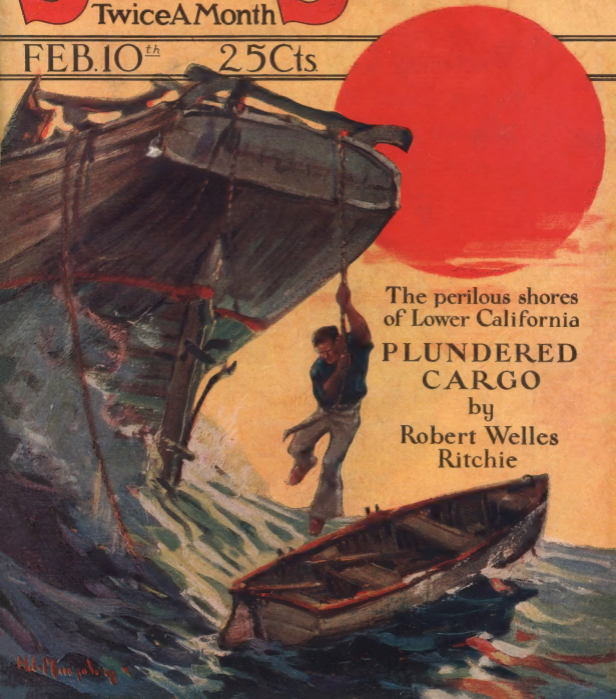


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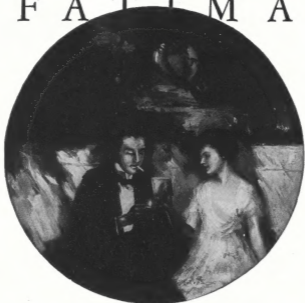
by
Robert Welles
Ritchie

W.C. Tuttle

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Short Stories



Vol. CXIV, No. 3

Whole No. 484

HARRY E. MAULE
EDITORD. McILWRAITH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

THE BULLY'S COMEUPPANCE


IN SPEAKING of the old time Western gun fighters last issue we mentioned the fact that most of them were killed in the end because people feared them so much that someone shot from behind. The point is obvious for us in modern life. There is a type of man whose self-esteem is never so well bolstered up as when he thinks he has made someone afraid of him. He is the domestic tyrant, the official martinet, the man who bullies in an argument. If he is a fairly successful bully he inspires fear as well as hatred in the hearts of his victims. For a time it tickles his vanity to think that people jump to do his bidding, that his wife and children are afraid of him and that people will not contradict him when he makes statements — false or not. But no man can carry this to its logical conclusion, for soon no facts would be true but those he got himself, all men would be such fools that only he could do a given job and no

advice would be of value to a being supreme. He would be a man alone, cut off from help and guidance by his very self-imagined supremacy. Of course in that way lies a well known form of insanity.


But what usually happens instead is that this petty tyrant gets his comeuppance from someone who is afraid of him. The strong men whose enmity he has incurred realize that he is hardly worth bothering about, because sooner or later he will trip himself up, if someone else doesn't.

It's the little fellow who is afraid of him who lays for him in a dark alley of business intrigue and stabs him in the back. No, no man can be a law unto himself these days. To get ahead and to be happy he must consider others, must have their cooperation and good will. Enemies every man must make, but let them be enemies who respect him rather than fear in their hate.

THE EDITOR.



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PLUNDERED CARGO

By ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

Author of "Light Ridin' Durry," "Rat-Tail Spills the Beans," etc.

THE EVENING BEGAN FOR HEADLONG SPIKE HORN IN A SAN FRANCISCO FERRIS WHEEL, AND ENDED WITH HIS FINDING HIMSELF SHANGLAIED ABOARD THE "LONNEY LEE," FORCED TO SHARE IN THAT CRAFT'S SOUTHWARD SEARCH FOR A TREASURE-LADEN HULK. SKIPPER STORRS RATED SPIKE AS DANGEROUS. IN THE LONELY WATERS OF THE GULF OF CALIFORNIA HE WELL PROVED HIS RIGHT TO THE RATING

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING A FERRIS WHEEL

BEFORE-The-Fire-San Francisco was the Land of Romance for a continent. The seven seas brought mysteries to be-unladen at her wharves. Mountains and deserts of the hinterland sent silent men to play strange games in her places of business and of pleasure. The city behind the Golden Gate was vibrant with the pulse of life, a little raw but spiced for strong palates.

There, in those times, a mahogany-colored monarch of the South Seas could launch a sugar king on his career by so small a circumstance as losing to him a third of his kingdom over jackpots in a hotel room. An untutored negress might make herself mistress of a fortune by voodoo magic. A black-birder and pirate wanted by three great powers could pass the collection plate of a Sunday ashore.

This tale, one whereon murder will be done and barratry—with shipwreck, and villainy finally unmasked—finds its beginning in that city of enchanted hills in those days of its earlier glory. And it is in tone that so trivial a circumstance as a breaking of the driving machinery of a Ferris wheel near the Cliff House should start

something destined to come to its climax in the Vermilion Sea.

A SHRILL whistle squeak told that the manager of the Ferris wheel had duly delivered to his customers five cents' worth of revolutions. The great swinging circle of lights slowed down to discharge passengers, car by descending car, on the platform between the giant struts supporting the axle. A man in a yachting cap and with a roll of tickets conveniently under his arm stood at the point of debarkation to urge another voyage.

"Hey, Bill, 'nother swing around the circle for you?" The ticket seller leaned through the gap in a swinging gondola's side to touch its single passenger on the elbow.

The one thus addressed roused himself from a doze. He lifted the rim of a hard derby from the bridge of his nose and gave the ticket vendor a searching look.

"You guarantee this's good for loss o' memory, spots before the eyes an' that tired feeling in the morning?"

"All of that and then some, Bill."

"Give me fi' dollars' worth, then."

This magnificent deal having been arranged, the passenger settled himself in his private gondola—paid for certainty for the rest of the night—and tilted the rim

of his derby back to the bridge of his nose to indicate that conversation was finished. His car swung upward. The Ferris wheel was merrily on its way. From over to the right of the revolving wheel, from the blazing windows of the Cliff House a hint of gay band music came winging down the keen north breeze. Nearer at hand, stretching from horizon to horizon north and south, the moon-dimpled Pacific floated its dishes of gold on changing waves. A lace of surf drew patterns along the shore far as the eye carried.

The giant wheel had made, say, three complete revolutions when a link in the endless chain drive between engine and axle snapped. The wheel stopped. It happened that with the stopping of the wheel the man who had bought five dollars' worth of rides was marooned in his gondola at the very top of the wheel's swing, a full seventy-five feet above the peanut shells on the beach. That circumstance meant nothing to him, at the moment, for he slept. But he presently awoke. It was cool up there, and the north wind blew into his ears and stirred the cobwebs which had stretched themselves across his brain. He pushed his derby up from his eyes and fixed his gaze on the box of light which was the distant Cliff House.

"Guess the old skip's stalled 'round the five hundred level," he murmured, and his hand automatically went out to find the hoist signal and give it a tug. Then he caught a glimpse of the ocean and knew he was not back in the Gold Lode mine shaft. He hooked his chin on the edge of the car and looked down. He saw the tops of the other cars ranged in a springing curve below him. A man's arm dangled from the one next down the rank.

"Hullo, down there!"

A wide brimmed black hat with a high creased crown was poked out from beneath the eaves of the car. The hat turned. A heavily bearded face twisted upward.

"Take your foot off the brake, Gran-paw!" bawled the young man in the car above.

"I have no foot on the brake, young fellow," the bearded one answered with great dignity.

Feeling a sociable need for further conversation, the young man of the upper car leaned swiftly out from the gondola, seized the roof edge and swung himself over it. Like a monkey he worked his way down amid steel struts until his feet plumped on the roof of the gondola he sought. A final swing and he was inside.

"Good even', Gran'paw," he said with a wide grin. "How's tricks?"

The elderly gentleman allowed his eyes to travel slowly over the vivid checks of the intruder's spring suit enwrapping an athletic figure until they came to rest on his features. Surprisingly blue eyes with a hint of the devil in them; wide mouth of a comedian and a sturdy chin thrusting out over a choker collar and cerise puff tie; that was the sum of them.

"Good evening to *you*, sir," the elderly gentleman finally replied with no visible excess of enthusiasm.

"There speaks a scholar and a gentleman!" The visitor clapped the venerable one on the knee with a resounding thwack. "Kind of man 'at makes the grade with ole Spike Horn—that's me; Spike for short. Put 'er there with ole Spike Horn!" Mr. Horn thrust out a paw in infectious camaraderie. The whiskered one was constrained to return the clasp.

"My name is Chitterly," he said, and his voice had a fine rumbling resonance as from long public speaking. "Old Doctor Chitterly is the title given me in affectionate testimony to my long and varied practice of medicine along the shores of the Pacific Slope from Vancouver to Ensenada; and if I do say it myself——"

"Doc, you're worth climbing down here just for a look-see." The younger man drew back in exaggerated pleasure of a connoisseur before a rare work of art.

An eye-filling picture indeed he saw. A gentleman of the old school was Doctor Chitterly; big bodied, lusty, competent. Massive shoulders stretched the Prince Albert coat of ancient cut. His generous white beard flowed down over a hard shirt bosom wherein a single diamond glimmered through the fog of the ultimate hairs. His eyes, innocent of specs, had a touch of humor under the heavy thatch of white brows. White hair cascaded down from beneath the wide brim of his old style hat to curl rakishly over the velvet collar of his coat. One would have said here was a railroad builder of the West's roaring Sixties miraculously preserved beyond the time of his contemporaries.

Had young Mr. Horn but known it, the worthy doctor in his way was quite as great a citizen as any golden spike driver on a trans-continental railroad. From the tail-board of his black and gold medicine wagon, last surviving chariot of a golden age of quackery, Old Doctor Chitterly had studied the world of men and women from a penetrating angle. He had conned the

heart of mankind through its every gullible weakness. Pain, real or imaginary, had stood folk before him stripped of all play masks of sham and pretense. Perhaps that is the reason a ripe humor lodged in his eyes.

Yes, a seasoned old gentleman was Doctor Chitterly.

"How come you all by your lone in this big wheel, Doc?" inquired Mr. Horn vivaciously.

"Mr.—um—Spike, this is a custom of mine, riding in a public wheel on Saturday night. If I find myself on a Saturday night in a city which boasts one of these—ah—conveniences I ride in it. Change, you know. I've ridden horizontally in pursuit of my profession so many thousand miles it's a real novelty to ride—shall we say perpendicularly."



For all young Horn's boisterous humor—not untongued by stimulus alcoholic—and despite his taking of liberties with one's dignity, the good doctor began to find himself drawn to the gaudy rascalion before him. Before the pounding and tinkering noises below gave way to the creaking of the repaired wheel Doctor Chitterly learned that his young friend Spike had sold his interest in the Golden Lode mine at Goldfield for one hundred thousand dollars; that he'd come to San Francisco to "build a fire under the town"; that he had a private trolley car carrying an Italian stringed orchestra of five pieces and a colored bottle opener waiting his pleasure on a spur track over by the Casino.

And the good Doc had gotta come along! Just gotta! No fr'ens in town, Horn hadn't.

Vainly did Doctor Chitterly protest that a private sightseeing car with a five-piece stringed orchestra and a negro butler was a bit gaudy for one of his profession. When their car was once on earth Doctor Chitterly found his arm imprisoned by Spike's arm, and he was rushed through the pleasure grounds to where a brilliantly lighted car stood on a rusty spur behind the dancing pavilion, an admiring and expectant throng about it. With the air of an emperor Mr. Horn shouldered a way for himself and his patriarchal friend through

the crowd at the steps. He pushed Doctor Chitterly, resisting feebly, through the door into the luxurious interior. An obsequious colored man popped into a cubby as if on a signal and reappeared with a napkin wrapped about the neck of an opulent bottle.

"Where now, Mr. Horn?" A motorman in special uniform entered from the front platform. "Can switch to any track in the city."

"Let's play all the switches then. No fav'rites, mind you. Let 'er rollick!"

They trundled away from the Casino to a derisive cheer from the envious. Doctor Chitterly took the fizzing glass offered him diffidently and against the promptings of long conviction.

Spike called his attention to the mountainous figure of a man asleep in a chair behind the musicians' palms.

"See that li'l fellah?" Spike whispered as if in the presence of the great. "Great li'l man, eh? That's Walla-Walla, the Iron Man! Found him in Thalia—you know: vaudeville theatre. Let you hit him in the rear with billiard cue, ball bat, anything. Hit him hard's you can for only two bits—that's Walla-Walla, the Iron Man. There's talent for you!"

CHAPTER II

FATE AMID THE CABBAGES

THE motorman of the chartered car gave Spike Horn's sailing orders the widest interpretation, doubtless arguing to himself that there was little use getting back on the more crowded network of the traction system where he would have to arrange for meeting and passing other cars on regular schedule. He chose, therefore, to follow the most roundabout way back to the city from the playgrounds around the Cliff House, traveling along the new line around Twin Peaks. At this hour, which was approaching midnight, he would not meet an outgoing trolley, on these sand dune wastes, oftener than once in thirty minutes. He knew the location of the brief intervals of double track where he could draw aside to make the passing.

So a frame of blazing light went rocketing through a fog wilderness, trailing fugitive strains of music.

Within the snug security of the palace car all was well. Though Doctor Chitterly did not believe in spirituous liquors, ardent waters in a square bottle once having been responsible for his being marooned in his nightshirt on an equatorial dot in the Paci-

fic, yet his soul of politeness would not permit a refusal.

The second glass did not give so serious a wrench to his convictions. The third still less.

Doctor Chitterly suddenly recalled that in the brave days of the Seventies when he was a young buck in the Mother Lode country of Plumas he was counted no slouch of a singer. He set his glass on a table, arose and motioned the orchestra to quiet. He caroled lustily:

*In a valley—peaceful valley—of the
mountings*

Where twines the colum-bine,

A maiden—beut-chous maiden—had a—

The car floor arose in a mustang leap—plumped down. Crash of glass—a single wild call from harp strings. Darkness.

Doctor Chitterly and Spike were thrown together in a clawing heap when the car vaulted. For a half minute the latter was content to feel himself over for broken limbs, cursing volubly. Finally he managed to light a match. Its feeble flame revealed a narrow area of confusion: overturned tables, a guitar speared through the sounding board by a champagne bottle, one of the orchestra plucking fronds of palm from his collar.

The voice of the motorman called from up forward where the control platform was: "All right, gents! Just jumped the track an 'plowed into a sandbank. Soon's I can get the trolley pole over to the wire we'll have some light."

The scrambled passengers did not await that event. Host, guests, musicians and colored attendant groped their way to the rear platform and so out into a clammy world of fog. Even the somnolent Iron Man, Walla-Walla, had been wrenched back to life by the accident.

A cursory hand-groping around the stalled car revealed more than a casual track-jumping. All the conductor's attempts to re-establish current connection by way of the trolley pole were vain. In brief, the palace car would stay there until a wrecking crew arrived.

"Where are we, Bill?" Spike Horn put the question to the motorman in a voice of restored good humor.

"Down below Ingleside, I guess," the other answered.

"How long before a reg'lar car comes along to take us back to the city?"

"First car due here 'bout seven in the

mornin'. Passed the last owl car back at No. 2 switch."

"How far t' nearest telephone, Bill? Maybe we can catch a brace of hacks to come fetch the outfit into town."

The motorman, hardly visible in the swirling smoke wreathes of fog, waved an indefinite direction down the track.

"Maybe half mile from here y'oughta hit the Four Corners. Wake up the little pill-roller whose red and yellow lamps burn all night. Me, I gotta stay with the car."

Spike organized his relief expedition. The colored man refused to budge; no "prowlin' 'round" for him. One only of the five musicians consented to accompany Spike, the doctor and the Iron Man on the hunt for a 'phone. Promising the motorman that he would send in a call to the car barns for a wrecking crew, Spike and the three set out over the shifty footing of the sand between the rails.

A ghostly pilgrimage. The fog was pressing down so densely it entered the lungs like wood smoke—slightly stinging. To the left a suggested row of eucalyptus trees marched with them; a ghostly pat-pat of condensed moisture falling from their rags of foliage kept time to their pace. On the right an unseen cabbage field distilled a rancid odor. The sand clung to their feet like muck. Occasionally one of the quartette stubbed a toe on a projecting tie and pitched against a fellow before him.

They had progressed thus perhaps fifteen minutes away from the wrecked car when a vagrant gust of wind tore a rent in the fog curtain. For the space of half a minute a light shone, startlingly near, off in the direction of the odorous cabbages.

"That's our drugstore," Spike shouted and turned abruptly down the bank upon which the rails ran. The others followed. They came to a barbed wire fence and scrambled under and over. Then the fog closed as suddenly as it had parted and the light was snuffed out.

"Well, anyway, we know where that light was," Spike cheered and he kicked over a cabbage head with his first stride into the field. Then a neat game of guess-work: finding a place where a light had shone.

They blundered and they back-tracked. Once again the fog shredded to reveal a smear of yellow behind them. They about-faced for the new position. Suddenly a dog yapped in the gray fluff ahead. The sound of a slammed door came to their ears.

Spike, in the lead, plumped against a

crazy picket fence, half fallen. Beyond that he could discern the dim outline of a house with ghostly finger dabs representing windows. But no light.

"I should say," ventured Doctor Chitterly, "that whoever lives here was mighty unsociable. That light we saw was in one of those windows not two minutes ago."



A shaggy black dog came bullying out to bay and snap at their heels. Spike strode to

the door, the others in a hesitant knot a few paces behind him.

The man from Goldfield thundered on the door with his fist. "Hey, inside there!" he challenged. Silence. He beat again with impatient knuckles.

"Open up in there!"

Suddenly came to the ears of the adventurers in the dooryard the pad-pad of running feet. They heard the dog, whom they had beaten off, vent a triumphant bay. Before they could turn in their tracks a half dozen shadowy shapes had swept down on them, coming around either corner of the house. These were the shapes of men carrying rifles.

A scream from the Italian musician as he turned to run. A rifle butt thudded on the back of his neck and he went down. After that no sound but the labored breathing of men in combat, fists against clubbed rifles and revolver butts short-hafted for hammer blows.

There could be but one result of so one-sided a struggle. In no time Spike Horn, the dizzy spender, a worthy vendor of Squaw Root Tonic, an Iron Man and a flute player were triced like fowls.

"Bring them inside the house," commanded a voice as gentle as a woman's.

CHAPTER III SHANGHAI

THE four individuals whose fortunes thus brought them to a bleak house in the cabbage fields would have to be considerably less than human if what occurred there did not leave them with their reasoning faculties decidedly scrambled. The four found themselves bound with ropes, dumped in a pitch dark and unfurnished chamber within the house, dumped unceremoniously like so many potato sacks. They heard a door close and the sound of a key in the lock. Then absolute silence. For a long minute each pri-

soner was busy with his own mental machinery, adjusting himself to the results of overwhelming surprise.

"Well," in a growl from Spike Horn, "I'll say this takes the cake!"

