained from cap-and-ball days not to waste a single load. That they killed from ambush did not matter.

"Remember Green Meadow!"

Their voices shouted through the roar of that deadly gunfire. Green Meadow had been a cold-blooded craven massacre of men and women and children. These renegades deserved no fighting chance for their lives. And so they died. And there was not a man among their renegade pack left alive.

There was only Buckskin McGregor alive. He still stood there braced with his back against the granite boulder. His beaded buckskin shirt now sodden with the blood that was draining his life away. Stark fear glazing his yellow eyes.

The red-bearded, red-maned buckskin giant had stood there motionless until the echoes of the last shot died. Then he moved. With long swift strides. His Bowie knife in his hand.

He stood close to Buckskin McGregor now. Within arm's reach. His eyes slivers of green ice. Then slowly his left hand reached out and gripped the tawny yellow mane of the dying man. Lifting Buckskin McGregor to his full six-foot height. Then the Bowie knife moved. Its whetted, honed, stropped edge slid along the bearded face, shaving off the luxurious yellow beard. To bare a long livid knife scar that ran the length of the man's jaw.

A horrible, inhuman scream tore itself from the throat of Buckskin McGregor. Fear of Death and what judgment lay beyond Death was in that terrible scream. It showed for a moment, stark fear, in his yellow eyes. Then the scream choked in a death rattle and the yellow eyes glazed. Colorado let go his mighty grip on the yellow hair. Buckskin McGregor was dead when he slumped to the ground.

Colorado turned and strode back to where Ike Poe was standing. Neither man was bullet nicked. They stood facing each other.

" 'Tis you and me now, Poe."

There was something like regret, sadness

in the voice of the buckskin giant. Soft, low-toned.

Ike Poe had discarded Colorado's carbine. He had reloaded his six-shooter and it was in his hand. He shoved the gun into its holster. Then slowly, carefully he wiped the sweaty palm of his hand along the seat of his pants. And held it out.

"If I knew how to ask a favor from God," said Ike Poe, "I'd ask Him to give you Lassie the woman. To me she will never be anything but Lassie, a small girl I saw golden-haired in the shadow of death."

Colorado gripped the hand of Ike Poe.

THEN Colorado lifted his mighty voice in a wild, wailing shout. The buckskin men came out from behind brush and boulders. Here and there a jug appeared. They slammed rough hands on Colorado's back. Roared and bellowed and drank to the name of Colorado in the fiery Taos lightning.

Colorado told them they'd witnessed something they'd never seen before nor would ever see again.

"Ike Poe shook hands with Colorado!"

Ike Poe, who for the first time in his life had shaken any man's hand, smiled thinly. And he drank Taos lightning from their proffered jugs.

The buckskin men would mop up here." Later Ike Poe could gather his longhorns and take his delayed trail herd on. Sell the cattle. Take the money back to the Texans who still had faith in Ike Poe and were waiting for him to return some day with their cattle money.

RIGHT now Ike Poe and Colorado had something else to do. Far more important than burying dead men or gathering long-horned cattle.

They caught fresh horses from the corraled remuda that had quieted down after the shooting was over. Ike Poe's remuda was in the big cavvy. He gave Colorado one of the top horses from his own string. And saddled another.

Together Ike Poe and Colorado rode up out of Superstition Valley and across the Black Mesa and on to the Ortega ranch on the Pecos.

Two young women stood there in the sunshine waiting for them as they rode up. Black-haired, black-eyed Lolita. Tawny-haired, gray-eyed Lassie.

Even before they swung from their saddles both men saw the change in Lassie. She was no longer a child. She was a woman come into her own. And with a choked sob Colorado took her very gently into his huge arms and there were tears in her eyes when Lassie kissed his red-bearded mouth with a woman's kiss.

For Lolita and Ike Poe there was no need for such awakening. Her arms were tight around his neck and he held her and the grayness was gone from his leathery face, the hardness no longer in his gray eyes.

"There is a God," said Ike Poe, "a Blessed Virgin in a blue silk dress. Where you burned a candle and said a prayer that was answered."

It was then that Lolita saw what was changed about this man she loved. Ike Poe no longer wore the cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter. He had unbuckled the cartridge belt and left his six-shooter back yonder at Superstition Valley.

Lolita and Ike Poe watched Colorado leading Lassie toward the river bank, his great arm protectingly around her shoulders.

"Aye, Lassie," they heard his voice rumbling softly, a chuckle in it, "The last of the Irish Kings. 'Tis a queen ye'll be—born with that golden crown. 'Tis the whole world we're sharin' for a kingdom. This earth, with the feel av it solid under our moccasins, the birds will always sing for us—and the blue sky above us. 'Tis that I'm layin' at your feet, Lassie. Together with the heart and soul, the life's red blood av the Last av the Irish Kings."

The giant red-bearded, red-maned buckskin man stood there, a heroic figure. None to dispute his legend.

Ike Poe and Colorado. Legendary figures. Their hardness forever tempered by the love of two women of courage.

MEN who wouldn't DIE!

by George C. Appell

Death Reneged

WHEN Captain Guy V. Henry, Cavalry, got mixed up in the War of the Wild Roses in '76, he began to think the Civil War had been kid stuff. He had won the Medal of Honor at Cold Harbor, and picked up five brevets for gallantry besides. And he taught Sunday school, when he could.