"A much more serious matter than a cake appears to be involved here, my young friend," spoke the measured thought of the doctor. "I for one feel that I have a rising somewhere on my head, though I can't get my hands up to feel it. People do not produce risings on other people's heads with blows of some blunt instrument without reason. Now if we only knew the reason——"

"Aw, you make me tired, whoever you are," came brusque interruption of a soft tenor voice somewhere near. "Don't you know a hold-up when you see it—or feel it? Cripes, I guess my arm's broke from the way it feels!"

A chuckle from the irrepressible Spike. "The Iron Man! Walla-Walla, who lets you hit him in the pants with a ball bat, gets a wallop out of bounds an' yells about it! Oh, Mama!"

"You crazy drunk!" the disembodied tenor retorted. "Wait'll I get my hands untied and we'll see who's an Iron Man! 'F I hadn't met up with you and fallen for your dizzy talk I'd be settin' in a peaceful game of pinochle in the back room of Barney Moore's right now, 'stead of——"

A footfall sounded outside the door of their prison chamber. A thin ray of light shone under the bottom of the door. The key grated in the lock. Back swung the door and a man entered the room. He carried a ship's lantern: a squat, black affair with light streaming through a corded round of glass lens. By a curious trick the spray of light revealed no more than the boot toes of him who carried it; not even the hand holding the bale of the lantern was visible. The light danced like some illuminated feather duster over the figures of the four propped against the wall: the flute player, Spike Horn, the Iron Man and finally in a far corner, Old Doctor Chitterly.

"Well, well!" It was again that soft voice the prisoners had heard at the conclusion of the brief battle outside the house.

"Well, well, gentlemen, here we are! I've been expecting this visit and so was ready to receive you."

"You received us all right," was the doughty Spike's rejoinder given with light truculence. "My watch is in my right vest pocket an' you'll find a handful of gold

down my pants pocket, you cheap lead pipe artist!"

A quiet laugh sounded behind the lantern. "Pretty bluff! The people who hire you, young man, know very well I'm not in the footpad business."

Once more the whiskbroom of light slowly brushed the faces of the four prisoners, ranged backs against the wall. It crossed the patriarchal beard of the doctor and then returned to linger upon his features.

"Aren't you rather an elderly man to be mixed up in this sort of game?" asked the voice.

"Not too old to thrash you thoroughly if you'll give me the use of my hands," the valiant Chitterly replied. "I don't know what business you have in mind. I don't know who you are nor what may be your wretched reason for assault upon my person. I am a physician and known from Vancouver to Ensenada as Old——"

"An' I playa da flute—me," came the



hurried interjection from an unlighted space along the wall. Instantly the round eye of light bored the features of the unfortunate musician: the tight curled, highly glossed mustache, the staring eyes in olive slits.

"A-ha! A physician and a flute player, eh? I see that the *Lonney Lee* won't lack for talent. Now gentlemen—your pardon!"

The invisible speaker knelt before the doctor and, keeping the lantern light dazlingly on his face, searched his pockets with careful thoroughness. What he found therein—a memorandum book, an old-fashioned wallet of vast proportions, some printed dodgers extolling the merits of Squaw Root Tonic—he carefully perused under the lantern ray, then returned everything intact. The others, watching these proceedings intently, could see the play of heavy hands wherein strength was proclaimed by the stubbed fingers and breadth of back; but of the rest of their inquisitor not a vestige showed.

Each of the other three was subjected to this search. The man behind the lantern chuckled when the Iron Man's intimate possessions showed several pawn tickets and a Chinese lottery chance stamped in red and black lozenges like our present day

crossword puzzle. He bunched the pledges and the lottery ticket significantly.

"Cause and effect," he laughed.

Spike kept up a running fire of provocative comment when the big hands were pawing over his treasures—a gold and purple garter, a cigarette picture of Jimmy Britt, pugilist. The hands opened the pages of a new bank book which showed a deposit of \$100,000 dated but two days back.

"Ah, yes!" came the satisfied exclamation. "But a hundred thousand! They were not at all stingy in providing funds, now were they?"

"Why, you big Swede, my interest was worth twice that," was Spike's bullying rejoinder. He had the feel of unseen eyes boring him.

"Your interest, eh? So you're the mysterious third party in this business? Well, let me tell you, young fellow, now that you're where you are and I'm where I am, your interest isn't worth a plugged Mexican peso. I had thought a minute ago maybe I'd made a mistake—thought perhaps you four men blundered onto us here by mistake. But this little item of a hundred thousand, and what you say about 'your interest'—well, I don't need to know more."

"My dear sir!" Doctor Chitterly's agitated voice came booming from the dark flank. "We came here just to find a telephone. Our car—our pleasure car suffered an accident. This young man, Mr. Horn, whom I scarcely know, told me he'd sold——"

"Aw, shut up, Doc!" Spike muttered. "More you talk to this gazabo the nuttier he gets."

The voice behind the lantern purred on as if no interruption had come: "Of course, you know, gentlemen, I could do away with you. But I only consider murder when there's no other course. Out-of-hand murder never pays. Luckily for you, it will serve my purpose just as well to take you along with me on the *Lonney Lee*; we're short handed anyway, I think we'll get along very well together provided you discover at the start I am master."

The light lifted from the floor and began to back toward the door.

"And I would advise you, gentlemen, to make that discovery as to who's master without any prompting from me. I can be a hard man, and lay to that!"

"Meester!" came the despairing wail from the musician; "Meester, I swear I on'y playa da flute—me!"

"So much the better," purred the voice,

and the door shut behind it.

Before the prisoners had a chance to collect their wits men came in to lift them, bound as they still were, and carry them like so much cordwood to be loaded into a farm wagon outside the house. On their backs on the hard wagon bed, with the fog pressing down on their faces, they were jolted and tortured by the ruts of a country road for three endless hours. Where the fringe of truck gardens tributary to the city markets ceased wilderness commenced—a wilderness of crags overhanging the sea, of bald mountains and marshes where inlets of salt water backed into the land.

It must have been at Abalone Cove just north of the broad swing of Halfmoon Bay that the wagon stopped. Those on the floor saw the driver above them light a lantern and, standing on the seat, wave it up and down in slow arcs. The sound of the sea on a beach was very nigh.

After what seemed an interminable time, Chinamen appeared at the wagon tail and cut the ropes which bound the prisoners' feet. They were dragged out to the ground and, each with a guard, were bidden to hoof it. A short cut through furze, the feel of yielding sand, and at the end of a brief journey unceremonious booting over the gunnel of a yawl pulled half way out of the reach of waves. The boat was shoved off.

Before many minutes the loom of a hull suddenly cut out of the thinning fog. A rancid smell of fish oil and opium—typical Chinatown smell—stung their nostrils. The yawl drew alongside, and bare yellow arms stretched down to receive the prisoners, half lifted over-side by the rowers. A Chinaman directed they stand over against a mast.

Sound of a second boat approaching. The shanghaied ones saw a heavy shouldered man in blue sea-jacket and vized cap come over-side. Instantly he turned to a group of slattern, yellow men showing in the light of a lantern fixed to the mainmast and called with a voice of authority: "Hoist those boats aboard! Be spry about it!"

There was a creaking of fall-blocks.

The man in the sea-jacket called back into the darkness of the after-deck: "Turn over your engine, Mr. Hansen." Then once more to the Chinamen: "Man the winlass! On the jump!"

From the darkness forward came the mutter of anchor chain crawling through the hawse-holes. Aft a gasoline engine was put-putting fretfully.

"Quarter speed ahead, Mr. Hansen. For'ard there, heave in!"

All this with not so much as a look from the skipper toward the group of bound wretches under the mainmast lantern. But for their arms triced at their backs, the luckless four might have been willing passengers for all they seemed to count.

They heard the anchor come dripping up to the cathead. They felt the throb of the



floating rags of fog.

Suddenly, bound as he was, Spike Horn made a dash for the side. He had mounted the gunnel of the yawl lately dropped in its chocks there and was poised for a desperate leap overboard when the skipper intervened. A cat-like bound brought him below Spike's vantage. One hand caught the tail of his jacket and jerked him backward. Even as he toppled a stinging blow from the skipper's right smashed under his ear. Spike spun around in midair and fell on his face along the deck.

His miserable companions saw the fingers of the boy's bound hands twitch convulsively as if in a signal.

CHAPTER IV

QUARTERDECK LAW

A BLEARY sun with shreds of cold scud driven across its face by a boisterous north wind. Great gray seas tipped with spindrift heaving and tumbling in a pantomime of resistless force. Landward and miles off a succession of bleak mountains marching in line like elephants, whose feet came straight down to kick a froth of surf at the ocean's edge. Alone in the water waste the hundred and twenty ton schooner *Lonney Lee*, trim of line and rig, was running close-hauled to the wind with mainsail, foresail and both jibs rock-hard under the thrust of the breeze. Her forefoot turned up a wound of white water which sang along

her counter and went streaming out in a troubled trail behind.

On the quarterdeck, where a stolid Chinaman grasped the wheel spokes, an interesting tableau was presented to the sun's misty eye. The big skipper stood a little aft of the binnacle, hands in pockets of his blue sea-jacket, a smile of mild cynicism parting the sparse graying beard which ringed mouth and chin like a rusty fetter. Before him, standing unsteadily and suffering pangs of seasickness, were the sorry remnants of Spike Horn's beach party. They had been routed from behind water butts and dark holes of the fo'c's'le where in abject misery they had crawled when first their bonds were cut on leaving Abalone Cove. At the skipper's direction they had been stripped of their shore togs, with the exception of the Iron Man, the sickest of the lot, and arrayed in nondescripts from the *Lonney Lee's* none-too-complete slop chest—in reality pegs in the paint closet whereon a previous crew had left their cast-offs.

Old Doctor Chitterly wore a pair of Chinaman's cotton trousers, had Cantonese rattan shoe-packs on his feet, and his hard glazed shirt, from which his diamond stud blazed defiantly, was covered by a sleazy jacket inches short, from the arms of which his wrists and big hands protruded like cypress stubs.

Spike Horn carried a challenging grin over the collar of a patched slicker, although his face was putty. His loud checked trousers peeped under the hem of the oilskin and his patent leather "tooth-pick" shoes had been replaced by brogans which might be rated worse than second-hand. The unfortunate flute player, whose name might well be Angelo, had compromised with his changed status by shedding his jacket in favor of a Chinaman's denim smock, very greasy and smelling to the wide heavens.

I said the skipper's smile was one of mild cynicism. There was more cynicism behind that in his demeanor as he let his eye rove over the tattered malion crew who had assembled at his summons three hours after the anchor was cat-headed. The easy assumption of mastery was in his mien; he was master of the schooner *Lonney Lee*, and was the law between sea and sky so long as salt water ran under the schooner's foot. Whatever other advantage he fancied to be his, this prerogative went with his master's certificate, and of course he was sensible of the fact.

"Men," he began in that baffling voice of mildness the four had marked in the room of the house of the cabbage fields when a speaking light was their only introduction, "men, we're going to make a voyage together and it might as well be understood here and now that Cap'n Judah Storrs is master of this schooner, the *Lonney Lee*. It happened to suit my convenience to press you in to fill a short crew. You understand you're to take orders from me and from my mate, Mr. Hansen." Captain Storrs jerked a thumb to indicate where a slouching man of Scandinavian stamp leaned against the rail, a dull humor in his eyes.

"Ye-ah, an' we'll get you for this first chance comes up!" Spike growled his defiance with his never failing grin. Captain Storrs acknowledged the threat with a broadening smile.

"Mr. Man, a little piece of advice to you—and I see already you are going to be the hardest to persuade with advice only. While you're aboard this schooner and under command of Cap'n Judah Storrs it'll be best for you to 'vast any notion of 'getting' your skipper. Men have tried that before and found themselves tidily stowed away in a shark's belly. A *corpus delicti* is mighty hard to discover in a shark's belly, and any sea lawyer'll tell you that."

The doughty Spike was on the point of compounding a breach of sea discipline by further speech when Doctor Chitterly's uplifted hand stayed him. By a mighty effort the doctor rallied his shreds of dignity, although his stomach was giving him a great deal of trouble, and he spoke in his best medicine wagon manner.

"Captain Judah Storrs, sir," he said, "we have a just grievance against you. Or perhaps our present situation is due—ah—to an unfortunate misunderstanding. You may see for yourself we are not sailors. I, for example, am the discoverer of Squaw



Root Tonic, an unparalleled elixir, the secret of which was imparted to me by the widow of a Medoc chief. This man here—" he pointed to the miserable Walla-Walla —"makes his living I am told by letting

people strike him in the most resistant part of his body with a baseball bat; not an elevating profession, I admit, nor one necessarily qualifying him to be a sailor.

"Captain Judah Storrs, sir, I give you my solemn word of honor as a medical man that before last night I never so much as set my eyes on any of these men; that I have no part in any—um—conspiracy such as you intimated when we were made your prisoners last night. This—um—kidnapping—not to put too fine a point to the word—works a decided inconvenience upon me personally, and I demand to be put ashore."

"Demand, eh?" The gray fetter of whisker about Captain Judah's lips suddenly became elastic.

"Well—um—request," the good doctor amended lamely.

"Neatly spoken, Doctor!" the skipper applauded. "I think, since you know nothing about sailing, I'll make you my second mate and let you divide watches with Mr. Hansen. No second mate knows anything about navigation anyway, so you'll fill the bill. You'll move your things—" he paused to iron out a grin with the back of a hand—"you'll move your shore coat and shoes aft and mess with me."

Some instinct of sea craft prompted Doctor Chitterly to quit his position among the vagabonds and step across an invisible line of authority to stand beside the skipper. He tried to put a look of severity into his eyes as he gazed across a gulf of four feet at his erstwhile companions.

"Any of you three swabs know how to cook?" Captain Judah plumped the question suddenly. Angelo the flute player smote himself on the chest resoundingly.

"Cook? Tha's me! One time secon' cook by Fior d'Italia rest'ra', San Francis'. Ravioli, vermicelli, all da *pasta*: that's me, Angelo!"

"In the galley for you and out goes Hop Wo, the worst cook that ever burned a slum. You—" Captain Judah's finger speared at the Iron Man—"are you the man that takes a ball bat before breakfast?"

The moon face of the Iron Man, green as Roquefort, turned sickly toward his interrogator.

"Well, Bat, you look strong. The galley for you—potwrastrer for little Angelo here. Now, you three, get for'ard."

Walla-Walla and Angelo moved uncertainly to the short flight dropping from the quarter-deck. Spike Horn remained, slouching in his scarecrow rig, his eyes challenging the skipper's.

"You heard me! Get for'ard!" The skipper made two swift strides. His right hand flashed out from a pocket of his sea-

jacket. Brass knuckles gleamed dully across the back of his fist. Spike set himself and launched a wide swing at the whiskered chin. By a lightning side-step the skipper dodged and sent in a short hook to Spike's point.

Down he crashed, rolled over once and lay face upward, arms spread-eagled. The captain of the *Lonney Lee* stepped to the side of the prone figure and stamped once with his boot heel upon the upturned features.

A wave of nausea rippled upward from Doctor Chitterly's solar plexus. He covered his eyes. "Dear God!" he moaned.

As if it was a matter of the day's work, one of the Chinese rats from up for'ard came padding bare-footed with a bucket and line. He dropped the bucket overboard and sluiced the unconscious man twice, thrice.

Spike sat up; studied the hand that came bloodied from his face; clapped exploring fingers to his mouth. He tossed two teeth overboard, then grinned wryly at the back of Skipper Judah by the wheel.

Spike went for'ard with the Chinamen.

CHAPTER V

DIVIDENDS OF SIN

A WEEK OUT FROM the questionable port of Abalone Cove.

The stiff north winds which had carried the *Lonney Lee* down the coast suddenly died with the passing of San Clemente Island, and the schooner made bare steering way, jibs and tops'ls limp as bed sheets between vagrant puffs of zephyrs.

An African heat dropped upon the ocean; a shriveling furnace breath straight off the deserts behind San Diego where September marks the climax of summer's torridity. The sky was a thin plate of superheated brass riveted upon the horizon. The sea appeared molten tallow, viscid, filmed over by grease globules wherever a capful of wind dropped. Only twice in twenty-four hours did sea and sky return to familiar aspect and then in an exaggerated degree. At dawn and sunset, especially at the latter hour, the ether was a crystal sphere deep as the universe itself, through which flowed unimaginable colors. Then the sea became a mirror to distort and blend violets and golds and ruby reds into a breath-taking pattern.

Land still showed off the port bow—it never had been out of sight. But it was an unreal land. Tenuous blue mountains,

which at dawn showed bare and ragged and by sunset became black iron palings, fenced the eastern horizon. Distance half veiled a stark brutality, a portent of slow death awaiting any luckless one who might be cast upon this inhospitable coast.

All of this was background for the bit of yeasty life being played on the *Lonney Lee*. Between bowsprit and taffrail ran cross-currents of passion which the heat and hours of mid-day breathlessness served only to aggravate. Under the surface of affairs psychic forces were constantly coursing: blood lust, mounting promptings of savagery—even, in time, the popping of bubbles in the brain pan of the least stable intelligence aboard this floating half-portion of life.

Not a man on the *Lonney Lee*, except perhaps the dull Mr. Hansen who lacked the imagination of a cockroach, who did not feel the prickle of portents.

Spike Horn, seven days after he had started out to build a fire of easy money under gay San Francisco, was at war with the whole immediate world except Doctor Chitterly; and him he held only in disdainful tolerance. It was Spike Horn against every other damned man on the ship, yellow, white or olive tinted. The major force of his antagonism was directed, of course, against Captain Judah Storrs.

He only bided an opportunity to kill the skipper. No middle ground for the rage that boiled like hot pitch through his veins; it was kill Captain Judah or be killed by him. No man, in Spike's very direct code of personal ethics, could put the mark of his boot heel on Spike Horn's face and get away with it. He'd stand being knocked



down in a fair fight, Spike would; he'd take his medicine if anybody could give him a licking straight and above the belt. But to be brass-knuckled and then stamped on when he was out, that was a killing matter.

Captain Judah sensed the temper that was in him and was vigilantly on his guard. He never approached the man he'd marked but that one hand stayed in his pocket; and it took no sharp eye to see the bulge a revolver butt made in the cloth. He took care, the skipper did, that wherever he

went on his schooner, day or night, the deckhouse, a mast or a rail should be close at his back. Yet the odd humor of the man twisted these precautions into a sort of game, as a tiger tamer might conceal his whip upon entering his cage of beasts. He developed the trick of standing a little away from where his enemy was at work upon some wretched task and letting his cold blue eyes follow every swing of an arm, each bending of the back. This sometimes for an hour on end, with not a word spoken by either.

And Captain Judah exercised sweet ingenuity in the appointment of these tasks. During the first days of the voyage there was brass to be polished and the windlass to be scraped and repainted. He saved the most heart-racking job for the hot weather he knew would befall. That was the chipping of rust from the anchor chain.

The skipper had the fathoms of heavy links stretched on the fo'c's'le deck in massy parallels of sullen steel, then set Spike to work with a shortened cold chisel and a maul scaling the rust off link by link. A paint job would follow the chipping.

Without cover from the grilling sun, the youth who had one hundred thousand dollars written on his bankbook's credit side started his slave work. He had cajoled a coolie's wicker hat from a Chinese fo'c's'le mate; this sat on his head like a mammoth toadstool. Shreds of a silk shirt and his loud checked trousers, now grimed and grease stained, completed his rigging. Whenever Captain Judah mounted his tantalizing vigil by the windlass Spike put on his dogged grin which could not be drowned by sweat.