But out there, out in the Tongue River country under Crook, the captain got mixed up with an enemy that had its own ways of fighting. Almost surrounded by Cheyennes, he ordered a retreat, then waited to bring up the rear of the last troop. A bullet crashed through his jaws, just below the eyes and he became blood-blinded. Then he was shot from the saddle and left for dead.

The Cheyennes whooped and galloped over his body.

A counter-attack cleared the field, and Henry was borne to the rear. He regained consciousness when the surgeon was working over him, braced against the pain and said: "Fix me up so I can go back."

He survived the jouncing wagon journey of several hundred miles to Fort Russell, where he eventually healed. Healed as well as could be expected, that is. One eye never did recover, and he'd lost a finger some place.

Back in action, he won another brevet, fought through several more Indian campaigns, and finished his career as a general in the Spanish-American War. And to this day, his remark to a correspondent is remembered as well as his wounds. It was after he'd been shot in the face and ridden over. He murmured: "It's nothing—for this are we soldiers."

Pickings Had Been Lean for a Free Lance Shipping Agent Along the Frisco Waterfront

CARGO FOR CANTON

By STEVE HAIL

MORE from habit than from any particular purpose Michael Quinn closed the door of his lodgings behind him and stepped out into the muddied ruts of Kearney Street. Although he was freshly shaven except for the sideburns left overlong as a concession to the current fashion, he hadn't breakfasted. It didn't look like he was going to. Pickings had never been leaner for a free-lance shipping agent along the Frisco waterfront.

Thinking about it, Michael hooked another notch in his belt. The gesture rattled the three silver dollars in his waistcoat pocket. Michael frowned and struck out determinedly in the direction of Long Wharf, trying to forget about the three silver dollars and the fact that they represented the last of his dwindling capital.

He slowed after a moment, smiling ruefully to himself at the unconscious briskness of his gait, laying it to the bone-chilling fog still hanging over the bay rather than

to any real necessity of hurry. After all, there hadn't been as much as a Mexican lugger ventured through the Gate in days. Worse, it had been far longer than that since any New England merchantman had seen fit to chance the vagaries of the California trade.

Michael's brows drew together. Of course this reluctance on the part of Yankee shipmasters was understandable enough, considering the fact that California had little in the way of exports to lure a shrewd trader. Considering, too, the hundreds of idle vessels that were gathering rot at downbay anchorages with their crews deserted to the diggings.

Michael snorted disdainfully, thinking about the mines and the fools who let the tall tales of easy wealth influence them to rashness.

He had learned that for the ten who made strikes, there were a thousand who were lucky to wash out wages.

As for himself he'd stick to trade, and the small but steady percentage of profit it offered an honest agent. Why, a man with ideas and a little local knowledge to back them up should . . .

Michael shook his head. That was the trouble. There wasn't any trade. Of course if one was able to take a broad view of it . . . Michael Quinn couldn't. He was hungry.

He had reached the intersection of the Embercadero and Long Wharf, his eye carefully gauging the depth of the mudhole at the crossing, when the fog layered apart before the first gusts of morning wind.

Michael whistled softly in disbelief. He knuckled his eyes to make sure. A barque was ghosting in under jigger and foretops'ls, picking careful way through the deserted shipping of the roadstead. Best of all, the house flag trailing from the mizzen truck was new to the bay. Undoubtedly, Michael thought, she would need a shoreside representative. He lengthened his stride, forgetting the morass below the planking of the roadway into which it was rumored a dropped hogshead would disappear from sight.

HE paused at the water's edge, waiting to see if the inbounder would brace her yards and stand in for the wharf. She didn't. Even as he sucked in his breath hopefully, the barque rounded into the wind and her anchor splashed overside.

To his right, close inshore against the force of the flooding tide, Michael saw an ancient Chinaman pulling stolidly at the oars of a fishing skiff.

Michael fingered the silver in his pocket, debating. Even at present prices, three dollars would buy breakfast of sorts. He sighed. "You Chinaboy!" he called out in sudden decision. "You row me out to shipside? One dollar!"

The Chinese stopped and turned his head. Michael recognized Wa Lin, head of the Sing Toy, San Francisco's most populous tong.

Wa Lin said, "One dollah, no can do. Two dollah, can do."

Michael found himself wondering if the Chinese was clairvoyant. He shook his head. "No got," he said. "One dollar."

The Chinese resumed his effort on the oars. "You got," he said accusingly. "No two dollah. No low."

Michael thought about rival agents who even now must be hurrying toward the waterfront. He fished the coins from his pocket and waded out to the skiff. "Robber," he said, and settled himself in the sternsheets.

"No lobber," the ancient protested. "My go Chinaside to die pletty soon. Need plenty dollah catchee passage." He picked up his chopping rhythm on the oars.

Seamen were still catwalking the yards when the small boat pulled alongside the barque. She was full laden, Quinn saw, her copper sheathing almost level with the water.

Her superstructure was still salt-encrusted even to the gold lettering on her counter that identified her as the *Ada Riggs* of Boston.