Doctor Chitterly ventured to expostulate with the skipper the second day of this torture. Not at all sure of his own somewhat honorary position as second mate, nevertheless the worthy discoverer of Squaw Root Tonic risked his peacock feather.

"Captain Storrs, sir," he suggested, "I do not know exactly what may be a schooner's equipment; but if there might be such a thing aboard as—um—a sea umbrella which could be raised over that poor young man's head—"

"Mr. Chitterly," spoke the skipper's suave voice, "I regret to say that the *Lonney Lee* left her sea umbrella at home." And that was that.

A word as to Spike's status in the fo'c's'le, which the Iron Man, Angelo the flute player and impressed cook and he himself shared with six scurvy offscour-

ings from Canton. That fo'e's'le was a ten-by-twelve corner of Bedlam.

The Iron Man cordially hated Horn as the cause of the misfortune which had been visited upon him. Had not this loud-mouth plucked him from the dramatic stage where he had earned an honest living by being smitten with ball bats and billiard cues and singing "Asleep In the Deep" between spoonfuls of beer? What chance of getting back to the artistic life? And what about five bucks a day with cakes?

Angelo's Latin temperament was quick to sense the roused tiger in Spike who bore the fresh scar of degradation on his face. He looked upon Spike as some sort of a mad dog and, being a timorous soul, he greatly feared lest he fall foul of so dangerous a character. A man afraid is a dangerous man. Angelo slept at night in the bunk above Spike's with a long bladed knife from the galley handy under his blankets.

The blunter sensibilities of the Iron Man and Angelo did not find bunking with Chinamen the abomination it was in Spike Horn's eyes. Reared in the mines where the most despised member of society is the humble Chink, Spike felt his soul smirched by being herded in a dark cubby reeking with the burnt-peanut smell of opium.

But there was more to it than squeamishness. Spike had been shanghai'd aboard with a pocket bursting with gold pieces. When on that night of their kidnapping he had undertaken a partial change of wardrobe a pitch of the schooner had floored him and before several of the Chinese, tell-tale gold had spurted from his pocket. An avid light jumped to slant eyes when the white man scrambled to recover his money. The secret was out. A dangerous secret in those surroundings.

Once the cause of that bulge over his thigh was revealed, there was no dodging the ever present threat of robbery. Spike knew coolies of this type would kill for the sake of gold if a reasonable chance offered—a chance and a fair possibility of not being caught at murder. A silent knife-thrust in the dark; a body carried up four steps to the deck; a splash—

He seized the initiative himself by stealing a sheath knife from the belt of one of the sleeping Chinamen—a sort of bos'n-boss of the crew; this on the second night out. Thereafter he carried that knife by day inside his shirt and at nights he catwinked—deep sleep would not come however great his exhaustion—with the haft clutched close to him. His gold he dis-

tributed between three trousers pockets and the inside of each sock. Walking on double-eagles raised blisters on his soles.

To complete the bizarre picture of life aboard the *Lonney Lee* there was the matter of Angelo and his flute.

When that musician started to walk with Spike Horn and his two companions to find a telephone at the time of the palace trolley car's wreck, canny caution had dictated he take his instrument with him. The thing unjointed into three segments and was carried in a flat case capable of being slipped in an inside coat pocket. During the surprise at the house of the cabbage fields and the subsequent rough handling this precious instrument remained snugly stowed. The third night of the voyage, when he and his pot-walloper had things all tidied up in the galley, Angelo screwed his flute together. Seated on a box with his back against the foremast, Angelo forgot his troubles in music.

Captain Judah was one who did not favor flute piping overmuch. The second night of Angelo's solo work the skipper sent Doctor Chitterly for'ard to bid him cease.

"Why not I playa da flute—me, Angelo? Good music!" Angelo protested.

"Because, my good man, the captain says you shall not," Doctor Chitterly answered with what he meant to be a note of fatherly austerity.

"Capitan, he can go t' hell—heem!" Angelo pursed his lips anew to finish the rippling arpeggio of a Spanish bolero.

Captain Judah was on him before six notes were vented. Without a word he snatched the instrument from the Italian's lips and tossed it overboard. Like a flash Angelo leaped to his feet, his hand search-

ing his waist-band for the knife he carried against attack by the wild man Horn. The skipper deliberately turned his back and walked away. He knew the



man was a coward.

But that incident was the beginning cause for what the other white men aboard came to believe was Angelo's madness. Angelo spoke word to nobody, not even to the Iron Man, his helper. Glumly he went through his tasks in the galley. Everybody

who encountered him, whether yellow man or white, got a baleful look from his black eyes, wherein much of the white showed. And at spare moments during the day, under a lantern at night, Angelo busied himself with a section of bamboo broom handle. He was filing and haggling vents in the stone-like fibre. He cut and fitted a wooden stopple to close one hollow end. He was making himself another flute.

Captain Judah locked up a can of ant poison which stood on a galley shelf.

"Ant poison," he remarked to Doctor Chitterly, "is all right in its place; but it wouldn't go so well in coffee."

Doctor Chitterly's position as second mate was, as I have said, more or less an honorary one. Though he went through the pretense of standing the first watch, with Captain Judah always within call if not actually on deck during that term of hours, his real status aboard the *Lonney Lee* was that of entertainer and companion for the skipper. Perhaps you have seen that Captain Judah was not of the ordinary type of coasting master. The man possessed a well ordered and acquisitive mind; he was far more widely read than the doctor; he took a secret pride in his ability to dissect character.

Perhaps this latter characteristic was what prompted his instant selection of the doctor for a cabin berth upon the coming aboard of the shanghaied four. Certainly he found amusement in the gentle old fraud's pompous mannerisms and pretended erudition. After the third night out they played dominoes together each evening on the cleared table of the cabin. On these formal occasions Doctor Chitterly donned his Prince Albert coat.

The worthy Chitterly, being secretly very much afraid of Captain Judah and fearful lest some sudden whim should send him to the fo'c's'le, ventured no reference to the manner of his and his companions' coming aboard. However great his curiosity as to what lay behind that incident, as to where the *Lonney Lee* might be bound and what awaited at the end of the voyage, his judgment tied his tongue. One night, which was the second of the calm, Captain Judah broke the silence of the game by plumping an interesting observation.

"Mr. Chitterly, I believe I shanghaied you by mistake."

"Captain Storrs, sir, I offer a hearty second to that statement," was the doctor's gusty answer.

"I'm rather pleased that I did, after all." The skipper bent his blue eyes upon his

second mate in a baffling half-smile.

"Meaning no offense, sir, I cannot share that sentiment," Doctor Chitterly declared. "My previous ventures at sea have all proved—um—unfortunate; and I have no reason to believe this experience will break the rule. Moreover my duty on shore—the thousands of ailing folk who crave the healing touch of Squaw Root Tonic—"

"Rot!" snapped Captain Judah. "If things break right on this voyage, I can put you in a position where you'll never have to cure another stomach ache. That is if you have the gumption to know which side your bread's buttered on."

"You mean—?"

"Thousands! Thousands in your pocket, Mr. Chitterly, if you stick by me."

The doctor turned in his swivel seat so that he might slip his hand beneath the second button of his Prince Albert—his Henry Clay gesture. "A-hum, Captain Storrs, my integrity in a worthy cause—in a worthy cause mind you, sir, has never been open to question. Once when I was suspected of assassinating, or attempting to assassinate the President of Panama—"

The skipper cut him short with an impatient shake of the head. "You wouldn't hesitate to shoot a man if he stood between yourself and a fortune?"

Doctor Chitterly combed his beard in acute embarrassment. He wanted to temper his answer to trim with the necessities of the moment; yet somewhere under his diamond stud lurked a conscience.

"Wouldn't that depend, Captain Storrs, sir, upon how the right of the thing lay—his right and mine?"

Captain Judah shrugged. He stirred the mess of dominoes on the red cloth. "Draw," he commanded and at random picked out five.

"You can lay to this much, Mr. Chitterly," he mused in afterthought as he put the five counters before him up on edge. "If I made a mistake in shanghaing you I didn't go far wrong with that young wolf pup for'ard, that Horn fellow. He represents the people who're going to race down here to double-cross me. It's my guess Horn's the first man that you—or perhaps I—will have to drill with a lead slug."

CHAPTER VI

THE MATTER OF A BOILED CIGAR

UNCONSIDERED trifles often have a trick of suddenly developing into circumstances of extraordinary importance. In the tiny world of the *Lonney*

Lee so trivial an event as the theft of three cigars jarred all the bolts of security and put Captain Judah's supremacy to the test. Events befell in this way.

Among the many sterling vices the redoubtable Spike Horn owned to was a love for tobacco. He had learned to chew at ten, was whipped by his school principal for smoking a pipe at twelve and from that year on he leaned heavily upon the prop of the leaf.

When he was shanghai'd aboard the *Lonney Lee* four cigars, or the remnants of four, remained in the pockets of his waistcoat to arouse memories of his gaudy party ashore. These perfectos had been sadly used in the fight before the house of the cabbage fields and the subsequent ride on the floor of the farm wagon down to Abalone Cove. One only was intact enough to smoke; the other three were mashed and frayed beyond any attempts at salvage.

Spike smoked the serviceable cigar the first night out, rashly and with a spendthrift carelessness. If he thought of replacements at all it was to assure himself he had money enough to buy more cigars. Next day he approached the wooden Mr. Hansen with a request to be shown the cigar stock. The first mate gave him a dead fish's stare.

"This is a schooner, not the Palace Hotel," he grunted. "Ve don't sell see-gars."



The Iron Man had half a sack of flake tobacco and cigarette papers in his trousers pocket. He grudgingly gave

Spike a few of the manila leaves from his little book. For four days the man from the mines eked out the shreds and crumbs of the ruined cigars in his waistcoat pocket by rolling them into cigarettes. Then even the lint from the bottoms of the pockets, turned inside out, was consumed. Spike Horn was tobaccoless.

This lack came when Captain Judah had set him at the anchor chain. The cruel job was doubly aggravated by the skipper's practice of mounting guard over him with a cigar in his teeth. The toiling Spike, on his hunkers by the line of chain, never looked up at his tormentor; but an occasional sly puff of wind would carry to his nostrils the delectable odor of Havana. More than once as his right arm rose and

fell to the swinging of the maul the miserable Spike reckoned the possibility of a swift upward fling of that heavy instrument straight at the skipper's midriff—a dropped cigar—a few satisfying drags upon it, come hell or high water.

Here was he, Spike, sitting on gold and with gold raising welts on both feet; yet would he have had his right hand lopped off rather than ask Captain Judah to sell him some cigars.

There was no other way to relieve the tobacco hunger. What the Chinaman smoked looked and smelt like camel's hair; even a whiff of it in the stuffy fo'c's'le was enough to send Spike gasping to the deck. The Iron Man's sack was nearly empty, and he nursed what was left with flat refusal of a division. Angelo and Doctor Chitterly didn't smoke. Spike approached Mr. Hansen a second time with a goldpiece balanced on the tip of his forefinger. The mate, true to his Scandinavian stubbornness, would not consider selling any of his black plugs. In desperation Spike offered him all of ten dollars for one, only to get a curt, "Na!"

Three smokeless days, then the evil genius who had shunted the Goldfield miner from a Ferris wheel to a fo'c's'le baited still another trap for his feet.

Spike was at the early morning task of sluicing down and swabbing the decks; a job which he shared with three Chinamen. The hose had been stowed, and Spike was on the quarterdeck alone, working the slop down the planks with a squeegee. He saw the skipper's sea-jacket lying on the deck-house grating, evidently thrown there and forgotten the night before. The tips of three cigars peeped from the breast pocket.

Those three brown tips could not have been more tempting had a diamond been set in each.

Spike cast an over-shoulder glance at the Chinaman at the wheel. The slant eyes were roving off to leeward. Spike manuevred the overturned yawl, which was lashed to the house, between the helmsman and himself, made a quick pass at the coat pocket and then again bent to his work.

It was a dreary day of dripping heat made a little more tolerable by avid anticipation. At night with the skipper below over his game of dominoes with Doctor Chitterly, Spike slipped up to the bow of the schooner. Perched on a pile of anchor chain, he screened the flame of a match and lighted one of the stolen cigars. No boy with a pilfered watermelon could have found the delight in a first mouthful that

was Spike's at the initial deep draught of fragrance. It searched his toes, that full-lunged inhalation.

As puff followed puff the chains of his slavery aboard the *Lonney Lee* slipped from him. The mystery of whither bound the craft might be and for what purpose, even his bitter blood feud with the skipper, these distractions were dimmed in the lulling narcotic of the smoke. Nor did the smoker hear a quiet footfall behind him when Captain Judah, following his nose along the trail of three stolen cigars, paused by the windlass for a final sniff of confirmation. The saturnine master of the *Lonney Lee* tiptoed back to the main deck without revealing his presence.

The morning following, Angelo received a surprise visit in the galley. Seizing a moment when the Iron Man, Angelo's scullion, was clearing away the breakfast dishes in the cabin, Captain Judah stepped over the galley sill. He held an unlighted cigar between his fingers.

"Listen to me," he commanded. Angelo turned a sullen face up from his bread board. "You've got two coffee pots here." The captain jerked a thumb to indicate where a reserve boiler hung on a peg over the sink. He pointed to the pot and then to the cigar. "When you cook your noon grub I want you to make two pots of coffee: one for the crew and the cabin mess and one for Horn for'ard. Put this cigar in Horn's pot when you boil his coffee; understand? Boil the cigar with his coffee."

The startling whites of the flute player's eyes showed even wider. He looked from the cigar to the coffee pot.

"And leave the cigar in that pot when you've finished boiling," added Judah. "I want Horn's coffee boiled with a cigar in it until further orders. And when that cigar wears out you come to me for another. And, mark you, Cooney; you pour Horn's coffee yourself. Don't let that swab, the Iron Man, handle the coffee and don't let him see you doctor Horn's pot. Understand these orders, now?"

Angelo nodded and turned back to his dough.

The weather suddenly became capricious enough to divert the skipper's mind from contemplation of the punishment he had ordered for the theft of his cigars. Before dawn the breathless sea began to be stirred by puffy winds from the south-west. The sun had not been up two hours before it was more than evident that the past days of calm were broken. The winds came

squally and in brief spells of violence. The sea assumed a dour, leaden hue, with whitecaps here and there giving portent of a troubled water waste. Captain Judah's glass registered a sudden drop.

The skipper cast an appraising glance at the shore line not fifteen miles off and gave orders to his helmsman to bear up a couple of points, which brought the *Lonney Lee's* bow almost into the teeth of the wind. He commanded the fore and main tops'ls taken in, greatly as he would have preferred to take the full advantage of the wind after the days of drifting. The schooner cut like a knife through the waves.

At eight bells the skipper and Doctor Chitterly sat down to their noon meal; Mr. Hansen remained on deck in charge of the changed watch. The Iron Man in his dirty apron set the beef stew and tomato slum before them and poured out the coffee.

The wraith of a smile stretched Captain Judah's ring of whisker as he ladled himself a generous portion of stew. He beamed at the doctor with a travesty of good humor which had marked all his assumption of fellowship with the physician; a sort of condescending patronage.

"Mr. Chitterly, perhaps you can tell me the effect upon the human system of nicotine taken in considerable quantities directly into the stomach."

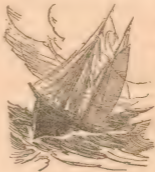
The doctor pawed his beard while he did some rapid stalling.

"Well, Captain Storrs, sir, the juice of the tobacco leaf is a powerful alkali, while nicotine—um—is an alkaloid. Now the difference between an alkali and—"

Doctor Chitterly paused, mouth ajar and eyes fixed upon the face of the skipper. It was set in lines of mixed surprise and horror. His hand plumped a coffee cup into its saucer; the surface of the liquid within had been dropped from the brim by a generous draught.

"That unholy swine of a flute player!" Captain Judah staggered to his feet, red napkin significantly clapped to his lips, and made for the companionway.

Just that instant the *Lonney Lee* heeled suddenly to port—over—over until all the dishes on the table went sliding and crashing to the floor and the



swinging lamp spilled oil from banging against the cabin roof.

Trampling on the deck above—confused cries—

Doctor Chitterly scrambled madly to the deck, convinced that the schooner was sinking. What he saw was fully as exciting as a shipwreck.

First, the deck aslant at an angle steep as a church roof where a terrific squall had laid her down; the sky had shut down like a black pot. Next, a knot of men struggling hand to hand, waist deep in water by the lee rail; yellow men and white; yellow arms and white arms flailing savagely against the background of a wall of green-gray water rising almost perpendicularly above the rail.

Doctor Chitterly cast a swift glance back to the wheel—that much of a sailor ten days at sea had made him. He saw no man there—the wheel was wobbling sickly. He made the precipitous climb thicker by scrambling over the canted deckhouse. Once his hands were on the spokes, he pushed with all his might against the unseen force of storm strength forcing the *Lonney Lee* under. Spoke by spoke the wheel came over while every muscle in the doctor's broad back and arms cracked under strain. Little by little the *Lonney Lee's* head came up out of the sea trough, where another boarding wave assuredly would have capsized her, and came around into the wind. The mains'l and single jib slatted furiously, then caught the lessening wind of the squall. The schooner was saved.

Old Doctor Chitterly felt tremendous exaltation. For once in his life he had done a job with no fake in it.

To get the whole picture of how the flute player's coffee affected the fortunes of the *Lonney Lee* we must go back to a moment when, with the skipper below at his dinner, Mr. Hansen had placed the afternoon watch with the sounding of eight bells, the watch of Spike Horn and three of the six Chinks. He took the wheel himself. A black cloud which he had been watching smear the western horizon suddenly broke away from its moorings where sky joined water and came ballooning over the heavens like a runaway blimp.

"All hands!" he shouted and he pointed to the fores'l halyards. The wind whipped his "Take in sail!" out of his mouth.

Spike Horn had been dallying by the galley door, lingering over his second cup of coffee—good coffee which Angelo himself had given him with a sly smile. That

was the first smile Spike had seen on the flute player's face since the night Captain Judah pitched his instrument overboard. Just as he hastily passed the empty cup to Angelo, at the mate's hail, a chorus of shrieks sounded from up for'ard where three coolies had been squatting by the hatch over their cups of coffee and tub of stew.

One writhed on the deck holding his hands over his mid-region. One was being very honestly ill. All screamed falsetto imprecations.

Spike joined the three of his watch in taking in the fores'l. They had it half clewed down—a clumsy task in the rising gale—when the three Chinks whose screams had come at the same time as Mr. Hansen's summons came padding wild-eyed down the deck. They jabbered excitedly at their fellows and pointed to the opened half-door of the galley.

The vicious squall and mutiny struck the schooner at the same instant.

With reports like the barking of seventy-fives the jib carried away and the unfurled section of the fores'l bellowsed and split. The ship heeled over and took solid water over the rail.

"Cooke put-um one piecee poison by coffee," the yellow man next to Spike at the fores'l boom bawled as he quit work and joined his fellows in a rush on the galley. Knives glittered in the fists of two of the attackers; windlass staves came out of their rack to arm the rest.

Mr. Hansen at the wheel permitted himself to slip into a Scandinavian panic, all the more complete because rare, and to quit his post with the wheel hastily and insecurely lashed. He charged bellowing down on the knot of coolies vainly trying to storm over the galley's half-door.

Spike leaped into the mêlée bare handed. No loyalty to Captain Judah or his schooner prompted him. Hardly the sense of race loyalty—defending a white man in the galley against yellow men storming his stronghold. Just the lure of a fight called him; primitive instinct to do battle.

The struggle at the galley door was necessarily brief. Angelo met the charging Chinamen with a painful of scalding water. Even as he leaned over the half-door to get full swing with his pail a knife slit one arm from wrist to elbow. He spit like a cat, whirled and seized a meat cleaver from its rack over the chopping block.

Before he could wield it the heeling of the schooner sent the whole milling crew—Hansen, Spike and six Chinamen—slid-

ing down into the waist-deep wash of a boarding wave. This was the scene Doctor Chitterly burst out upon. A clout on the head knocked out the mate—he would have drowned had not Spike with a mighty effort hooked one limp arm through the lanyards of the mainmast shrouds—and Spike was left to face alone six sealded Chinks gone wild.

There Captain Judah found him when he erupted on deck under the magic compulsion of a boiled cigar. His schooner wrecked, his crew in mutiny and this wolf pup Horn fighting for him, fighting like a fiend from the pit—that's the way the picture looked to Captain Judah.

One eye swiftly roved to catch the giant figure of Doctor Chitterly, now at the wheel. The skipper drew his revolver, clubbed it and sid half-bent into the ruction. That finished it. The Celestials would not stand up against authority. They quit cold.

"Get for'ard, you swine, and hoist the stays! Horn, give Mr. Chitterly a hand at the wheel—steady as she goes."

In ten minutes the last of the squall had blown itself out, and the *Lonney Lee* under double reefed mains'l and with the single stays'l to steady her was running before a lively breeze mounting almost to a gale. Tattered canvas was stowed under gaskets. The vessel was shipshape.

Captain Judah beckoned Spike aft. Still bloodied from the fight and the old glint of defiance in his eyes, Horn stood before him.

"Horn," began the skipper's mild voice,

"any idea what started that ruckus with the Chinks?"

"Yes." Spike steadfastly refused to append the "sir" of sea usage.

"One of 'em said that crazy

Dago cook put poison in the coffee."

"Ah! Did you taste the coffee served at noon mess?"

"Yes."

"Taste all right to you, Horn?"

"Sure; two cups worth of right."

Captain Judah's eyes half closed as he put two and two together and came to the sum of a flute player's iniquity. He smiled at the battle stained youth before him.

"Do you smoke cigars, Horn?" he purred.

"When I can get 'em."

"Horn, I think you saved Mr. Hansen's life. Not worth much, but of course valuable to him. And you did a great deal to save my ship. Will you accept a box of my cigars and forget by-gones?"

"No," said Spike.

CHAPTER VII

A WORM PLANS TO TURN

FOURTEEN days out from Abalone Cove the *Lonney Lee* rounded Cape San Lucas, where the bony finger of the peninsula of Lower California is chopped off in a forbidding headland. A fine following wind sent the schooner nosing up into the gulf between peninsula and Mexican mainland.

The Vermilion Sea is the name old Fernando de Alarcon gave to these lonely waters when in 1541 he warped his ship away to the head of the gulf and saw the blood-red waters of the river we call Colorado staining the blue of delta tides. Though the red silt of the river dyes only shoal water a little way out from the point of discharge, hardly a sunset in a whole year round of perpetual summer that the entire gulf does not justify the name given it by a poetically minded adventurer and become for a magic hour in truth the Vermilion Sea. Even the Sixteenth Century navigators marveled at unique atmospheric conditions above this confined sea which wrought the miracle of turning water into blood with each setting sun.

Loneliest sea between Hudsons Bay and the Gulf of Panama is this seven-hundred-mile gut of salt water fringed east and west by mountain-bound deserts. Two decayed ports mark a steamer path on the mainland side; ancient La Paz at the southern end of the peninsula has its occasional visits by craft courteously called steamships. For the rest of the gulf, on its western shore at least, is vacant water, strewn with numberless uninhabitable island knobs and knowing no keels but those of the forty-foot *gasolinas* carrying mails, and in season the small craft of the pearl fishers going to the beds in Conception Bay, at the Punta de Santa Inez and Isle of Carmen. Gulf pearls of fabulous price are still to be bought in Paris.

A few dead-and-alive old villages sprawl along the peninsula shore of the Vermilion Sea where fringes of cocoa palms mark secret wells: Loerto the Blest, Mulege, Escondido. Life is as stagnant as dead ditch water in those inhabited spots



except in midsummer when men go out to dive for treasure hidden under the mantle of one oyster in a thousand. Then the fervor of the gaming table revivifies slack nerves; a peasant may come home a king.

Of the four kidnapped landsmen aboard the *Lonney Lee* Doctor Chitterly alone shared with Captain Judah and Mr. Hansen knowledge of the schooner's whereabouts. The skipper made no effort to conceal from his titular second mate the small black crosses he marked on his chart with each noon's shooting of the sun. Doctor Chitterly watched the procession of those crosses down and around the tip of the peninsula; but as to where they would end at destination Captain Judah gave him no hint. One night, the second after rounding the cape, the doctor saw a faint glow of lights behind an island's high shoulder and guessed La Paz, the capital, lay there. When the schooner kept right on her northing he yielded himself to the gloomiest forebodings. If the skipper was not making for La Paz where in the water wilderness north could he be going?

His vague unrest was by no means allayed when on the third day in gulf waters he found Captain Judah busy in the cabin with a nail puller gouging out nails which held the cover to a long packing case. On that cover a Spanish consignee's name had been lampblackened with the port, "Guaymas," scrawled beneath and the legend, "Machine Dies," in one corner.

"Lend a hand here, Mr. Chitterly," his superior ordered as the last nail came out of the cover. He dropped it to the cabin floor. A double row of new rifles, their barrels greased against sea dampness, lay racked securely in the packing case. Captain Judah handed them up one by one to be stood against the wall by the doctor. At the bottom of the case were wedged two dozen paper boxes of shells in clips.

"What's the matter, man?" Storrs caught a troubled look in the other's eyes. "Don't you like the look of these fancy machine dies?"

"Well—um—rifles," the doctor stammered; "perhaps I was not quite prepared to—ah—"

"Did you expect to see bon-bons containing paper caps with strings to tie under the chin?" Doctor Chitterly was favored with a bland smile. "Come, come, Mr. Chitterly, I wouldn't pick you for a milk-sop!"

"I have never been accused of being that," was the answer given with great dignity.

"Of course not! You remember what I said to you one night on the run down: how I'd put thousands in your pocket if you'd stick by me. Well, Mr. Chitterly, you do not have to be told that in this rough-and-ready world folks don't pick up thousands without fighting for them.

"And machine dies—" the skipper gave one of his tight lipped smiles—"machine dies are right handsome things to have handy in a fight. Now take this rag and be so good as to wipe the grease off those barrels before we stow our little trinkets away."

While the worthy doctor was not an ardent pacifist, it was true that in his way through life he had made it a practice to cut a wide corner around ugly violence. He had relied upon the power of the word rather than a smash from the fist to lift him over rough going. He abhorred anything savoring of crude force.

Indeed, the uncovering of rifles secretly shipped left the discoverer of Squaw Root Tonic in a most chaotic frame of mind approaching outright funk. Here in this lonely sea suddenly was disclosed a very tangible portent of dirty work ahead, dirty



work in which the captain of the *Lonney Lee* evidently expected him to take a hand. It appeared to be tacitly understood that he, a peace loving man, was going to shoot somebody, or several persons, as yet unknown, in order that he might share in ill gotten thousands.

Who might be the ones destined to receive those slender steel points which the doctor had viewed with a slight shudder upon the opening of one of the paper shell boxes? Where would they be found? When?

Moreover, Captain Judah had not spoken of a massacre; it was a fight which lay ahead somewhere in this bleak waste of waters. And a fight of presupposed give and take in the matter of steel-jacketed bullets. Glory be! If there could be one thing the good doctor abhorred over shoot-

ing somebody else it would be the experience of having somebody else shoot at him. Once or twice in his lifetime he had been shot at; recollection of that experience always made his entire internal machinery turn over. A knife wound—he'd seen them in others—might be bearable if not fatal. Nasty, of course, and something to be avoided at all hazards. But to receive perforations from a steel slug traveling with the speed of light—ugh!

The doctor's secondary reaction to the uncovering of the rifles was a sense of great loneliness. There was nobody on the schooner with whom he could take counsel. The Iron Man was a swine; he had hidden behind a flour barrel in the galley that epic moment of the assault upon Angelo the flute player. Angelo himself was unquestionably crazy, or far enough off his balance to deny the worth of any confidences. Spike Horn, then—

With him Doctor Chitterly had had little to do since that fatal hour of their kidnapping. The young man was a violent person, although he had the doctor's secret sympathy in his defiance of Captain Judah. Then, too, the doctor was half inclined to believe what Storrs had told him: that Horn was allied with that mysterious enemy who was out to double-cross Storrs—doubtless the enemy against which rifles had been provided. How could Chitterly be sure one way or the other? All he knew about Horn was what that exuberant youth himself had told him after climbing down the struts of a Ferris wheel to the doctor's car.

But to Spike he went, nevertheless, for comfort and counsel in his dire stress of mind. The night following the uncrating of the rifles when the skipper was busy in his cabin Doctor Chitterly found Spike alone by the windlass smoking the butt of the third stolen cigar. He told him what Storrs had revealed as to the imminence of a fight and the circumstance of the rifles.

Spike heard him through without comment. Then when the doctor paused, "Well, Doc, looks like we can get the game in our own hands."

Doctor Chitterly vented an incredulous whistle.

"You know where Storrs put those guns, don't you?" from Spike.

"Yes, in a locker under one of the cabin seats."

"Shells there, too?"

The doctor nodded.

"Is there a lock on that locker?"

"I didn't see any padlock. Maybe it

closes with a spring lock. But my dear fellow—"

Spike waved down the doctor's rising objection. He rushed on in an eager undertone.

"Like this, Doc! Tonight when that Swede Hansen's on the middle watch—old Storrs snoring in his cabin—you slip out of the hay minute two bells sound. I'll've crawled along the deck right up to the cabin hatch. You find me there. We gumshoe into Storrs' cabin and tap him once with one of these marlin spike dinguses or somethin'. Then us for the guns—and the schooner's ours."

Doctor Chitterly was appalled.

"My dear boy! That's mutiny, and Captain Storrs could hang us for less than that." The doctor's juvenile reading taught him that where mutiny at sea was, a tidy hanging hovered in the offing.

"Mutiny be damned! How's he goin' hang us if we've got him where we want him? You poor goat! Talk about hanging when you come to me, an' you're like to get shot. I tell you, let me an' you get hands on a rifle apiece an' in five minutes we're running this ole soap-dish! The Swede we'll tie up with the skipper. We give the Wop an' that big stiff, the Iron Man, a gun each to watch the Chinks, an' there you are!"

"But," the doctor interposed with fluttering breath, "suppose all goes well and we get control of the ship, you and I don't know how to run it. Where would we take her?"

"Like hell I don't know how to run this scow!" was Spike's confident rejoinder. "Where 'bouts are we, anyway?"

"In the Gulf of California," Chitterly answered.

"I don't know where that is; but I can see land over yonder. That's enough for me. We'll steer for land. Me for that!"

"And wreck the ship?" Doctor Chitterly quavered. Spike suddenly put his face very close to the Chitterly beard and hissed at him.

"You ain't got the guts of a louse, Chitterly. You're the kind of a feller that teaches penmanship in a young ladies' seminary and takes tea with cream puffs every afternoon at five. Cripes, but you give me a pain!"

All unwittingly the headstrong Mr. Horn had plucked just the right chord in the worthy physician's soul scale to bring him to support the hairbrained scheme. Doctor Chitterly drew himself up to stiff dignity.

"Young fellow, no man can impute cowardice to Old Doctor Chitterly and not live to regret it. I expect, sir, that when we have made ourselves masters of this ship you will come to me with appropriate apology."

"Good kid!" was Spike's irreverent approval, and the doctor felt his hand in a strong grasp. "At two bells I'll be at the cabin hatch."

"At two bells, then, I'll be waiting for you," said the doctor.

CHAPTER VIII MUTINY

WHITE-HOT day drew to a close with an explosion of celestial fireworks behind the ragged line of mountains marking the peninsula, hot furnace red illuminating the plumes of horse-tail clouds, then cooling to umber and ice green. With up-creeping shadows the mountain tips remained each a burning carbon point of incandescence slowly cinder-ing to blackness. The wind had fallen



with evening, and the *Lonney Lee* was drifting lazily under puffy airs. The Isle of Carmen, a broad-backed water monster rising from the slime of a pre-historic sea, was so close off the port bow the white of its surf line winked

through gathering dusk. Doctor Chitterly was set for the first watch, taking his place at the wheel; for Captain Judah now trusted him to con the vessel when no weather was abroad. Horn was lookout in the bow; occasionally the doctor could see the youth's blocky figure silhouetted against the stars by the schooner's lift to a long roller. Hansen and the skipper both were below. Before five bells light which had streamed up through the cabin skylight was snuffed out. A sound of snores succeeded.

The hours following the doctor's joining of a conspiracy with the rash Spike Horn had become increasingly freighted with misery for him. He felt he was flirting with the working parts of a volcano. He was positive that before another sunrise he would be shot or hanged by the

competent Captain Judah. And to die in this desolate Vermilion Sea with no sepulcher but the alimentary tract of a shark would be a taking-off of a downright melancholiness beyond the power of imagination to conjure. Absently the worthy physician felt of the heavy gold links of his watch chain and wondered how much digestive trouble they would give a shark.

Time and again as the hours marched toward the moment of tryst set with Spike an hysteria of panic seized the elderly gentleman at the wheel, and he was on the point of lashing the spokes and rushing down to awaken Captain Judah to a recital of treachery planned. Yet a fine spark of honor burned to prevent his doing that thing. He had given his word to the rash youth from Goldfield. Old Doctor Chitterly's word was of greater worth than the printed promises on his bottles of nostrums. Perhaps in his inner soul the fine old fraud held to the integrity of his word as somehow redeeming the shams of his years with the medicine wagon.

Ah, that medicine wagon! Now on the eve of his sudden demise the doctor visioned it as a faithful servant dumbly awaiting the return of the master to the San Francisco livery stable where it had been stored. He saw it in its black and gold body, like the body of a hotel bus without a top; the shining brass rail running along its sides to the brass-treaded steps at the back. Letters of gold spelled "Squaw Root Tonic" over its wheels. Two sleek black horses, wearing black fly nets in summer time like hearse horses, were at the pole.

The gasoline flare beneath the elevated drum; crowd of shirt-sleeved men, and women in summer organdies, pressing close under the flare's radiance; the chart on its rack with its movable flaps which came away in a horrid succession of revelations concerning the human mechanism—

"—And now the liver, friends—that treacherous organ which the ancient Romans believed to house the seat of human emotions—"

Spike Horn, up forward, struck eight bells. Mr. Hansen came on deck to take the wheel and the watch. Doctor Chitterly went below to his bunk with the step of an early Christian martyr who knows there will be no rain checks at the Colosseum the day of his engagement with the lions. He lay in a profuse perspiration awaiting the striking of two bells, which would mark the moment of his rendezvous with death.

At the first stroke of the fatal bell Doctor Chitterly was out of his bunk, and in shirt and stockinged feet he tiptoed into the cabin. Captain Judah's measured snoring reassured his fluttering heart beats. He groped his way to the locker seat beneath which he had seen the guns stowed. The seat lifted easily. A swift exploratory hand encountered the outlines of rifle barrels. The doctor lifted two from the pile, lowered the locker seat and stepped to the short flight leading to the deck.

The figure of Spike Horn was glued against the coaming of the hatch. The doctor passed him one of the rifles without a word.

"You handle Hansen," Spike whispered. "Keep him at the wheel and covered; and stand off any rush of the Chinks—maybe they'll start somethin' if there's any fracas. Me, I'll settle Storrs' bash."

Spike slipped like a shadow down the steps into the cabin. Just that chilling instant of action a little bell struck warningly under Chitterly's snowy thatch. Shells! He had forgotten to put shells into the two rifles which were to accomplish a mutiny!

Doctor Chitterly vented a low groan; then he threw down his head and advanced, rifle to shoulder and cheek laid professionally along the stock, upon the spot where the binnacle threw a light upon the torso of Mr. Hansen behind the wheel.

"Throw up your hands—no—keep them on the wheel!" The doctor amended his order hurriedly. Sighting along the rifle barrel into the wooden countenance of the first mate, Doctor Chitterly was a little dashed to read no sign of surprise there. Mr. Hansen's expression was the normal one of a cigar store Indian. He said nothing. He just let his small blue eyes turn once to the star dappled darkness beyond the bowsprit. Doctor Chitterly was decidedly disappointed. He'd felt the moment called for some very stern words from him.

But this mutiny business was not to pass dully.

Suddenly there was a crash of splintered wood from the cabin beneath their feet. Then a shot—another.

Doctor Chitterly knew those shots must come from Captain Judah's revolver. The miserable Horn—so lightning calculation ran with the doctor—was shot down with his useless rifle.

The white haired mutineer swayed a little in his tense pose of alertness. His back was to the hatchway. He would not hear that third shot which inevitably must be fired at him any instant now.

But there was no third shot. Instead, through the open gratings of the deckhouse came sounds of desperate struggle in the black pit below, thud of blows, coughing grunts of men struck, creak and smash of cabin fittings splintered under the impact of locked bodies, all the bestial noises of brute men in battle.

Diversion came from for'ard. At the first shot the Chinese lookout on the fo'c's'le head emitted a thin yell and dived down the companionway into the sleeping hole beneath. Straightway the other Chinks of the crew, plus the Iron Man and Angelo the flute player, erupted thence. Through



the tail of his eye the doctor thought he saw knives in the hands of the yellow men as they edged down past the foremast.

Suddenly the doctor jumped to the top of the deckhouse and half turned so that his rifle might menace any rush from for'ard while still keeping the mate in its hollow threat. He called to the two white men from the fo'c's'le:

"Men, this is mutiny! Watch those Chinamen and don't let them rush me or we'll all hang together at dawn."

The intrepid flute player ducked like a cat for a windlass bar and turned to face the Chinamen. The Iron Man dropped his craven bulk back through the fo'c's'le hatch to the security of his bunk.

The issue on the *Lonney Lee's* deck might have been decidedly hazardous, what with the doctor and his useless rifle and Angelo's stave against a Swede and six Chinamen, had not the balance been unexpectedly turned. A sudden dropping of the uproar in the cabin below was followed by the flash of light through the gratings in the house. After a moment Spike Horn stepped on deck.

He took a step forward toward the huddle of Chinese, dropped on a knee and sent two bullets whining over their skulls. They whirled and scurried like rats for the fo'c's'le.

Horn mounted the deckhouse where Doctor Chitterly had relaxed his guard over the unperturbed Hansen.