A slope-shouldered man with a peaked cap of authority pulled low over a bearded face was bellowing orders from the poop. Michael looked at him appraisingly. They were about the same age, he guessed, but the other was taller by an inch or two and carried another twenty pounds of muscle on his heavy frame. There was a brittleness in his eyes that didn't look encouraging.

Michael Quinn cleared his throat. "If you're in need of an agent, Captain," he said, "maybe I can be of help. I've letters

from former shipmasters that'll testify to my honesty."

The bearded man turned hard brown eyes on Quinn. Mud-brown, Michael saw now, and as bottomless. They looked at Quinn as if the intruder might be the source of the low tide stench rising from the shoreline of the bay.

"I ain't the master here," he growled. "I'm the mate, but we want no truck with grafting agents. I've been here before. In '48. I know my way around Frisco town. Anyway, we're not stoppin'. Shove off!"

Quinn said calmly, "Stopping or not, there are formalities to look after. My fee is modest enough. May I speak to the captain?"

"You mayn't," the mate snapped. "He's on his back with fever. I'm lookin' after this hooker's affairs. I . . ."

A VOICE racked with illness, but cool enough, interrupted from the shadowed overhang of the house. A slight figure, with the flesh wasted away from his bones, stepped into the growing sunlight burning down through the melting fog. He was bearded like his mate, but his skin was yellow above the hair on his cheek.

"I'll remind you, Mr. Purdy," he said acidly, "that I'm far from dead." He eyed Michael speculatively. "It looks to me as if this gentleman's offer has merit, considering the changes here."

His sunken eyes swept across the shanties spilling down the sandhills to the south. The eyes were bright, even in the deep hollows of his cheeks. Michael wondered if it was the brightness of fever or . . .

The small man was speaking then and Michael put his fleeting suspicion aside.

"I'm Captain Henshaw," the other introduced himself. "I've been down with yellowjack since we visited at Callao a month ago. Mr. Purdy's right. We're not stopping here for long. We've flour and general merchandise for Oregon, but I'll have to have a doctor before we carry on. And we're short on stores. We put in at Catalina Island two weeks back for water and a small amount of trading, but they couldn't help us out. So maybe, Mister . . . ?"

"Quinn," Michael said, and touched his hat. He started talking fast. "I'll see that you get a doctor, sir. And I'll arrange for beef and such fresh stuff as I can find. Now about this cargo of yours. I'd be glad to take over its disposal for a very small percentage. The town's in sore need of flour. More than likely your other items will find a market as well.

"You'll get boomtown prices. Now, if I could glance over your manifests . . ."

There was the recurring light in Henshaw's eyes. It might have meant anything. "You're a fast worker, Mr. Quinn," he said, "but San Francisco's no place to lay alongside a wharf." His bony hand gestured eloquently at the glutted anchorage.

Michael angled his jaw at Purdy. "Your mate here looks capable of holding a crew," he suggested mildly.

PURDY spat noisily to the flood sucking past the rail. He leaned over the side and waved a corded fist in front of Michael's face. "I'm capable enough of handling them, all right," he said. "And of sharpers that stick their noses into the *Ada Riggs*' affairs. I told you once. Shove off!"

Michael took a chance on the hint of interest in Henshaw's eyes. He said quietly, "It appears you're outranked, Mister Mate." He climbed over the bulwarks and into the waist, ignoring the glowering Purdy.

He addressed the captain. "If I can have a list of your consignments, sir, we can tell better about your profits."

For a moment he was afraid he had overplayed his hand. But at last the captain's lips lifted in a half smile and he led the way into the main cabin.

When he had lowered himself shakily onto the settee, he said, "I don't mind telling you, Quinn, that I'd rather unload here than the Columbia. Another thousand miles of headwinds and seas is nothing for a sick man to look forward to."

He wiped sweat from his fevered face and went on, "But ships are run for profit. Aside from the risk of desertions there's the matter of a payload outward bound. We're headed for Canton. It was my intention to trade our Oregon cargo for furs. They're a commodity that'll show a nice profit in China. What has San Francisco to offer that can match it? You see my point?"

"I do," Michael admitted. His brows drew together. This was the old story. Until California rid itself of gold fever and de-

veloped its land, there'd be little to lure sharp-trading shipowners.

"There's hides," Michael said half-hopefully. "I could probably dicker for a half load or more from the Californios."

Henshaw said, "No good. Hides are cargo for a homeward bounder. We'll have to trade off the few we picked up at Catalina to the Sandwich Islanders. They don't keep." He shook his head. "I'm afraid we can't do business, Quinn."

A hunger pang knotted Michael's stomach and he found himself saying desperately, "I'm certain I can drum something up, Captain, given time. Now, it'll take about a week to unload your vessel and provision her. Mr. Purdy ought to be able to hold the crew that long. I'll promise to round up a paying load for Canton in that time."

The captain expelled a weary breath. "I'd like to believe you, Quinn, but trade is based on more than promises. The *Ada's* owners would have my job if you failed me." His eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Now, if you could put up a guarantee, say four or five thousand dollars, to be forfeited in case you fail to provide a cargo. You're a businessman. What do you say to that?"

Michael felt his sole remaining dollar pressing hard against his ribs. He swallowed. "Wh—why, certainly, Captain. That's reasonable enough. I'll give you my personal note, drawn on Adams & Co., for that amount."