"Doc, you ding-donged ole rooster! How come you sent me up against Storrs with no shells in my gun an' left me to find 'em

when the fun was over? But at that I guess you've got some thanks comin'. I had to beat him unconscious with my own two lily-white mitts."

Doctor Chitterly threw open the ejector of his rifle to show an empty chamber. "I thought it more worthy to have our mutiny without violence," he lied magnificently.

"'Thout violence?" Spike boomed exultantly. "What you think I been doin': teachin' a Chinese lady the language of flowers?"

In ten minutes the stolid Mr. Hansen was tied in his bunk. Captain Judah, still unconscious from a terrific drubbing, lay similarly bound behind a door which Spike had been forced to splinter to bring the combat to the skipper. The Chinese crew, quick to accept change of masters, was docile.

Angelo suddenly dived into his galley and, returning to the deck, seated himself on a rope coil.

Into the still night of the Vermilion Sea went winging the first shrill notes of a Spanish bolero. Angelo was christening his new flute made out of a bamboo broom handle.

CHAPTER IX

SPIKE HORN TALKS BUSINESS

SPIKE HORN'S first act after successful overturn of authority aboard the *Lonney Lee* was to go down into the cabin and rummage among the effects of the unconscious skipper. He came on deck with a cigar spearing through his grin of triumph. That flower of Havana was incense burned on the altar of victory. The waxing and waning of the glow at its tip gave quick-shutter pictures of a gargoyle mask which was Spike's battered countenance.

Doctor Chitterly was at the wheel, his rifle, now loaded, conveniently propped against the binnacle. On the edge of the deckhouse beyond the glow of the binnacle light sat the Iron Man. Angelo was forward giving his starved soul to music. Not a Chinaman was to be seen; with true Oriental stoicism they had accepted a changed situation and waited to test the mettle of whatever new master fate might order.

Spike stopped in front of the Iron Man and gave him a truculent stare. "Who asked you back here?" he wanted to know.

"Looks like I don't have to get an invite now." The Iron Man tried to match the hardihood in his voice to Spike's.

"We're runnin' this floatin' coffin now, looks like."

"We!" the man from Goldfield mocked. Then he called over the binnacle to the doctor, "Doc, where was this big boloney sausage when you was holdin' the deck alone against Hansen an' the six Chinks—me down below havin' a little *parear* with ole Storrs? Where'd you see him?"

"I did not see him at all, Horn," Doctor Chitterly answered accusingly. Spike turned again on the Iron Man.

"How come?"

"Guess I was doin' my share in the fo'c's'le," he mumbled. "When that shot went off—the first one, I mean—two Chinks come over to my bunk an' wrestled me. One held my legs; t'other one give me an awful fight with somepin hard—felt like a bar of iron. All over the top of the head he give me that fight, an'—"

"Le's see." Spike's hand shot out, gripped the Iron Man's collar and dragged him over to hold his head in the light of the binnacle. His free hand explored the expanse of wiry hair.

"Where's your bumps?" Spike's question might have come from an examining judge on his bench. The Iron Man, held in this undignified position with an inexorable fist slowly strangling him by its grip on the neckband of his shirt, vented a sound which was surprisingly like a snivel.

"My God, gents! I don't get no bumps on the head after—after the big one a guy give me six years ago. I—I take bumps on the head like I take 'em other places—'thout a mark. Say, gents, don't make me go up with those Chinks, now that yuh've broken away from that fo'c's'le place!"

Horn gave the Iron Man a shove back against the coaming of the house, glared at him—and then suddenly burst out laughing at the ludicrous abjectness of him. He turned to the doctor.

"Doc, what'll we do with this beauty?"

The soft hearted doctor stroked his beard reflectively a moment or two.

"Well, suppose we let him stay with us," he said. "He obviously can't hurt us."

"Right," seconded Horn. And the Iron Man sighed with relief.

SO FAR as matters of navigation and the outward peace of the schooner went, when dawn broke on the *Lonney Lee*'s first day under amateur management, things could not have shaped up better. Doctor Chitterly, still at the wheel, was holding the bowsprit to the course marked out for him by the stolid Mr. Han-

sen just before he submitted to being bound and carried to his bunk below. By luck there didn't happen to be any islands or shoal water along that course. Nor had any stiffening of the wind prompted the good doctor to shorten sail. He wouldn't have known how if the occasion had arisen. The *Louney Lee* was making her slow northing about twenty miles off shore when the sunrise glory in the east lighted the mountains of the peninsula.

Angelo went to his galley. The Iron Man accompanied him to do the humble things with breakfast pots and pans. The Chinamen for'ard came blinking out of their hole. Unbidden, three of them took to swabbing down the maindeck without orders as evidence of good faith under a changed management.

Spike Horn went down into the cabin to see how Captain Judah might be faring. Now that he had worsted the worthy skipper in stand-up fight, his bare knuckles against the other's fists plus a revolver, the man from Goldfield could afford to be magnanimous. All the murder poison which had been engendered in Spike's veins when he was chipping the anchor chain with the mark of the Storrs boot fresh on his cheek had been dissipated by that berserker battle in the dark.

He came under the saturnine stare of the skipper's eyes the instant he entered the latter's wrecked quarters: eyes fully alight with reason and a sort of impersonal fury. Storrs lay as he had been left, with hands bound behind his back and feet laced to a stanchion at the foot of his bunk. His face was not pleasant to see. Spike had played considerable havoc with it.

"Well, Horn, you've thought better of your folly and have come to release me?" Captain Judah's soft voice carried almost a burlesque quality by contrast with his brutalized features.

"You got another guess, Cap," was Spike's hearty denial. "Just come down to figure out a way to slip you some coffee 'thout giving you a chance to start something. If you were a horse, I'd know what to do—hobble you."

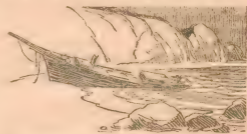
He went to the folding bowl on a bulk-head wall, soaked a towel in water and clumsily bathed the blood from the skipper's face. Here was a simple gesture of charity which might have moved a heart less embittered than Captain Judah's. The man mumbled at him from under the wet cloth:

"How long do you think, Horn, you and your bunch of crazy landsmen can keep my

schooner off the rocks? Not one of you that knows as much about navigation as one of those Chinamen for'ard."

"We won't keep her off the rocks long, Cap, if rocks mean shore. We're goin' ashore, schooner or no schooner, soon's we get breakfast." Spike gave his answer cheerily.

Captain Judah writhed in impotent rage. "What! Deliberately wreck the *Louney Lee* on this bare beach, and with Sabina Island not a day's sailing away from noon



reckoning yesterday? Oh, you black swine!"

Spike grinned with utmost humor and carefully swabbed a bit of clotted blood from the skipper's chin.

"Sabina Island? Where does she fit into the picture? Me, I've seen enough islands to last a lifetime. Reckon I can give this Sabina the go-by an' not feel broke up about it."

"Quit your damn' foolishness, Horn!" Captain Judah snarled. "You know well as I do your business aboard this schooner was to keep me from getting to Sabina Island—to hold me off until your gang could hop from San Francisco down to Guaymas and run over there to get—to get what is mine by right!"

Spike walked over to soak the towel anew. Here was the master of the *Louney Lee* off again on that mysterious hunch of his about a decent young fellow named Spike Horn trying to doublecross him. Same sort of bunk Storrs had talked that night in the house of the cabbage fields when he found Spike's bankbook showing the deposit of one hundred thousand dollars. Must be a big stake behind all this. Something phoney.

Spike Horn was a gambler in blind chances. He might try sinking an explanatory shaft to tap this blind business; maybe something doing for ole Spike.

"Cap," he began with mock seriousness, "I'm just a young fellow tryin' to get along in the world and followin' the Golden Rule wherever she leads. Maybe-so I'd listen to reason; who knows?"

He sat on the edge of Storrs' bunk in an attitude suggesting an invitation to confidences. A crafty gleam shot through the bound man's eyes and was as quickly smudged. What his ears told him was that this fellow Horn, for the minute holding the upper hand, was willing to sell out, at a price. Horn would play both ends against the middle—so Captain Judah appraised his intention—and, having already been paid a fat price by the other side, would now attempt to bleed him, Storrs, as the price of restoring his schooner to him and making possible the gaining of Sabina Island in time. Captain Judah did some quick calculating.

"Horn," he began with an air of crafty deliberation, "the difference between you and me—between your gang and me, let us say—is that you fellows guess the value of what lies at Sabina. I know to the last dollar piece what that value is. You fellows are taking a flyer on a gamble; I'm playing a sure thing. Does that circumstance tell you anything?"

"Not much," Spike grinned noncommittally.

"Doesn't it mean that I can talk cold turkey?" Captain Judah asked. Spike gave him a shrug of the shoulders. "Well, then, let's get down to tacks. What's your price for restoring the *Lonney Lee* to me?"

That hit Horn under his guard. A game of discovery into which he had entered casually but a moment ago appeared to have become suddenly a bonanza lure. Here was a turn! Yesterday he was a shanghaied sailor sweating under the heel of a bitter-hard master; now before breakfast he was asked to name his price in a deal as far from his ken as the ultimate fixed star. Spike took a shot at the moon.

"You're so cock-sure about what the stuff's worth—what lies on Sabina Island, I mean. Why not name that figure so's we can tell where we stand?"

Cold blue eyes stared up at him unwinkingly. "Two hundred thousand," was the skipper's answer.

Spike was wearing his poker face. Not so much, as the tweak of an eyebrow registered.

"Well, Storrs, figuring on two hundred thousand, how much is it worth to you to go up on deck and put your two hands to the wheel once more?"

"Ten thousand dollars." Spike tipped back his head and laughed.

"Goodness gracious, Claudine, aren't you a spender!" he mocked. "I raise you a cold forty thousand."

The man in the bunk fumed and swore. Horn sat tight. Finally Storrs met the terms named. A monitory finger was wagged before the captain's nose.

"Here's the other terms," Spike dictated. "First thing you do when I untie your hands is to sign a contract which I'll draw up an' which'll say you agree to pay the party of the second part fifty thousand dollars by draft on the Wells Fargo Bank the day the *Lonney Lee* ties up in San Francisco Bay. Item two: you'll run the schooner but you'll take orders from me any time I have a mind to give 'em. Item three: you'll turn over to me one box of a hundred prime Havana cigars an' receive from me in gold their price at the market—an' we won't have any of 'em boiled, either."

Captain Storrs nodded assent. Horn stooped over and picked up the skipper's revolver where it lay amid the debris of the fight. He pawed over a shelf above the skipper's head and brought down three boxes of cartridges.

"These little nick-nacks stay by me until we wind up our little business affair," he said. "We don't want you to be a bad boy any longer, Cap. Now, I'll fetch you down some of Angelo's prime coffee."

He quit Storrs' quarters, but he did not go to the galley for coffee immediately. Instead he gathered into his arms all the pretty new rifles left in the cabin locker—his own and the doctor's were on deck—and carrying them up to the weather rail he dropped them into the gulf. The ammunition he stowed in a cache of his own choosing and behind a padlock. That left, so far as he knew, two rifles and a revolver the only weapons aboard, and in safe hands.

Then he brought Captain Judah his coffee.

Fifteen minutes later Doctor Chitterly, who was having his breakfast on the deck-house so that he could have an eye to the Chinaman at the wheel, was thunderstruck to see Captain Storrs and Mr. Hansen emerge from the cabin hatchway. Spike Horn had his arm, in its shreds of silk shirt, linked through the skipper's.

CHAPTER X

WHERE A WATER TRAIL LED

THE situation which was wrought aboard the *Lonney Lee* by the headstrong Spike Horn's taking a flyer at a hint of fortune was one wherein interesting possibilities inhered. For now the

schooner drifted over the seething Vermilion Sea under the piratical flag of the Double Cross.

At one o'clock in the morning the craft had been in mutiny, with the master beaten



and bound in his bunk by one of the crew; another of that crew overawing the deck by the threat of a rifle. At sun-up the captain was restored to limited authority, free to con-

his craft on its appointed course but subject to reversal at any minute. Two loaded rifles and his own revolver still remained in the hands of the twain that had mutinied. In those three steel tubes rested tricky balance of power.

Needless to say that Captain Judah Storrs, who had put his signature to a contract drawn by Horn as the price of salvaging his own mysterious schemes from total wreck, was this dawn perhaps the most dangerous man in any cranny of Pacific waters. He was a muzzled tiger biding opportunity to rend the man who had mastered him. Convinced now beyond a shadow of a doubt that Spike Horn had contrived the night's violence only to coerce him into a division of spoils, the nature and value of which Horn must know full well, Skipper Storrs trod his quarterdeck in a cold killing fury. Give him so much as a hair of advantage and he would wipe out the contract by destroying the man who drew it.

As for Doctor Chitterly, from the moment he saw Captain Judah and Mr. Hansen escorted by Spike back to freedom he moved in a gray haze. Still in that haze he appended his signature alongside that of the mate as witness to a document Horn brusquely had bidden him sign. He knew nothing of its purport; nor in his confusion could he muster enough curiosity to ask about it.

Old Doctor Chitterly was grievously hurt. He had been doublecrossed by Spike Horn. He had been left somehow holding the bag. He had been made the victim of a shell game.

Above all, the discoverer of Squaw Root Tonic was fear-ridden. Here he had been bullied into rising against Captain Judah that he might escape fighting with unknowns somewhere ahead of the *Lonney Lee's* cutwater, and of a sudden the

schooner itself had become a death trap. Menace was right at his elbow. He read it in the cold blue eye of Storrs. He felt the presence of violence lurking behind the masts and hiding in the black hole of the fo'c's'le. But for his rifle, which he kept glued into the angle of his left elbow, the doctor felt he walked naked in a rattle-snake den.

He strode moodily to the rail in the schooner's waist and stood looking out over the magic of dawn's revelations. What with absence of sleep and twittering of nerves, a dreadful unreality clothed everything he saw. Near at hand the sea smoked with low hanging mists, oily and sluggish as engine room steam. A little off to westward these mist serpents wound their fat folds about the bulk of an island rising bare as an elephant's back over a white surf line. The mountain peak of another island behind appeared to float on dirty cotton wool. Over against the horizon the sierra of the peninsula burned rose-pink from a hidden sun; mysterious, aloof, like the furnace grids of hell.

Emptiness! A cold sea awaiting the day's scourge of heat. Islands of the moon. Dim land of nightmare.

"Oh, God, Thou seest me!" groaned Doctor Chitterly. His call to divinity was that of a little boy on dark stairs.

Spike Horn came swaggering up to him. His silk shirt was held together only by the neckband and gapped over his naked middle. He carried Captain Judah's revolver stuck behind the waistband of his trousers and the second rifle of the late mutiny armament slung hunter-wise in the crook of his left arm—as untidy a pirate as one could well expect to find in the end of the nineteenth century.

"Well, Doc, how goes it?" This with forced cordiality. Doctor Chitterly gave him a distant sweep of the eyes and turned again to watch the fat mist serpents strangling the nearby island. Spike grunted a chopped-off laugh.

"Y'r not sore, Doc? 'S all for the best, as the cat said when she swallowed the goldfish."

All the sense of outrage in the worthy practitioner's soul boiled up at the affront of the other's breeziness. He turned upon the rag-tag Horn, cocked his hoary beard at him truculently and whiffled through his nose like an exasperated horse.

"Young fellow, I do not care to have anything more to do with you. You have betrayed my trust in you, outraged every principle of honor. Last night I risked my

life at your suggestion, sir. I—um—did my not unworthy part in seizing control of this vessel so that we might quit her at first opportunity and return to—ah—our normal walks of life.

"And what do you do behind my back—and for some wretched motive I have not the least interest in learning? What do you do, young fellow, but turn loose a man who will kill us both first chance he gets and who now is free again to carry the unfortunate men aboard this schooner into lurking dangers. Why—"

"Say, looky here—!" Spike began: but Doctor Chitterly was not to be stopped. Under their heavy white thatches his little eyes were striking fire. His beard crinkled with wrath.

"You do not know, of course," the doctor ramped on, "that before we'd been out a week from that place where we were kidnapped this man Storrs approached me with a dishonorable proposal which involved my shooting you. His very words: 'Horn will be the first you'll have to drill with a lead slug.' For shooting you I was to share with him in some dirty thousands of dollars—doubtless the same blood money which he has used to tempt you to betrayal of your companions. And I scorned him, sir—scorned him!"

The oratorical opportunities of the moment were tempting Doctor Chitterly into taking some latitude with facts, a minor circumstance with him. He thought he saw the other's features fall in shame and thundered on.

"Now, sir, I make no requests of one of your stamp. I—um—demand that if you think you are master of this ship you put me ashore. I will have none of your rotten conspiracies—will be no party to them. I—ah—"

Doctor Chitterly's jaw hung open on his last word. He stared stupefiedly at Horn. The latter had dropped his rifle to clamp it between his knees so as to give his arms play for a violent flapping motion. He bent swiftly forward and back from the waist with a strange mechanical jerk, and with each forward ducking he uttered a burbling note, "Cuckoo—cuckoo—cuckoo!"

"You're a—a pip!" the doctor snorted. "A hyperborean pip!"

He turned and strode down the deck.

At seven bells of the morning watch, a scant two hours after Captain Judah found himself again master, with reservations, of the *Lonney Lee*, destination of this mysterious voyage suddenly loomed before the

eyes of the landsmen aboard. The island which Doctor Chitterly had watched under the strangling coils of



the mist serpents and along the shore of which the schooner had been drifting since first streak of dawn, lifted its contour to a bald headland at its northern end. Captain Judah, at the wheel, brought the head of the schooner

er around a few points so that her course was laid straight for the rocky foot of that headland cliff. He sent a Chinaman forward to heave a line from the cathead.

Tension settled upon every man aboard at these signs of imminent anchorage. The yellow men gathered at the foot of the foremast, shading their eyes under the brims of their wicker hats, like rank toadstools, to peer shoreward. Angelo and the Iron Man ducked out of the galley with dishrags in hands. Doctor Chitterly ceased his lonely pacing to stare at the forbidding shore line.

Storrs bawled orders which galvanized the Chinamen into action. Sail was shortened until only a jib and reefed mains'l caught the light airs stirring. All preparations were made for dropping anchor. Mr. Hansen took the tarpaulin off the auxiliary gasoline engine.

Horn the irrepressible took his stand behind Captain Judah, his rifle still ostentatiously at the ready. His was the thrill of the man at the green baize table who draws one card to fill a straight. Spike had taken a wild gamble on a blind hand and now the hidden card was about to be revealed.

The *Lonney Lee* crept by inches nearer to the line of lazy surf churning against the shore rocks. The high hump of the island towered above her, a mountain slope burned cinder brown by the sun and utterly barren—not so much as a clump of sage to break the dun monotony.

The cliff suddenly fell back revealing a cove perhaps a half-mile deep. Squared in the middle of the shallow dish of blue water a steamer was stranded, bow high against the sands where the first line of rollers broke.

There was something startling in this sudden revelation. After a fortnight of vacant ocean—not so much as a plume of steamer smoke south of San Diego—to plump upon a ship here in this outland cove. Here was a Crusoe of craft desolate in its desert harbor.