Henshaw got to his feet. "It's a deal then," he said. He went into an adjoining room and returned a moment later with a sheaf of papers. "If you'll make out the note," he continued, "you can go to work on these manifests. I'll have the *Ada* warped alongside before sundown."

Michael wrote out his personal pledge for five thousand dollars with a shaking hand. When he could trust his legs to hold him, he got up and shook hands with Henshaw. "They'll be a physician waiting for you at the dock," he promised. He smiled wryly. "Locating a cargo will take a little longer, I'm afraid. I'll get to work on it."

Michael pocketed the papers and made his way down the companionway, cursing himself for an addle-headed fool at the bargain he had made. He knew if he failed to keep his part of the agreement he was finished in San Francisco. Without a penny in the Adams & Co. bank to back up his pledge, he'd be lucky to get off with a prison sentence. Why, men had been hung from lamp-posts for lesser crimes. And——

He stepped out onto the deck and his foot caught the lip of a pail standing by the coaming. He recovered himself, but not in time. The bucket spewed whale oil in a spreading stain across the planking.

At the same time he heard a shouted oath and saw the big bulk of the mate leap toward him from where he had been lounging beside the inshore rail. His eyebrows all but met his beard in a savage scowl.

"You lubber!" Purdy roared. "This ain't no waterfront barroom. I'll learn you to watch your steps on the *Ada Riggs!*" One massive hand closed on Quinn's collar. The other hooked into the slack at the seat of the agent's trousers. Michael found himself being propelled toward the bulwarks, with only an occasional groping foot finding the deck.

Purdy set his victim's feet on the rail and drew back his boot for a departing kick. But with solidness under him, Michael whirled. One fisted hand lashed out in a clubbing blow to the mate's mouth. Purdy staggered back. Blood trickled downward from his cut lip into his beard.

Purdy licked an unbelieving tongue across his mouth, at the same time pawing at his hampering sleeves.

"So, my friend," he said with slow relish. You'll give backfight to a deepwater mate, eh? You and your snooping ways. Butting in where you're not welcome. I think you need a lesson in manners."

He advanced then in a low, lumbering crouch and threw a sudden looping punch at Michael's head. The full weight of his heavy shoulders was behind it. Michael jumped to the deck, rolling with the blow. He shot a short left to the mate's jaw in return. It didn't even slow the bearded man. His shoulder rammed into Quinn's chest, staggering Michael backward against the rail. The mate followed his advantage like a maddened bear, clubbing Michael's face viciously with hard knuckles.

Michael fought back with silent, desperate fury, feeling Purdy's hot breath on his face as well as the blows. But carefully, methodically, as if he were savoring his butchery and finding it good, the mate punched shut

first one eye and then the other and laid the skin of one cheekbone open to raw bleeding meat.

Quinn heard himself cry aloud in pain and bewilderment, the weight gone from his blows and falling on empty air in his blindness. At last Purdy stepped back. Quinn stumbled forward, unseeing, still swinging.

The mate looked at his handiwork, then smiled crookedly in seeming satisfaction. He smashed one last driving punch to the bleeding mouth. Michael's head jerked back. His body sagged and he crumpled into the scuppers. He lay there, quiet, except for the snoring breaths laboring through his mangled lips.

Purdy wiped his split knuckles on his shirt and turned to the ogle-eyed seamen who had been magneted from their work to the scene of the fight. "That's what happens to lads who mess with Sam'l Purdy," he growled. "That's one meddler won't be back. Any o' you wants some o' the same, just try jumpin' the *Ada Riggs*."

But the seamen weren't staring at Samuel Purdy. Their eyes were wide on the rigid figure of Captain Henshaw standing in the opening of the companionway. He clung to the coaming for strength, but his eyes were like summer lighting.

Henshaw lifted a shaking hand to the men. "Get out!" he roared. "All of you! No, wait. Two of you help Quinn over the side." His eyes went to Wa Lin, staring impassively upward from his oars. "You, pigtail! When this man comes to, tell him he's still acting as my agent."

He turned to the mate. His lips were pale over set teeth. "If," he said in a voice that carried to all of the crew, "this were twenty years ago, I'd have you flogged till you couldn't crawl. Get to your quarters, Mister."

Then, as Purdy passed in front of him, the captain snarled in a low voice, "Quinn isn't the only meddler who deserves a beating. Are you trying to scare five thousand dollars out of the *Ada's* profits? Quinn's got his rope, you fool! Let him hang himself. There's not cargo enough in the whole of California to give the *Ada* a paying load."

It was an hour before Michael came back to consciousness. He was lying on the bed in his room and old Wa Lin was laying wet cloths across his battered face. He lay there for a moment calling back to his mind the memory of that last obliterating blow.

Finally he took a painful breath and pushed the ancient's hand aside. He got to his feet, reeling with dizziness. He could see now, after a fashion, through the swollen slits of his eyes. He felt for the *Ada's* papers in his pockets, then brushed absently at his soiled clothing.

The Chinese said, "Numbah one man along shipside say you still catchee job." He clucked doubtfully. "My savvy mo' bettah you no workee."

Michael thought about the five-thousand-dollar note he had signed, and the lone silver dollar he had to cover it. "I think I better workee," he said, and tried a grin. He grimaced instead at the pain.

After a moment he headed for the door, shrugging off the old Chinaman's doleful headshaking. He started off down the walk, this time away from the Embarcadero. He walked slowly, thinking about Henshaw and Samuel Purdy. Thinking, too, about the reason for this beating. After all, the spilled bucket was little more than a minor incident. It was something else. Intimidation, probably. But why? Michael's forehead wrinkled.

THE barque's problems were many and Michael was kept more than busy for the three days following. The disposal of the *Ada's* cargo at a good price was simple enough in the commodity-hungry town. The needed stores, too, were easy enough to come by.

But the thing that worried Michael more with each passing day was the outbound cargo. He had scoured the countryside searching for a suitable payload for the barque. Everyone he had interviewed had wagged his head pessimistically. The mushrooming town and its dependent upriver mines were taking everything that the overcrowded community could produce.

On the evening of the third day Michael returned to his lodgings tired and discouraged. It looked like he was licked. Maybe the best thing to do was admit defeat, try to borrow the five thousand dollars and hire himself out at day wages until he could make up the amount of the guarantee. Providing, that is, that Adams & Co. would take that charitable a view of his worthless note.

Michael rubbed at the twin lines of concern between his eyes and sat down at the table in his room to catch up on the *Ada's* paper work. At least he could have the manifests in order when the time for his confession arrived.

His forefinger was running listlessly down a column of figures when it suddenly stiffened and stopped. His eye had caught an item that didn't check up with Henshaw's story of the Catalina Island trading venture. Those hides now——

Michael stared at the blank wall of the room, wondering about them. Wondering, too, if Purdy's intimidation tactics had anything to do with them. He sat up. That Honolulu consignment might bear looking into. It wouldn't solve the pressing problem of cargo for the *Ada Riggs,* but it might answer a question or two he had been asking himself about Samuel Purdy. And now was as good a time as any. He got up and was shrugging into his coat when a different knock sounded at the door.

Michael stepped away from the lamp. "Come in," he said, and reached for a water decanter.

Stringy white chin whiskers and a leathered face poked themselves around the jamb. Wa Lin shuffled into the room.

Michael set the water pitcher down.

The Chinese fumbled a greasy buckskin bag out of the folds of a brocaded sleeve. The leather dropped to the table with a heaviness that proclaimed its contents as gold dust.

"My go home," Lin announced, indicating the pouch. "Plenty soon die. My go Chinaside on *Ada Liggs.* Can do?"

"Why, yes," Michael said, remembering Wa's declaration of three days back. "I guess so, The *Ada's* bound for Canton. She's not a passenger vessel, but she ought to be able to accomodate you. Judging from the weight of that poke it should more than pay your passage."

Unconsciously he lapsed to pidgin English. "Why for Chinaboy must go Chinaside to die?"

Wa broke into torrent of Cantonese, illustrated with phrases of pidgin.

Michael listened amusedly at first. Gradually the amusement faded from his eyes. He rubbed at the hinge of his jaw.

"Look, Wa," he said, hidden excitement crowding his voice. "I've got an idea. Now listen—"

Michael went into patient detail, explaining the plan that had come half-formed to his mind, but that suddenly had magnified itself into bright vision of hope.

Wa listened stolidly, but when Michael had finished there was a quirk at the corners of his oblique eyes. He said, "Can do," satisfiedly. He shook hands with himself and departed.

When the other had gone, Michael snuffed out the lamp, pulled his hat down over his eyes and went out into the night.

The *Ada Riggs* was groaning mournfully against the pilings as Michael neared Long Wharf. Overhead the first ragged banners of evening fog were sucking inward through the Gate. A single lantern hanging over the gangway outdid the thin slice of moon in illuminating the deck. The light was enough, however, to show the bulky outline of a watchman lurking in the shadows of the deckhouse. Michael remembered the set of those heavy shoulders. Samuel Purdy was seeing to it personally that his crew stayed.

Michael lowered himself silently over the stringer piece until his boots found the fender log that paralleled the dock at the water's edge. He sidled along in the overhang of the wharf till he reached the bowsprit, then hand over handed up the forechain. The deck was deserted.

Carefully, he lifted a corner of the tarpaulin on the forward hold and dropped into the blackness below. The stench of the green hides guided him toward a corner of the cargo space. His sense of touch confirmed his suspicions, but he touched off a vesta to make sure. The sulphur match sputtered, flared and died. It was enough. Michael groped his way back to the open corner of the hatch.

He was climbing cautiously over the coaming when his foot dislodged an unseen hatch wedge in the darkness. It clattered to the deck. Michael stiffened, then crouched low in the doubtful shelter of the coaming.

Purdy's voice bellowed from aft. "A' right, you scum! Come out o' that!"

Heavy footsteps echoed on the wooden deck as the mate stalked forward. Michael saw moonlight glint on polished steel. A glance told him he could never make it across the deck and up the dock. He kicked

off his boots. He waited till Purdy was forced to pass the mainmast, then he leaped for the offshore rail. He vaulted over, plumping headfirst into the water.

A shot blasted the night apart behind him and he felt lead scorch his thigh. He was in the water then and let it close over him, kicking rhythmically under water, away from the barque. He hoped the tide was flooding. It was hardly the kind of night in which to be carried out to sea.