Save for the canting of its bow the steamer might have been snugly at anchor awaiting passengers and cargo so far as the eyes of the *Lonney Lee* could determine. Only Captain Judah's practiced eye, reinforced by binoculars, could detect the sagging of stays betokening masts loosened by the waves' pounding, and a cant to the funnel. The steamer was of the common coastwise type plying Pacific ports; around two thousand tons; engines set aft; grubby looking with its black hull and dingy green superstructure—a tramp in every line.

The Stars and Stripes floated, union down, from the main truck.

The *Lonney Lee* crept into the shallow cove and dropped anchor in shoal water about a hundred yards away from the abandoned ship.

Once the hook was down and the schooner rode on a short cable, Captain Judah ordered the yawl overside. Two Chinamen lowered away and scrambled down to take their places at the oars. The skipper had one foot on the rail prepared to swing down when Spike, timing his casual stride down the deck, intercepted him.

"Figurin' on takin' a little trip, Cap?" Storrs gave him a flicker from baleful eyes and nodded curtly.

"I don't hear any invites to go 'long." Spike thrust out his chin provocatively.

"None has been offered," was the curt reply.

"Thanks, just the same; I'll go." He dropped overside with his rifle, plumped himself in the stern sheets and indicated where Captain Judah should sit forward of the Chinese oarsmen. The yawl pushed off.

CHAPTER XI

SURPRISE AT SABINA ISLAND

THE stranded steamer presented every aspect of death to Spike Horn as the yawl from the *Lonney Lee* crossed flat water headed for her side. There was about the craft an indefinable air of slackness and decay which even a landsman's unpracticed eye could note. Captain Judah saw much more. He observed, for example, that the four boat davits, two on each side, were swung outward and with the falls hanging where boats had been cut away. As they drew nearer the craft his practiced eye caught the hint of a bulge in the iron plates along what had been normal water-line when the

steamer floated free—a swelling outward of the vessel's skin like a giant blister abeam of where the main cargo hold should be. Captain Judah saw this out-thrust of the plates and smiled inwardly as might one who checked up on a job well done.

The obvious aspect of a death ship was emphasized just before the yawl's prow raked along the side where pendant falls of a davit offered a way aboard. A nauseous odor of decay was wafted from the hulk; a gagging smell of decomposition calculated to set the most callous gorge to twittering.

"Wauf!" Spike snorted across the backs of the Chinese rowers. "What're we up against, Cap: a slaughter house?"

"Hides," Captain Judah answered with a monosyllable, and he swarmed up the falls to disappear overside. Horn, encumbered by his rifle, followed more slowly. He poised himself atop the rail to survey the scene of desolation below him. Storrs already was climbing the ladder to the high bridge for ard.

The maindeck Horn looked down upon was cluttered with evidence of a hasty abandonment; lengths of rope uncoiled and trailing nowhere; empty biscuit tins; a champagne case with straw jackets sticking out of the top. He saw up by the foremast a ragged hole in the deck boards, all fringed about the edges with splintered wood. Such a hole as could have been made only by some interior explosion.

Horn strode over to the rent and looked down. He almost swooned under the odor which assailed his nostrils—the smell of decomposition which had greeted their approach. All that he saw in the instant before a reflex of outraged nerves pulled his head away was a filthy mass of something dun and white floating on water, a most unwholesome mess.

Storrs, descending from the bridge, had come to peer through the hole in the deck. He appeared to find satisfaction in what he saw. At least, crinkles of something like humor splayed out from his eyes.

"Nice job—a very tidy job, I'd say." The man spoke more to himself than for Spike's ears.

"Looks like somebody'd tried to blow up the ship, Cap." Horn felt the situation called for some explanation, even though from a man who hated him. Captain Judah rewarded the remark by a searching glance. He might have been sounding Horn's demeanor for masked innocence.

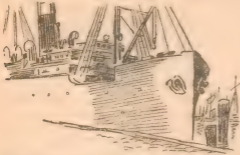
"You know what cotton packed tight and green hides atop that will do to a ship

if enough water is allowed to get into the hold." Here was challenge for Horn to come out from behind subterfuge. A shake of his head was Spike's genuine assurance of ignorance. The *Lonney Lee's* master favored him with a long unwinking scrutiny.

"Horn, what's the use of playing this child's game with me?" he snapped. "As if you didn't know Cap'n Lofgren of this ship, the *Sierra Park*, had his orders from your gang to wreck her—wreck her neatly so's not to invalidate the insurance. Barratry, Horn: ever hear that word?"

"Sounds like somethin' in metallurgy—a new kind of rock."

Captain Judah assumed the bored air of a schoolmaster with a dunce: "Barratry, young fellow, is wrecking a ship so that the underwriters can't come down on you for fraud. Here's a ship which cleared from Mazatlan with baled Sinaloa cotton



packed tight with a jack, then called at La Paz for green hides to be stowed on top of the cotton—stowed snug right up to the deck beams. First night out of La Paz somebody aboard this ship—mind you, I name no names—somebody, I say, let about five hundred gallons of water, say, run in the main hold, then bolted down the hatch—"

"I get you!" Spike interrupted. "Like dried apples in soak—everything swelled."

"Swelled enough to push out the plates at the waterline," the skipped added dryly. "Your Cap'n Lofgren—pious soul!—had to make a run for Sabina Island here and beach his ship to keep from sinking. Record all tidy and shipshape in case he's called before the inspectors in San Francisco."

Spike pointed to the hole in the deck with an inquiring finger.

"Gas, of course," Storrs grunted. "Decaying hide would account for that even if the cotton didn't. This godly Cap'n Lofgren doubtless figured on combustion and a fire which would burn the ship after he quit it."

The *Lonney Lee's* master suddenly checked himself and scowled. His saturnine eyes launched shafts of hate at the rag-tag Horn.

"Here you are, Horn, making a monkey of me again," he grated. "Getting me to tell you what you damn' well know already."

Horn's clown mouth widened to show the gap which the smash of Storrs' fist had made in his dentition that first day out from Abalone Cove.

"Cap, cross my heart an' hope to choke if this ain't all news to me."

For a long minute Captain Judah's eyes bored into him. Almost was there conviction of the truth of Spike's confession in their moveless irises, then doubt flamed over them. The master's fetter of whisker stirred in a sneer.

"Horn, you're the cleverest scoundrel of the lot, and I give you fair warning: I'm going to get out of this wreck what I came to get. If there's any interference from you I'll kill you, rifle or no rifle. So—"

The man's jaw hung open on the unspoken words. His eyes, shunting over Horn's shoulder, widened so that their whites flickered eerily. Spike whirled to follow the direction of the set gaze. What he saw staggered him.

The figure of a woman sat carelessly on the lee rail opposite where they stood and just beneath one of the outswung davits. She wore the blue trousers and woolen shirt of a steamship under-officer. Heavy braids of hair, thick and black, fell over her shoulders from the brim of a vizored cap. Her right hand was advanced slightly away from her body and toward them. At first Spike thought she was pointing at them with a long finger, strangely silvered; then he saw at that finger's end the small black bore of a revolver.

"Which one of you is named Storrs—Cap'n Judah Storrs?" The challenge came in a firm throaty voice. Captain Judah mastered his bewilderment sufficiently to speak.

"I am Captain—"

A jet of smoke from the silvery pointing finger, and Captain Judah's tight mariner's cap lifted and turned askew on his head.

CHAPTER XII KARELJA LOFGREN

SPIKE HORN, on the very split-second of that shot which turned Captain Judah's cap on his head, in two bounds was at the rail where sat the

mystery woman come from nowhere. Her forefinger was pressing the trigger for a second shot at Storrs when Spike's rifle barrel made a swift upward sweep toward the girl's wrist. A bullet went singing toward the masthead as the revolver spun an arc and dropped far forward near the ragged hole in the deckboards.

Perhaps Spike saved Storrs' life. If he did, that was, however, no great concern of his.

What followed upon that swift diverting of a bullet was decidedly Spike's concern. A body launched itself from the rail full at him. A stinging blow from a fist rocked his head backward. As he stumbled back he had an eye-filling vision of a face contorted by fury; eyes blazing like a black panther's; black braids of hair whipping about like striking serpents.

Surprisingly strong hands were laid on the rifle to wrench it from him. He felt hot breath against his face as the girl cried, "Give me that! Give me! I'll kill both of you!"

Spike's backward shuffling feet struck against the edge of a box and he went down. His breath was knocked from him as the girl fell upon him. Once they rolled over together on the deck, then Spike got a leverage for one foot against the butt of the mast and broke the hold she had upon him. Swiftly he rolled out of reach and scrambled to his feet, grinning delightedly. The rifle still was his.

The fighting lady remained in a sitting position on the deck, fists doubled, furious eyes jumping from Horn to Storrs. But for the incongruous shirt and trousers, she could have been easily a model for some sculptor wishing to imprison in bronze the figure of a perfectly formed modern outdoor girl. She was of good height for a woman, and her neck, which rose full and round from the opened flap of the shirt, carried her head imperiously.

Spike Horn was sure he never had seen a woman with a face like hers. It was more the face of a boy, and flushed with the vitality of youth. Very oval in contour, with narrow, pointed chin and broad forehead under the heavy V marking of the blue-black hair. The eyes had a slight Mongolian up-turn made more exotic by the slant of black brows tilted like the brows of a lady on a mandarin fan. The scowl she wore gathered the broader ends of those brows into a knot where her lustrous black eyes burned in rage.

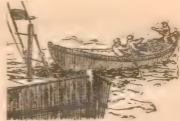
Spike saw those eyes give a sideways slant toward where the revolver lay many

feet away on the deck. He anticipated her intent on the instant, strode over, picked up the weapon, broke it and dropped the unexploded cartridges into his pocket. He clamped the barrel shut again and advanced the butt toward the girl.

"Lady, you dropped something," he snickered with a low bow. With no abatement of her furious frown the girl took the weapon, stuck it in the waistband of her trousers and came up standing.

Storrs, who had been a little shaken by the flight of a bullet across his hair-line, made a quick recovery during the brief hand-to-hand go between the strange girl and his roughneck captor. Now, smiling broadly, he received the full battery fire from her eyes.

"So, Cap'n Judah Storrs, you've come to



get the loot from the *Sierra Park*!" Again that huskiness in the timbre of her voice, a little like the low wood notes from an oboe. Storrs bowed his head for answer.

"But you didn't expect to find me aboard, eh?" This with a challenging out-thrust of the pointed chin.

"Madam, I could hardly expect that since I never saw or heard of you before."

"Never heard of me?" She took a quick step which brought her so close to the *Loney Lee's* skipper that her breath stirred his beard. "Never heard of Karelia Lofgren? Then why did you give orders that when your man Hoskin beached this ship here Cap'n Lofgren was to be killed and I left behind on the wreck to die?"

The girl who called herself Karelia was all the picture of a Greek Nemesis this instant. Her features, almost on a level with the skipper's, were drawn into a hard mask of devilishness, the strangely oblique brows giving it a satanic cast. Her fists were held rigidly across her breast.

Storrs fell back at her accusation of murder and marooning. His face, usually so well controlled, betrayed genuine surprise.

"I order Cap'n Lofgren's death? No!" he stoutly denied. "I fully believed he was alive, and——"

"You lie! You lie!" She whirled, took

a few hurried steps away and then almost ran back to bring her bared teeth, narrow and gleaming, close to Captain Judah's face. Every inch of her lithe body was consumed by fury as by a winding sheet of flame.

"There, on that bridge—" she pointed—"he shot my father, your man Hoskin did. Then he held me to the rail, your man Hoskin, to see what happened when my father's body was dropped overboard—to see the black fins come rushing—the foam which their tails lashed. Ah-h! Look at me, Cap'n Judah Storrs. See these eyes of mine! I tell you these eyes of Karelia Lofgren will again see that rush of black fins—that bloody foam. But you will be down there this next time—yours the body the sharks will tear!"

For a frozen minute they stood with stares locked, Storrs' saturnine face inches away from the flushed and passionate features of Karelia Lofgren. The man's voice came low and measured.

"Young woman, Hoskin is not 'my man' as you call him. If he murdered Skipper Lofgren and left you marooned here it was without my knowledge. I give you my word until this minute I thought your father had sold me out; thought that I would have to fight him and the men he'd sold out to for what lies under this deck here."

A sudden gleam of inspiration lighted the skipper's cold eye. He turned to indicate Spike Horn.

"Here's the man you can settle with. Ask him what he knows about Hoskin. You'll notice he carries a rifle when he's with me. He's no friend of mine."

Storrs' deft attempt to turn the girl's berserker wrath onto the innocent Spike Horn was made an instant too late. For the throes of her rage were unsupportable for long and the mood was passing from her. She turned smoldering eyes to meet a most engaging smile set in a comedian's face.

"After that chummy trick let me pull one of my own, Miss Ka—Karelia." Spike jammed a fist into one pants pocket and brought out four cartridges he'd taken from the girl's revolver. He offered them on his spread palm with a clumsy attempt at a bow.

"Horn, you goat!" Sharp alarm sounded in Captain Judah's exclamation.

"Y' aren't worried, are you Cap?" He made a clown's face at Storrs.

The girl slowly put out a hand for the cartridges. Storrs took a sudden step for-

ward, but Spike's rifle waved him back with an authoritative command. The master stood tight-lipped and with eyes narrowed for the least flicker of action.

Karelia Lofgren broke the breech of her weapon and slipped the cartridges into the chambers one by one. The forward sag of her head and slow movements of her hand betokened a lassitude following nerve storm. She clicked the breech shut, spun the chamber until a load was under the hammer.

Then her eyes slowly traveled along a seam of the deck to where Captain Judah's feet were planted, up the legs of his trousers to his waistband, to his face. It was held immovable as of carved wood. She searched his eyes while Storrs battled to match her gaze.

She tacked the revolver behind the belt about her waist.

"Cap'n Storrs, you'd better go away from the *Sierra Park*," was the admonition given in a husky voice. "You'd better go away, because if you stay here I'll surely kill you—and the sharks will pull you to pieces."

The extraordinary Karelia Lofgren turned abruptly and strode to the lee rail where they first had seen her. She mounted the rail, her bare toes curling over the edge, then swung out on one of the davit ropes and disappeared.

Spike made a run for the rail to look down. He saw the girl seat herself on a box athwart some bound spars making a crazy raft and take up a paddle. Slowly the rude craft headed for the shore line a hundred yards away.

And from three directions came hurrying the grim black triangles which mark the sea-tigers. They came cutting the water in lines of white to form a wary convoy into shoal water.

CHAPTER XIII

"MAN IS LIKE TO VANITY"

ARMS akimbo on the rail, Spike Horn watched the progress of this strange mariner on a stranger craft until it grounded on the beach. He saw the girl bound ashore and tether the raft by a rope noosed around a rock. Then without so much as a backward look she climbed a low ridge of rocks, which ran like the spine of some barred monster down the seaward flank of the mountain, and disappeared.

Even after she was gone from sight the man from Goldfield held to his place and let his eyes strain over every swale and

hummock of the barren island headland, hopping for another glimpse of the blue



shirt and those two black ropes of hair swinging like strong cables over her shoulders. He had been more p r o f o u n d l y stirred by this girl than he would have cared to admit

even to himself. Never in his life had Spike Horn encountered so vivid a fury. His steady stare against the yellow mountain side seemed to conjure her out of the rocks. He saw again her free stride; the boyish swing of her shoulders; the white flashes of her bare feet peeping out from the flapping vents of blue trousers. "Karelia—Karelia Lofgren." Sounded queer and sorta like a big bell ringing. Foreign.

His mind swung from conning the physical attributes of the visitor aboard the wrecked *Sierra Park* to the surprising substance of the charges she had flung so furiously at Captain Judah. Murder, no less; the murder of the master of this wrecked ship, her father. Yes, and worse than murder, the leaving of a woman alone on a derelict here in this God-forsaken sea bang up against a desert island!

Spike Horn was not a squeamish man. Life's rough hand had larruped him aplenty. He had played the game of men hard and ruthlessly; but he'd played it straight. No taking of life. No fighting foul, much less with a woman.

Of a sudden this cruise of the *Lonney Lee* down here into a white-hot sea away from the eyes of the world was revealed to him in a sinister light undreamt of before. A steamship deliberately wrecked. Captain Storrs knew just how it was wrecked even though he was not aboard it. Collusion there! He was in on the game. Then he must have been in on the murder of this Karelia girl's father and the vicious trick of leaving her alone to rot on a stinking hulk.

By God, that fighting fury was right when she called Storrs a murderer!

He turned from the rail to search out the captain. He found him kneeling by the side of the donkey engine at the foremast foot, tinkering a nut with a monkey wrench.

"Stand up, Storrs, we're goin' to have a

show-down, you an' me."

The skipper looked over his shoulder with an assumed air of patience.

"I think there's been enough palaver for one morning," he said shortly.

"Not till you've heard me," Spike snapped. "Listen to me: I think that girl's got you cold to rights. You *did* give somebody aboard this ship orders to croak her old man an' leave her to die alone on a wreck."

Captain Judah slowly arose and let his amused glance rest on the flushed face of the younger man before him. His lips slipped sideways into a sneer.

"Is this gallery play, Horn; or when did you become converted at the mourner's bench?"

"Me, I never tied into any game where murder's at the end of it," came explosively from Spike.

"Horn, you're a two-faced liar. You knew when I shanghaied you aboard the *Lonney Lee* that murder'd been done down here, which was more than I knew. I thought Cap'n Lofgren was the one who'd double-crossed me and was hiring you to jump me before I could get away from San Francisco. You knew all the time Hoskin, Lofgren's first officer, had given him the double-cross as well as a bullet. Hoskin, then, was the man who put money in your bank for you."

A surprising move on Horn's part. He walked to the bridge ladder twenty feet away and rested his rifle there. He came back, hands free and swinging lightly by his side.

"Drop that monkey wrench, Storrs, and stand up. I'm goin' to trim you all over again. What you got from me early 'smornin' was just a teaser."

The *Lonney Lee's* skipper did not lay down the heavy wrench; but he assumed no belligerent attitude.

"Grand stand play, Horn," he said; "you've caught the notion from that crazy Finn girl. I should say this is no time for you and me to be battering each other when our business is to get a fortune out of the hold here before——"

Spike leaped. With a lightning jerk of the hand Storrs brought the monkey wrench up from his waist. It did not travel more than half a foot, but the blunt face of the thing smacked dully against the lowered forehead of the charging man. Spike dropped like a grain sack and lay twitching at Storrs' feet.

The skipper stood looking down at the sprawled figure. The suddenness of his

mastery stunned him a little. His eye traveled from the unconscious Horn over to the rifle laid against the bridge ladder. A slow smile parted the ring of whisker about the man's mouth, then in an instant the smile was wiped away in a flooding of animal savagery. For the full value of that chance blow was borne in upon Judah Storrs; he could wipe out an obligation to which he had set his hand under compulsion not ten hours ago: a promise to pay fifty thousand dollars—and unfortunate publicity certain to follow his welching on the contract.

But he would do it in a manner most painful to the party of the first part.

Storrs looked around the deck and spied an empty oil can with a wire bale to it. He seized a length of rope, tied one end to the bale and flung the can overboard. Up it came, filled, to be sloshed over the head and shoulders of the unconscious man. Again and again water was sluiced upon him.

The one giving first aid wanted his man to be conscious before the next move in the drama was set afoot. He knelt and shook Horn.