When he could hold his breath no longer Michael pushed himself to the surface, gulped an anguished breath and prepared to dive again. But the *Ada* was only a black shapelessness in the closing fog behind him. The tide was flooding. Michael took a longer breath, this time in relief. He struck out for the shore.

After endless minutes he felt mud under his feet. He clambered erect and waited for his heart to stop pounding, then pointed his stockinged feet toward his lodgings. After all, it looked like it was going to prove a satisfactory evening.

IT was the night before the barque was to sail for Honolulu when Michael next approached the *Ada Riggs*. He didn't want to face Samuel Purdy before he'd had a chance to talk to Captain Henshaw so he stopped at the corner of Long Wharf and the Embarcadero.

He beckoned to one of a group of urchins hanging around the pier. "Here, son," he said, and tossed the boy a quarter. "Ask the captain of the *Ada* if he'll step ashore a moment. Tell him his agent has news for him."

The boy bit down hard on the coin. Satisfied, he scampered toward the *Ada's* plank.

Within minutes Henshaw appeared at the gangplank and seeing Michael, made his way up the dock.

" 'Bout time you showed up," he snapped. "I was about to go to Adamas & Co. and collect that bond you put up. Where've you been and where's my cargo?"

"Both will take a little explaining," Michael said. He took a shot in the dark. "But first off, that Honolulu consignment of yours will have to come ashore. Either that, or Purdy. Maybe both. The government customs has an interest in 'em."

"Stop talking riddles," Henshaw said.

"Those hides of yours in number one hold are outlaw cargo, Cap'n. They'll take some explaining."

"Cowhides, outlaw? You're crazy, man!"

"I didn't say cowhides," Michael explained quietly. "They're only a cover-up for what's underneath. I've yet to see a cow with fur. You've got at least two hundred sea otter pelts hidden there. Traded for at Catalina, evidently, while you were in your bunk. It's common enough contraband down that way, but dangerous cargo if you enter a California port. Of course, Purdy didn't figure on berthing here."

Henshaw's cheeks were coloring above his beard. "You mean that Purdy double-crossed me, and—" he began wrathfully.

Michael nodded. "Looks that way, sir. You'll find the discrepancy in your bills of lading. Well-concealed, I'll admit, but enough to show that Purdy intended a little double dealing at Honolulu. A thing that he didn't intend you to know about."

"So?" Henshaw said softly. His thin hands were knotted into fists. "Wait'll I get a hold of him!"

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Michael said dryly. "The customs officials are pretty efficient hereabouts." He coughed apologetically. "You see, sir, I'll take an honest dollar as well as anyone, but I'm not bucking the law. It'd be business suicide. I've a hunch that even now the investigators are looking for the man that made the bargain at Catalina. He'll be bound over for trial, of course. Now——"

"Don't look at me," Henshaw said harshly. "I can prove my innocence easily enough." He turned away.

"Before you go," Michael said, "here're your clearance papers. You can drop downbay with tomorrow's tide." He handed over a bundle of documents. "Your cargo manifests are there, too. The cargo will start coming aboard tonight. It's easily stowed and will cause you no trouble."

MICHAEL paused as the rumbling tread of a two-horsed dray echoed down a sidestreet. "This should be the first of it arriving now. It——" His eye caught sight of a shadowy figure slinking by in the sheltered darkness of the dock shed. There was a sea bag slung over bulky shoulders.

"What kind of cargo you got that'll load overnight?" Henshaw demanded.

"Chinese," Michael said absently, his eyes on the skulking form in the shadows.

"Chinese!" the captain exploded. "The *Ada's* no coolie ship! Why——"

"Excuse me," Michael interrupted. "I think you've got a deserter."

He leaped out and around the back of the oncoming dray and lunged at the suddenly running figure. His fingers closed on cloth and he spun Samuel Purdy around to the light. The mate dropped his sea bag with an oath as he faced the agent.

"Going somewhere, Mister Mate?" Michael asked him.

"The *Ada's* swarming with customs men," Purdy snarled. "You responsible for that, Quinn?"

"I am," said Michael modestly. "They're looking for you and otter skins. I'd hate to see them disappointed in the former."

Captain Henshaw spoke up. "I'd like a word with you myself, Purdy. Concerning some future profits you didn't figure on splitting."

"The only talking I'm doing is to this snooping agent," Purdy said darkly. "An' I'm doin' it with this!" He swung a sharp, clubbing blow at Michael's face.

Michael had been expecting it. He let his eyes flick aside, measuring the distance to the edge of the dock. It looked about right. He stumbled then and nearly went down as Purdy came charging in with both arms flailing. The mate grunted in triumph as Michael staggered. He rushed in trying to grab the agent in his arms, to hold him and crush him.

Michael recovered and took a half-step forward. He met Purdy with an all or nothing punch to the side of the whiskered jaw. Purdy spun, not hurt but fighting for balance. He sprawled headlong at the edge of the planking. His hands hooked, grabbing for support. They clawed splinters from the boards instead. Samuel Purdy plunged, twisted and landed feet first in the foul mud that flanked the roadway.