"Horn! Come around. You're going on a long journey and you want to meet some people who'll go with you."

Spike stirred and opened his eyes. He saw the solicitous face of his enemy bent over him.

"Ah, that's good, Horn." Captain Judah leaned nearer and slipped an arm under prone shoulders. "Horn, remember what



that crazy girl said about the sharks—how they churned up a bloody foam? She said, as I remember, that I was the next one who was slated to go to the sharks from this ship."

Storrs was half erect now, and he was dragging Horn by a grip on his shoulders. Nearer the rail!

"Horn, the lady was half right. In her hysterical condition she could not be expected to do the prophet business wholly ship-shape. Somebody's going to the sharks, Horn; but it isn't Judah Storrs, Esquire."

In that shadow gulf between unconsciousness and full reason the submerged spirit which was Spike Horn was battling upward through fathoms of blackness, like a diver with bursting lungs who yearns for the air and free sunlight. Faintly and as the tolling of a sunken bell, Skipper Storrs' words came to the ears of that swimming

spirit. At first they were just words, mumbled and meaningless. Then one stood out—"Sharks!"

"A lot of old fogies say, Horn, sharks won't attack a living man." Storrs had him by the rail now and was slowly heaving him shoulders-over. "All bosh, Horn! You'll see for yourself—ah, they're waiting for you, Horn—one—no, three, by George! And there'll be others!"

The swimming spirit now was out of the depths. Horn shot out a desperately grappling hand to seize the ratlines which came down to anchorage on the rail just where his shoulder was slipping—slipping. Storrs twisted his body so that his legs hung overboard. One of the skipper's hands freed itself to drop over and pry at the gripping fingers.

"Tut-tut, Horn! Why this reluctance? 'Man is like to vanity,' the blessed Psalms say; 'his days are as a shadow.' And so, good-by, Horn—good—"

Captain Storrs' prying at the gripping fingers suddenly ceased. He half spun round and staggered back to crumple against the foremast.

Over across flat water where the *Lonney Lee* lay anchored a dab of white smoke drifted away from the bow. Old Doctor Chitterly dropped a rifle from his shoulder with a heartfelt call of thanks to his Maker.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DOCTOR LEADS AN ACE

IT CAN be easily realized that nothing short of extreme circumstances could have prompted the discoverer of Squaw Root Tonic to shoot anybody with, as the courts have a way of adding, "intent to kill."

The good doctor, what time the yawl pulled away from the *Lonney Lee* headed for the wrecked steamer with Skipper Storrs and Spike Horn for passengers, had been left in a very low state of morale. He had just given the irresponsible Horn a generous piece of his mind. That the one so reproved should receive the dressing-down with the mechanical enthusiasm of a cuckoo in a clock did not tend to assure Doctor Chitterly that sweetness and light ruled the world. He was convinced to the contrary. He knew that of all miserable creatures on earth he could fight a Hottentot for lowest place.

Doctor Chitterly had proceeded to fetch a camp stool from the cabin and unlimbered it under the shade of the awning which had been carried stretched over the

quarterdeck since torrid weather was encountered. There he sat alone, while Hansen fiddled with the gas engine, with his rifle between his knees. A complete picture of dejection he offered. He wore his sea rig, Chinese cotton trousers; rattan shoe-packs on his bare feet. His shore shirt, once washed during the trip and bearing a decidedly unironed appearance, still carried the yellow diamond on its bosom and the celluloid cuffs attached to the wristbands by metal tabs. His ceremonial slouch hat with the drooping brim rode his white locks somewhat jauntily. He fanned himself languidly with a copy of an old newspaper which Mr. Hansen had brought aboard—the worthy doctor knew its contents down to the last word on the last page.

Came to him there Angelo the flute player, carrying his home-made instrument. "I playa for you nice-a tune, wheech for name makes Conti 'Offman."

Doctor Chitterly shuddered visibly and held up a restraining hand. He couched his protest in a bellow.

"Isn't it too soon after breakfast for musie, Angelo? Maybe in an hour from now——"

Doubtfully Angelo lifted the bamboo broom-handle to his lips and sounded a few eldritch screeches. "Nice-a-tune that Conti 'Offman," he urged; but he saw no answering light of enthusiasm in the elder man's eye. Angelo possessed the veneration for old men which was his racial heritage. He would not insist.

He plumped himself cross-legged on the deck at the doctor's feet. "Me, I ver' sad, too," he sighed. Then suddenly and without preliminaries, "What 'appen that damn' revolution we 'ave these sheep las' night? Bang—bang! Beega fight thees devil Horn an' Cap-itan. Me, Angelo, ready for figta damn' Chink. Then—'e's all finish; nothin' 'appen."

Doctor Chitterly, needing a confidant—even a flute player thought a little daft—straightway unburdened himself completely. He told, with some pardonable embroidery, how he had planned the mutiny with intention to sail the schooner to nearest port and there abandon her; how Spike Horn after a mysterious conference with the beaten enemy had double-crossed the whole outfit and signed some agreement with Captain Judah—doubtless a division of fabulous wealth which lay in that stranded steamer yonder.

"And now," he finished lugubriously, "they've gone to get their rotten plunder,

leaving us here to rot. I know we'll all be hanged or at best thrown in some jail before this wretched business is over."

A strange flicker of white in the flute player's eyes as he flashed them up to the doctor's face.

"W'at you theenk thees stuff they get—diamonds?"

"I don't know, Angelo. I only know I want none of it. All I want is to get back to San Francisco and the smell of the ocean winds through the Golden Gate."

The flute player drummed with nervous fingers on the vents of his broom-handle; evidently he was conning the wisdom of voicing a thought which possessed him. Finally he said, "Yes, I theenk so. W'en they get those diamond—thees devil Horn, thees Cap-itan—w'en they breeng those diamond here an' we go for that San Francis', then I do it."

Prick of some new terror spurred the physician. He turned frightened eyes on the Italian.

"Do what, Angelo?"

Now the flute player's voluble hands were flying in vivid gestures. The whites of his eyes flickered palely.

"One littla bottle; I find heem in that kitchen. I smell heem. I know—me, Angelo! One-a time before w'en I cooka de pasta in Fior d'Italia I know that bottle. 'E's for make ver' seeck the rat." Angelo bared narrow yellow teeth in a shocking grimace, clapped his hands over his stomach and squeaked like a fiddle in tuning.

"W'en we 'ave those diamond here on thees boat an' we start for San Francis', one day thees littla bottle in the soupa. Ah, then, Doct' Chit', you see something! Thees Cap-itan, thees Horn, all the dam' Chink they roll aroun'—they make squik like rat—they die. *Sapristi!* You an' me 'ave those diamond!"

The worthy Chitterly leaped from his chair as if spurred.

"Good Lord, man, you're talking wholesale murder!"

"W'y not?" was the childlike query.

Doctor Chitterly, shaken to his rattan shoe-packs, had just drawn himself to his full height prepared to give the flute player a sonorous lecture, when his eye caught a prodigy. A figure in blue was pushing out from the vacant shore line of the cove on a bundle of boards flush with the water.



A human creature on this deserted island!

Without a word to Angelo, he rushed down into the cabin for Captain Judah's binoculars. He leveled them at the spot of blue upon the raft now heading for the stranded steamer.

"A woman, by the Lord Harry! Yes, sir, she's got her hair in braids."

Angelo snatched the glasses and clapped them to his eyes.

"Yes—woman," he murmured. "Now large—a trouble!"

Which was exactly Doctor Chitterly's diagnosis of the situation. An uncompromising bachelor, the good doctor had been permanently corralled in that unfortunate state by an ever-present awe of the softer sex. From the time, in his riotous youth amid the mines of the Mother Lode, when a chit sued him for breath of promise and won, up to the occasion—not many years back—when he had connived at a friend's attempt to escape from a termagant wife and had been pushed to the brink of ruin by that outraged lady, over these many years of experience, all of Doctor Chitterly's contacts with the fair sex had left him somehow the loser. Now another—and in this desolate sea!

By turns at the glass the two stupefied men aboard the *Lonney Lee* followed the progress of the raft toward the stranded steamer until it was hidden by the up-tilted bow. Then Doctor Chitterly, possessing the binoculars for the moment, saw the figure in blue outlined against the sky as it balanced on the *Sierra Park's* rail; saw two puffs of smoke jet from her extended hand. Suddenly she slipped out of sight, for the elevation of the derelict's deck above that of the *Lonney Lee* denied observation of what transpired there.

"She is shooting at them!" the doctor whispered before Angelo could snatch the binoculars and vainly attempt to follow sequence of lively events across the water.

"Ah-ha, Doct' Chit'; how I tella you! Large—a troubles."

"Hush!" Chitterly had heard faint sound of a voice across the flat water separating the two craft. They strained their ears to catch the sound of a woman's voice lifted in anger; it was punctuated now and again by Storrs' rejoinders. A most maddening business, this being in the wings when drama was unfolding, yet denied sight of action and actors. Just as everything on this wretched voyage had transpired, so Doctor Chitterly inwardly complained, things were happening under his nose and he not privy to them.

They saw the mysterious woman who was garbed as a man disappear over the rail and presently come into their ken again as she paddled her raft ashore. Some obscure prompting of relief caused the doctor to vent a sigh of satisfaction. He was expecting the lady to pay a similar complimentary visit to the *Lonney Lee* after her stormy invasion of the steamer; and he feared the worst would result from the call.

SOME lingering fascination the strange woman exercised upon him kept Doctor Chitterly's glasses roving the length of the *Sierra Park* even after her departure. As if he suspected her of leaving a bomb with a time fuse behind her!

At any rate, the head of Captain Judah Storrs appeared in the double barrels of the instrument glued to the doctor's eyes; then the shoulders and lolling head of Spike Horn being hoisted to the ship's rail.

A single sweep of the eye told the doctor that Horn was helpless, perhaps from a bullet fired by the she-devil in trousers. But there was no waiting boat below where the skipper was heaving the nerveless figure. Storrs was not lowering away a wounded man to be brought back to the schooner. Dead, then! Spike Horn was dead and—

Out shot that arm in final desperate grab at a ratline; Chitterly caught the flicker of action and saw Storrs' hand come over to pry fingers from their life-hold.

Murder, then! Here was the cold-blooded killing of a man!

Doctor Chitterly took no reckoning of partisanship as between Captain Judah and Spike Horn; he had good reason to dislike them both. But he could not see any man done to death, brutally killed out of hand. A reflex of fine old morality sent his hand to snatch up the rifle he had propped against the schooner rail. He made instantaneous judgment of range and wind, for once Doctor Chitterly had been a mighty deer hunter, and fired.

As a puppet is knocked over in a shooting gallery, Storrs fell back out of sight. Doctor Chitterly and Angelo, both openmouthed, watched the dangling figure of Horn swing for a minute over a horrid death ten feet below his heels, then painfully pull itself up and over the rail.

Mr. Hansen, the wooden mate, appeared at the foot of the companionway with a face that dully questioned a matter of shooting. The doctor turned on him with an air of authority.

"I've just killed your captain, Mr. Hansen, killed him to prevent a cold-blooded murder. Have the Chinamen get out another boat and row me over to that steamer."

Hansen took the news as being naught but an expected part of the day's work. He went forward to round up a boat's crew for the *Lonney Lee's* second yawl which was lashed to the gratings of the house. In a few minutes it was lowered away from



the taffrail davits and in the water with two Chinamen at the oars. Doctor Chitterly accompanied by the flute player, whose excitement was at boiling point, was rowed across to the

Sierra Park.

Spike Horn met the doctor as he swung himself heavily over the rail, followed by Angelo. The battered young man caught Chitterly's hand between his two.

"Doc, ole timer, any time, any place you need y'r li'l friend Spike Horn to lift you outa a tough jackpot, he'll be there!" Which was about the limit of sentiment of which the man from Goldfield was capable.

Doctor Chitterly's eyes roved over the deck to where the body of Storrs made an untidy bundle against the foremast. "I've never killed a man," he began in a shaken voice. "I—um—confess I feel very—"

"Save your feelin's, Doc. Ole Storrs's a long way from dead, though not feelin' so prime as he might. You just drilled him through the shoulder."

"God be praised!" was Chitterly's heartfelt thanks, and with the other two he strode over to where the skipper lay. The doctor knelt professionally and put his hand under the unbuttoned coat where a red stain crept down over Storrs' shirt. The wounded man's eyelids flickered open and the gray eyes looked up with their accustomed aloof stare tinged as always with cold irony. He said nothing; only when Spike Horn's face came within the languidly rolling field of the eyeballs the fetter of beard about the mouth tightened.

The doctor cut jacket and shirt away and exposed a blue-black hole just below the right shoulder socket. With a tenderness hardly to be expected he lifted and half rolled Storrs' body to discover a lump

near the shoulder blade.

"Sea water's a good antiseptic," he flung over his shoulder at the flute player. "Pick up that can with a rope to it and scoop up some."

He brought out a pocket knife and selected the smallest blade to open. He fumbled for a match, struck it and passed the flame along the blade's keen edge. The wounded man's eyes followed fascinated the play of slender flame along tempered steel.

"Just as good as alcohol for cleansing," spake the doctor in his best professional manner. "No bones broken, I think; maybe the shoulder blade's scraped a little. Now if I only had a bottle of Squaw Root Tonic—"

"Fine old fraud!" Captain Judah murmured through lips that hardly moved. Then, "I take it you were the one that put that bullet through me."

Doctor Chitterly nodded and lifted the hairy back of a hand to his lips to wet it. He tried the keenness of the blade along the roots of the hairs. All his abhorrence of murder and of Captain Judah as a murderer checked in the act were lost in a professional enthusiasm. Angelo brought the canful of brine. The doctor turned Storrs over on his stomach.

"Cut, you white-whiskered old Mormon blank-of-a-blankness!" came the muffled oburgation.

Doctor Chitterly cut.

When the rude surgery was finished and a bandage of a sort had been contrived the doctor and Spike Horn walked out of earshot.

"Now tell me all about it—that woman in men's clothes and what happened between Storrs and yourself," Chitterly demanded. Spike gave him a complete chronicle.

The doctor heard him through without comment. "And so that dad-blistered son of Hell tried to make shark-bait of me," Spike finished.

"Hum-m-m!" Chitterly's hand was combing his generous beard in reflex of deep thought. "The young woman says Captain Storrs murdered her father. He tried his best to murder you. I should say his character is pretty well established."

"'Bout as purty a household pet as a desert sidewinder." Spike cast a baleful glance to where the late patient under Doctor Chitterly's surgery sat propped against the mast. He turned back to thwack a heavy hand on his companion's shoulder.

"Doc, ole horse, I guess I played you a

dirty game this mornin' when I let Storrs have his schooner back again—all for a promise of fifty thousand which isn't worth the paper it's written on. I slipped you the double-cross, Doc, an' you turn 'round an' save my life. That makes me out a purty ornery skunk."

"We'll forget that," Chitterly interposed with a bland look in his eyes.

"We will *not!* An' what's more, we're going to do just what you figured on doin' when I propositioned you on the mutiny business. We're goin' cut loose from this whole damn' outfit—leave 'em rot here on this busted steamer with whatever plunder ole Storrs thinks is down in the cellar. Just like the girl says he ordered somebody to slip *her* the Robinson Crusoe stuff."

"You mean sail away on the *Lonney Lee*—we shanghaied fellows?" The doctor's face was wreathed with a Santa Claus smile.

"You said it, Doc! We'll give a look-see 'round this ole gravy dish; find out if there's still grub an' water aboard—which there should be. 'F not we'll ferry some over here with Hansen an' the rest of the Chinks; enough to keep 'em goin' for a while until we tell somebody somewhere to come an' fetch 'em off."

Doctor Chitterly's first elation gave way to doubts. "But suppose Hansen and the other Chinamen don't wish to leave the schooner?"

Spike gave him a grin and patted the barrel of the rifle which he had recovered from where folly had prompted him to prop it before his bare-handed engagement with Captain Judah.

"Li'l persuaders, Doc. You've got one. I've got one. Looks like the ayes have it, as they say in the Chamber of Commerce meeting."

Spike started for the rear of the deck where the galley door swung open when an afterthought prompted him to fling over his shoulder: "'Course that Karelia girl goes with us. We can't run off an' leave her here with this curly wolf Storrs."

The doctor was rooted in his tracks, appalled. The sunshine of a new hope suddenly was blotted out for him.

CHAPTER XV

A GOOD WILL EMBASSY

THE sun, which in September swings over the Vermilion Sea like a white-hot pendulum, never looked down, perhaps, upon a sweeter interlude of piracy than that which transpired in the dish cove

of Sabina Island that afternoon.

A survey of the *Sierra Park's* stores and water tanks convinced Spike and the doctor the marooning of Captain Judah and



his crew on the hulk stranded on that deserted shore would not entail hardship for many weeks. After that—well, they, the mutineers, would report the presence of men on the wreck at the first Mexican port the *Lonney Lee* touched; and perhaps a kind hearted government would send to take them off.

Captain Judah, back against the mast, had watched the comings and goings of his enemies with eyes alive. Not a word of their intent was fung at him. He saw the three go overside. The man made a desperate attempt to gain his feet; an invisible quicksand held his legs prisoners.

Back on the schooner once more, Spike made no ado about bundling the remaining Chinamen, their little wicker ditty baskets and opium pipes, into the boats where their fellows waited at the oars. His rifle, carried hunter-wise in the crook of an arm, emphasized his orders.

"You, too, Hansen!" The wooden-faced mate showed mild surprise; but he was one to take the fall of the cards as predestined. With an imitation leather suitcase under his arm Hansen paused at the rail:

"Maister Spike, you remembair von time you ask me I skol sell you tobaccy. Maybe I say then, naw. Skol you ask me now I sell you tobaccy, I say yaw."

"Ask me again next time you see me," was Spike's hearty promise of future business, and he dropped Hansen's suitcase down to one of the boats. With the doctor and his rifle in the stern of one ferry and himself similarly shepherding the second, Spike gave orders to push off for the *Sierra Park's* side. The twain rowed the empty boats back to the *Lonney Lee*. Transfer of the last vestige of Judah Storrs' authority was complete.

To sum up, here were two ships in a shallow cove on the seaward side of Sabina

Island, somewhere offshore in the Vermilion Sea: one a beached wreck with gaping seams letting the tides into a hold believed to contain treasure; the other seaworthy and at anchor. Aboard the derelict Captain Judah Storrs and a crew of seven, with no chance of navigating anywhere—not even a small boat in their possession. And with the two white men, Storrs and Hansen, no weapon to buttress their authority over six yellow men from Canton River.

On the deck of the *Lonney Lee* were four men—landsmen. Two only, Horn and the doctor, possessed quite the most shadowy rudiments of the art of navigation. Two, the Iron Man and the flute player, have seen nothing of the working of a schooner beyond the galley door. Four men, sailors, could make shift to navigate a 120 ton schooner; but hardly a quack doctor, a gold miner, a flute player and an Iron Man lately off the stage of a honkey-tonk.

There was still another factor in the situation: one embodied by the vigorous personality of Karelia Loifgren, the Finnish girl who had taken her smoldering wrath ashore with her to the oven slopes of a barren island. Captain Judah Storrs, wounded and aboard the treasure hulk, might be revising his plans for the immediate future. Chitterly, Horn, and the others on the *Lonney Lee* had theirs to make. But what of this jet-haired woman of the fens and her lust for revenge?