Michael watched him sink to his armpits before he stopped. Judging from the rumors of hogsheads that had sunk from sight in the same slime, Michael thought that Purdy would probably stay there for awhile. Anyhow, until the customs guards saw fit to pull him out.

Michael Quinn turned back to Henshaw, staring grim-lipped at his earthbound officer. Michael dusted his hands in satisfaction. "Now," he said, "about your outbound cargo."

The captain recovered his speech, but not his temper. "Yeah," he growled. "We've got no accommodations for passengers. I'm taking no Chinese. They'd eat up all the profits for the voyage. Why, meals for half a thousand coolies from here to Canton would run into money."

"No," Michael corrected him. "You're wrong. These Chinamen are dead."

Henshaw paled. "Dead! Now, look, Quinn——"

MICHAEL raised a placating hand. He nodded at the dray as it swung past them onto the dock. It was loaded with small wooden boxes, each one lettered with Cantonese characters.

"Dust and bones is all you're carrying, Cap'n. It's an old Chinese custom. You see, burial in foreign soil is utter calamity to the old-time Chinaman. They feel that their lost souls will wander through eternity, cut off from their ancestors and unknown to their sons. They'll pay most any price for burial in their own land, so I persuaded Wa Lin to gather all his tong members together and form a—well, a burial association, I guess you'd call it. They all donated to a common fund to have the remains of their brother members who have died here, shipped back home."

Michael paused, then continued. "It's not what you'd call a permanent commerce, exactly," he admitted, "but what with a hundred Oriental boothills scattered up and down the state it ought to flourish for awhile. You satisfied, Captain?"

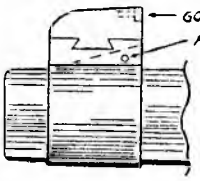
Henshaw passed a bewildered hand across his jaw. "Well, yes," he answered finally, "but how you ever thought of——"

Michael let the question hang there. No use trying to explain some things to a world traveler like Henshaw. Like, for instance, how a man with ideas could nearly always put local knowledge to work, given proper thought. Thinking about it, Michael grinned. He turned aside and spat, missing Samuel Purdy's mud-caked eye by calculated inches.

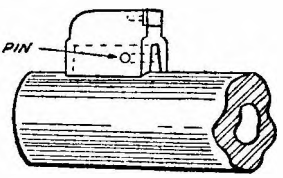
THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by PETE KUHLHOFF

Handguns and Black Bears



SKETCH A



SKETCH B

A MAINE reader writes:

I have been a devoted reader of your "Shooter's Corner" for quite a spell, and find just one fault with it. It's too short. I'm all for organizing a campaign to pressure for a bigger department.

I grew up with a gun and flyrod. Spent most of my weekends through the fishing season in back of the hills.

Decided it might be a good idea to tote a handgun on some of the trips I make alone. So I picked up an Army Spec. caliber .38 couple of years back. The fixed sights grouped the slugs at 8 o'clock. So I built

a sight band with dovetail slot enabling me to get windage with my front sight which I built at the right calculated height to group my shots at aiming point.

The original blade I cut down leaving 1/8" or so which served as a key for my new base, finally drove a pin through the whole hookup. See Sketch A.

Bead was turned to 1/16" (copper alloy). By the way, I'm going to build an adjustable rear sight with square (Partridge type) notch, and build a new front sight with a bead of above stated alloy, but flat-topped and post-shaped. I'll build it with sufficient height to allow for the raised sighting plane occasioned by my proposed rear.

I filed my keyway in the new base at an angle so it runs out and doesn't show at the front. I bored the sleeve so I got a drive fit just right on the taper of the barrel, and the outfit looks pretty neat. Now, if I ever chance to look up some time into the face of a cat while I'm fishing, he sure wants to cut his visit short in a hurry.

Bears never have bothered me by being inquisitive, but up here there have been a few cases of the critters pulling capers that the book doesn't mention!

Probably I'll never meet a cranky actor, but nevertheless, I would appreciate a bit of information as follows:

1. Would the regular 158-gr., .38 Spec. load drill the skull of a husky black bear?

2. How much bone would need to be drilled to reach the brain cavity? Side on, and quartering head on?

3. Should aiming point be the butt of the ear, side on? Or a mite higher?

4. What would be the target's size and shape (brain cavity) location?

5. Would a bear standing erect facing the shooter offer any chance for a quick kill at close range? (I doubt it, too!)

6. I'm pretty well acquainted with these black fellers, and don't plan any heroic stunts; just want to know exactly what I can do at close range if I ever have the occasion to do it.

7. Would the Super Speed load be enough better to warrant using it?

8. Winchester puts out two .22 L. R. semi-autos. I'm interested in the lower-priced of the two. How is the let-off?

9. Could you list .22 L. R. semi-auto's that do have a decent trigger pull? IF ANY.

Thanks a heap if you find time to pass along the dope.

H. B. F.

Wilton, Maine

Quite a large number of sportsmen enjoy carrying a handgun while wandering through fields and wood. I know I do. Generally speaking, the big-game hunter who carries a large caliber pistol to augment his fire power is looked on as a tenderfoot. The theory is—if you can't stop 'em with a high-power rifle, a pistol certainly won't be of much help. And as for hunting big game with a handgun—well, most experienced hunters are definitely agin it!

One time out in Pennsylvania I came across a hunter who was armed with a .270-caliber rifle and a heavy Colt .45-caliber revolver in a holster strapped around his waist. His answer to my query as to what the hand cannon was to be used, was, "For finishing off wounded game." My thought at the time, and still is—why not carry an extra rifle cartridge? It'd weigh a lot less!

Let's take a look at this business of putting new sights on a pistol and then take up with the idea of shooting a black bear in the head mit said handgun.

It's fun doing minor remodeling on guns, and it gives them that personal touch so desired by gun fans.

I have put quite a few sights (both fixed and adjustable) on handguns, and have through bitter experience, come to the conclusion that good strong fixed sights are best for a general utility or field gun. These sights, in my estimation, should be adjusted to one cartridge (load) and never changed. On the other hand, the target pistol should have reliable adjustable sights, the adjustments being of the micrometer type.

I like a good, wide front blade, say about ⅛", with a square flat-faced gold inlay at the top. This flat inlay tends to do away with the change of zero encountered with the bead sight when the light changes—from one side or the other.

The opening in the rear sight should be of sufficient width to give a good light streak on both sides of the front blade when held in aiming position.

Most handguns have the rear sight milled into the top strap. With this arrangement the only way to adjust for horizontal deviation is to bend the blade of the front sight, and file for elevation. Get the thing zeroed and stick to that particular type and brand of ammunition if you want to do good shooting.

It is fairly easy to file a dovetail crossways into the rear of the top strap of a revolver, and make a tight-fitting rear sight that can be zeroed for windage by careful tapping with a lead or brass hammer. When making file cuts on a front sight, or anywhere else on a gun, it is a good idea to cover the surrounding area with adhesive tape as it is almost impossible to keep from giving it a nick now and then, no matter how careful you are.

For the fellow who likes to tinker and is short on tools, a front sight may be easily made without the barrel band as shown in the sketch. The top half of the factory sight is filed off and a new sight sawed and filed from a piece of cold rolled or tool steel to fit down over the remaining half left on the barrel. To be pinned on, after being completed, with a piece of 1/16" or less round drill rod. Or, in a pinch, part of a nail of proper size may be used.

The making of a micrometer rear sight, with adjustments for both elevation and windage is a little too much for the average gun tinkerer—so it's a better idea to buy 'em from some good sight maker, say Walter Roper of Springfield, Massachusetts.

LET'S get on to the black bear business!

1. Yes, the 158-grain, .28 Special bullet would drill the skull of the average black bear at close range. A .22 Long Rifle bullet no doubt would also do the job, surely, if it went in at a perpendicular angle.

2. Over the brain cavity I believe the black bear's skull averages about ¼" thick, more so directly from the side under the ear, and even more quartering head on.

3. I'd say to aim at the base of the ear on a side shot, and a little higher if angling down.

4. As near as I know, the brain cavity of the average black bear is 4 or 5 inches long, about 3 inches wide in front and 4

inches wide in back, and located just above the eyes and rearward. Definitely not a very large target and one heck of a hard shot with a mad and excited bear coming full speed at you.

5. I know of a fellow who instantly killed a large black bear (standing and about to take a swipe at him) by firing the bullet of a .44-40 from a Colt Single Action army revolver, through the bear's mouth into the skull. I'd hate to chance it at such close range.

6. As you no doubt know, the black bear is a great bluffer. He will huff and puff and scare the daylights out of a person, but can usually be chased away with a stick. I know of no instance where a wild (remember I said "wild") black bear attacked a person without good reason. A wounded one may charge but in almost all cases will run away unless cornered. In which case he will fight until killed.

If you have ever hunted bear you know he is about as tough to stalk as game animals come. As a matter of fact, most black bears taken are killed by hunters who run into them accidentally while deer hunting. Stalking a deer is a pushover compared to trying to catch up with Mr. Bruin.

In the eastern states the average bear is about five feet long and 2½ or 3 feet high at the shoulder. Extra large ones may go to 6 feet in length and 3 feet high. The average in these states weighs from 250 to 300 pounds hog-dressed, the really big ones 400 to 500 pounds.

If I remember correctly, the record black bear killed in Pennsylvania weighed under 650 pounds hog-dressed.

For study, the black bear is the most interesting of all our game animals.

7. It depends on the shooter—if the extra recoil doesn't bother—I'd say every little bit helps!

8. For quite some time I messed around with a Winchester Model 74, semi-automatic rifle in .22 short caliber. It was very accurate and had a good trigger let-off. This little rifle is very easy to sight as the peep is mounted on the rear end of the bolt.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but this is the only modern .22 auto. that I have used to any great extent. Maybe sometime I'll get around to the several others on the market!

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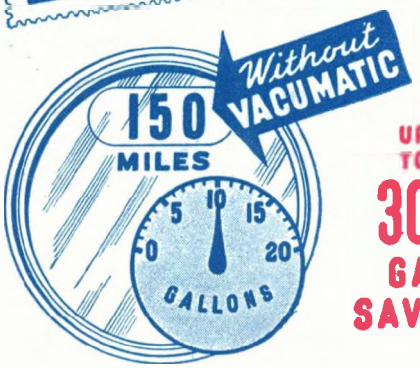

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