It was to her that Spike Horn's thoughts turned the minute he was back upon the schooner. In fact, the vision of that straight and lithe body in shirt and trousers, that oval face with its black brows drawn into a furious frown had floated like an aura behind every turn of action since Karelia Loifgren went over the *Sierra Park's* side. Some unsuspected chords in his being tingled as if blown by a strong wind.

The doctor saw Horn preparing to drop overside into one of the yawls riding at painter's end and guessed his purpose.

"Horn, you're not going to look for more trouble ashore?"

"What d' yuh mean, trouble?" Spike challenged. "I'm headed to fetch off a captain to run this ship."

"Captain?" Chitterly echoed. "You don't mean—"

"The girl, sure! Daughter of a sea captain, ain't she? Been to sea all her life, most likely. Knows how to steer this li'l ole bathtub so's it'll get somewheres—

which is more'n you and I know, Doc."

"But you'll take your rifle along, Horn," anxiously.

"That'd be a nice way to make a call on a lady." And Spike pushed off. Doctor Chitterly followed his progress shoreward with deepened misgivings. Any young female, he reasoned, who signalized her sudden appearance from nowhere by instant and unreasoned shooting would not make good company aboard the schooner.

Spike drove the boat onto the sand alongside where the girl's rude raft was tethered, gave the painter a twist around a rock and set off toward the spine of naked dike which seamed the seaward side of the mountain and over which he had seen her disappear. For all his decidedly low-brow surface character, Spike Horn possessed a store of imagination carried over from childhood. To be thus treading the burnt turf of a bit of island bastioned off from all the world and in quest of a sort of Miss Robinson Crusoe gave him a skipping sensation around the heart. A far cry from Stingaree Gulch in Goldfield or even a Ferris wheel on the beach near the Cliff House!

He scaled the natural stone fence which came slanting from the heights and looked down upon a bit of beach beyond the cove where lay the two craft. A hedge of naked thorn bush blocked off the foot of the mountain from the yellow scimitar of sand where the fan face of the surf laid its changing patterns of foam. Back against the gaunt branches of the desert shrubs Horn thought he saw a dun colored peak of tarpaulin stretched tentwise. He commenced picking his way down a talus slope bearing in that direction.

"Stop where you are!"

The command came from behind him and a little way up the rocky battlement he had just crossed. Spike whirled in the direction of the voice and stood moveless,

his hands lifted a little way from his thighs. He saw a blue-shirted torso and a black head lifted above the rocky dike. He saw the same curiously silvered finger he had first noted aboard the *Sierra Park* so short a time before; and it was covering him in an identical manner.

Spike swept off the fragment of a straw



hat which partially covered his shock of hair and made with it a sweeping bow.

"Pleased to meetcha again!" he called with one of his comedian's grins. The girl stepped out from behind her breastwork. She lowered her weapon a little, though still keeping the blocky figure of the invader covered. Spike could see the knotting of the black brows in a scowl.

"What are you doing ashore?" Karelia demanded roughly.

"Come to have a little pow-wow with you, lady," was the hardy answer.

"Well, you might just as well make tracks back to your schooner. I've got nothing to say to anybody from Judah Storrs' craft."

Spike widened his grin. "There's where you're wrong, lady. It ain't ole Cap Storrs' schooner any more. It's ours—mine an' Doc Chitterly's—an' we're goin' pull our freight outa here just's soon as you'll say the word an' come aboard."

Karelia's scowl of displeasure turned to one of mystification. What sort of a game, her tip-tilted brows asked, was this tough looking man trying to put over?

"How's this—the schooner no longer Cap'n Storrs'?"

"Well, you see, lady, it's kind of a long story from where it starts with a Ferris wheel at the Cliff House down to this morning, an' if I should start to yell it at you across fifty feet of rock maybe you'd get tired of my voice before you knew it all." Spike's insinuation of a closer approach was given most engagingly, but met with no favorable response.

"You can keep your distance just the same," the girl said with crisp incisiveness. "And you needn't make up any fairy tales as you go along."

Spike started in an exaggerated bellow which could have been heard on the deck of the *Sierra Park*: "My name's Spike Horn, an' I'm a minin' man from Goldfield, just a decent young feller tryin' to get along. An' I never pack a gun when I go to see a lady, howbe the lady may figure she's got to take precautions."

Karelia's glance dropped to the weapon she held at her hip and for an instant something like shame flickered through her black eyes. Then her protective mantle of suspicion dropped over her again and she nodded curtly for Spike to continue. The revolver held its place at her hip.

He continued with no abatement of his voice. Told her simply and with unconscious dramatic power how his ambition to build a fire under San Francisco had

landed him, together with three other men he'd never seen before that hectic night, on the deck of a strange schooner in a fog-bound cove south of the city. How the entry on the credit side of a bankbook had started Captain Storrs off on a cranky notion that he'd stumbled onto a band of conspirators. How, the dawn just passed, when he had the skipper helpless, he, Spike, had angled in the dark waters of mystery and had hooked a contract with the raging Judah Storrs. How they had marooned Storrs and his crew on the wreck.

"I give you my word, lady, I got no more idea than a rabbit this minute what it is ole Cap Storrs's so crazy to get at down in the muck of that steamer's hold. What's more, I don't care. Me, I'm for pullin' my freight outa this hell-hole, pronto! An' Doc Chitterly, who's a nice ole gazabo if you handle him right; the doc thinks like I do.

"'But,' says I to the doc, 'we don't pull outa this bowl of hot slum they call a ocean 'til we get that young lady ashore to go with us. She sure needs to be looked after,' I says."

Silence between them for a long minute. Spike watched the play of emotions across the olive features of the girl. They registered themselves without dissembling: suspicion, hope, beginning beam of confidence. Finally she put a test.

"But suppose I don't wish to go with you. Suppose I tell you I'm perfectly content to stay here on Sabina Island and play out my game with Cap'n Storrs."

Spike pondered this challenge, abashed. Here was a facer.

"But, Miss Ka-Karelia, we can't go 'way an' leave you here alone. Not with ole Storrs out there on that busted steamer like a chained wolf pup ragin' to get at you. He can get ashore like you did—some sorta raft business. An' when he does—why, girl, I tell you it ain't safe!"

Unconsciously Spike Horn poured into his plea a weight of sincerity calculated to convince the most skeptical Karelia Lofgren. A great deal more feeling than he would have thought he possessed. And, though he did not know it, there was in his urging something more personal than abstract chivalry.

The girl behind the dike pondered his words with brooding eyes, for doubt of men which had been lodged in her by cruel bludgeoning was slow to yield. Finally she thrust her revolver under her strap belt with a definitive gesture and came and gave Spike her hand with a hearty grip.

"Now," said she, "we'll talk things over."

CHAPTER XVI

THE "SIERRA PARK'S" CARGO

KARELIA'S first words after the joining of truce were disconcerting. "I think," she said, "you are a great fool but honest. A fool to believe any compact you made with Cap'n Judah Storrs was worth the paper it's written on. Honest—well, because you don't know better than blab your affairs to a stranger."

Spike, taken aback, could do naught but scratch his head and grin sheepishly. "Guess you said it, lady."

"Call me Karelia," the girl corrected.

Spike suspected a joke and made a quick appraisal of her features. Absolute soberness there; black eyes regarding him levelly under their oddly tiptilted brows, eyes full of a vast hardihood but with no room in their irises for life's thistledown moments.

"Mighty fine of you," the velvety contralto purred on. "Mighty decent, I say, to want to take me away from Sabina. When you talked about that I knew you were playing straight with me. But why do you suppose I've been waiting alone here a month and more, living here on the island away from the stench of the *Sierra Park*?"

"Looks to me like you've stayed here because you couldn't get away—no boat or anything," Spike heard himself saying.

"Bosh! A good sized raft with a sail; I could have made it if I'd wanted to—with the port of Miraflores on the peninsula about seventy miles nor'west.

"No, Mate, I've waited here to pay off my score with Cap'n Storrs and a man named Hoskin, first officer aboard the *Sierra Park*—the man who shot my father. I knew both would come here. Bound to. Cap'n Storrs happens to be the first of the two to arrive."

The girl seated herself on a jutting rock, her chin in her cupped palm, and seemed to be in a deep study which took no accounting of Spike's presence. Finally she spoke, not to him but to the heat quivers that wavered from the stone spine running down into the sea:

"Go your way, Mate; you and your schooner you've stolen from Storrs. I stay here."

Spike swept the prospect of thorn hedge and beach, the utterly barren brown shoulder of the mountain behind. The desola-

tion of it all! He looked at the girl in a new wonder.

"But K-Karelia, there's where the joker comes in," he ruefully admitted. "We can't go away without you. Get a sail up and down: the doc and I can do that. But



this business of lookin' at the sun through a cockeyed surveyor's transit and figurin' where you are; we're not there on that stuff, him an' I."

"Ho-ho!" The black head went back in a gust of hearty laughter. "So you need a navigator. That's why you felt so tenderly about leaving an unprotected woman alone on Sabina!"

Spike's face flamed red. He was mad, he told himself—mad clear through.

"Look here! You can't play horse with Spike Horn, girl or no girl." He made a first stride toward the top of the dike, quite ready to leave this Karelia girl "cold," as he would have phrased it. A strong hand shot out to grip his wrist. He heard her voice, mollifying.

"Wait a minute, Mate. No use flying off at loose ends. When you know me better you'll find out you have to get used to my speaking my mind. Sit down. I want to talk. Haven't talked to anything but little rock crabs and sea gulls for five weeks." A pause. "What's more, I like you."

He suffered his offended dignity to be salved—not so difficult a concession since Karelia Lofgren had unerringly penetrated to the real motive of his visit. With an elaborate show of magnanimity Spike selected a jutting lava shelf for a seat.

"Shoot!" he said.

Karelia let her eyes run down to the yellow sickle of beach where the slow pulse of the waves sent yeasty surges climbing a slope and sucked them back with a snoring of the shingle.

"Opium," she said as if continuing revelations already begun. "Two thousand cans of Ispahan opium stowed away in cotton bales out there in the *Sierra Park's* hold. Worth \$125 a can laid down in San Francisco's Chinatown."

"Glory be!" Spike drew in a whistling breath. "And I——"

"For that," the girl continued in an even voice, "my father has been murdered, a steamer has been wrecked, you and your friends have been shanghaied—and no tell-

ing where all the devilment will stop." Spike saw her features suddenly stiffen into cold lines of fury even as they had been first revealed to him the minute she came over the *Sierra Park's* rail. "But this devilment won't stop until Karelia Lofgren has had a hand in it. I had my chance at Cap'n Storrs out there this morning," she continued. "You spoiled it. Maybe I'm glad you did. There's a better way of paying him off than just shooting him. When Hoskin comes back—"

Karelia broke off her reverie and gave the man a quick smile, half apologetic. "What you want to hear is not my grudges but the story of how opium got into those cotton bales and how the bales happen to be here in a beached steamer. I'll give you all I know of it, Mate."

Gone was the look of a stalking tigress that had tensed Karelia Lofgren's features. Once more her chin was cupped in her propped hand and her eyes were following a little dreamily the wash of waves on the shining beach. Her voice came lazily.

"Cap'n Lofgren, my father, knew Cap'n Storrs many years ago. I knew him, too, when a child on my father's ships plying the Far Eastern tracks. Cap'n Storrs lied this morning when he said he didn't know me—never had seen me before. He saw me no less than three months ago.

"That was when he came to our little ranch in the San Joaquin—such a little ranch as every seafaring man longs to have for a snug berth after years of hard work. He came there, this Judah Storrs, to let his old friend Cap'n Lofgren into a piece of big business. Those were his words—'big business'—but he wouldn't talk more before me. I who had been more pal than daughter to Cap'n Lofgren since I was old enough to hold a match to his pipe had to leave them alone with this big business.

"But I knew it was crooked, Mate, this affair into which Cap'n Lofgren let himself be drawn, because when Cap'n Storrs went away with my father's promise to whack in with him, not a word of it all would he tell me. Only that he was to take out a steamer under Chinese charter—Frisco Chinamen—load her with cotton and hides in West Coast Mexican ports and bring her back to San Francisco.

"Cap'n Storrs' excuse for not taking the job himself was good enough; he'd lost his ticket running foul of the laws against bar-ratry up in British Columbia waters and couldn't get his rating back. He told Cap'n Lofgren his only interest in the matter was the commission he'd get from the

Chinks for finding them a steamer, a skipper and a crew. At least, so much my father told me.

"I tell you I knew Cap'n Lofgren had been let in for some crooked business—was certain of it when Cap'n Storrs insisted on signing up Hoskin as my father's first officer. The same Hoskin who'd been Cap'n Storrs' first over ten years and had nearly lost his ticket when the inspectors came down on Storrs. Putting this and that together, I said I was going to make the voyage as supercargo.

"Cap'n Lofgren went into a storm over my going. Hoskin was nasty about it. But let me tell you, Mate, when Karelia Lofgren says she'll do a thing nothing from North Star to Southern Cross can stop her. I went.

"The *Sierra Park*, a crippled old tramp, sailed in ballast through the Golden Gate a little more than two months ago. First port was Mazatlan where we loaded cotton. Cap'n Lofgren told me the Chinamen who'd chartered the steamer raised and ginned the stuff up yonder in Sinaloa. Then across the gulf to La Paz for green hides atop the cotton. All regular and shipshape so far as I could see. No hint of crooked business.

"Then that night—" She gave her shoulders a shrug as if to ward off nightmare recollections.

"It was about the end of the middle watch. Cap'n Lofgren had turned in early after setting the south'ard course beyond Pechilingue. I was in my cabin behind his. I don't know what awoke me—just one of these calls in the dark—maybe from the spirits.

"I heard the gurgle of water somewhere forward. I tip-toed out on deck. Nobody stirring, yet that splash and swash of running water.

"First thing I saw, Mate, was that the *Sierra Park* was headed north—the stars told me that—when Cap'n Lofgren had set the course for Hoskin due south to clear Cape San Lucas. Then I kept to the shadow of the boats following the sound of splashing water and stumbled over a hose. It led through the trap in the main cargo hatch. Gallons of water pouring on hides and cotton stowed tight in the hold. Do you know what that meant?"

Spike nodded sagely. "Ole Storrs explained aboard the *Sierra Park* before you



came. Like soaking dried apples, huh?"

"Exactly," the girl concurred. "In other words, wrecking the ship. Who couldn't swear before a court the vessel had sprung a plate and shipped enough water to start the cotton swelling? Who but I had seen that hose at work?"

"Looks like somebody figured on double-crossing your old man," Spike filled in an interval of silence.

"Somebody?" Karelia echoed. "Who but Judah Storrs through his man Hoskin? The Chinamen who owned the opium in those cotton bales, Cap'n Lofgren who'd lent himself to the crooked business: both to be duped. All arranged for by Cap'n Storrs before ever the *Sierra Park* left Frisco.

"Wreck the ship and come back for the opium in all good time: that was Storrs' game." The girl delivered this deduction with a recurrence of her fierce intensity.

"But wait a minute! How 'bout ole Storrs figurin' me for a double-crosser; his saying somebody slipped me the coin to head him off from the plunder?" Spike's objection made no impress on Karelia's solidly built hypothesis.

"I went and woke up my father," she continued, "told him what I had seen. But before I would let him go up on the bridge where Hoskin held the watch I made Cap'n Lofgren tell me all he knew about what lay behind this voyage. How a syndicate of wealthy Chinamen in Frisco had smuggled two thousand cans of opium from the Straits Settlements through Mazatlan and had ginned them in cotton bales to get them past government inspectors at Frisco.

"Storrs had persuaded him, so my father whispered there in the dark of his cabin—the merciful dark—to join with him in a scheme to steal that opium. Instead of making San Francisco, Cap'n Lofgren was to slip into Magdalena Bay, a desert haven where nobody lives, and there cache the cotton. Storrs would come down with a schooner to break out the opium and run it overland across the Border near San Diego. The *Sierra Park* would be abandoned."

Her voice trailed off to silence. A blue and yellow lizard had crept to the top of a nearby rock and there crouched poised, with the slack skin about his throat puffing and retracting in a tremor of alarm. Karelia's eyes, all lack-lustre, fixed upon the creature.

"Why am I telling this man the shame of my father?" she asked the lizard. Then unexpectedly she turned upon Spike the

full battery of smoldering eyes. "Not a word from you! Don't you dare breathe a word against Cap'n Lofgren!"

Spike, thoroughly startled, batted his eyes with nervous rapidity. "You don't hear me sayin' anythin'."

She appeared to set herself for the next words:

"Cap'n Lofgren went to the bridge. In the first light of dawn I saw Hoskin standing there. I heard Cap'n Lofgren ask the meaning of the changed course.

"Cap'n Judah Storrs' orders," Hoskin said. And when Cap'n Lofgren made a motion to draw his revolver—for this was mutiny, Mate—Hoskin shot him."

For long Spike did not dare break the silence which fell upon the girl's last words.

"After that——?" he finally whispered.

"The *Sierra Park* began going down by the head before the sun was two hours in the sky," came the dead answer. "Hoskin beached her where you see her now around eight bells of the morning watch. He and the crew quit the ship in three boats, after staving in the fourth so I could not use it. They made nor'eastward in the direction of Guaymas over on the mainland. They left me alone on that stinking wreck.

"Just before he went over-side Hoskin came to me with a wolf's grin on his ugly face—I hadn't yet found Cap'n Lofgren's revolver or I would have shot him then.

"Sorry to leave you here alone, Miss Lofgren," he sneered. "But I don't want you at the end of a wire when I report this wreck to the owners. You'll see me back again just as soon as I can pick up a craft to fetch me."

CHAPTER XVII

DECISION

SPIKE HORN pondered the girl's story of double dealing; of barratry cunningly contrived and a murder done in callous spirit. He tried to match this story with the jig-saw puzzle his own hectic experiences had partially revealed. Pieces overlapped. No sort of conformity could be plotted.

The girl had lived for lonely weeks with her preoccupation of revenge. It was based upon facts the logic of which seemed to her unshakable. Horn on the other hand had the advantage of an open mind. Where his sketchy story of Shanghai work and a stormy voyage down to this desolate spot, as shouted at a suspicious Karelia, had left little impress upon the girl, her narrative in turn came to Spike as a com-

plement to a half-solved riddle. He attacked the crux boldly.

"Looky here, Karelia: You say this Hoskin fellah told you he'd report the wreck of the *Sierra Park* to the owners when he reached that Guaymas place over on the mainland. S'pose ole Storrs was in Frisco when that report came through. Any way he could find out that the *Sierra Park* had been piled up on Sabina Island?"

"Why, the report of the wreck would be posted at the Marine Exchange," she answered. "But Hoskin said, 'Cap'n Judah's orders,' when my father caught him off course and flooding the cargo hold. Storrs knew, of course——"

"All right," Spike interrupted. "But s'pose, just for the sake of argument, Storrs was playing fair with your father and figured Cap'n Lofgren was goin' to land that cotton at this Magdalena Bay place; he'd know, wouldn't he, that he'd been double-crossed the minute he read that Marine Exchange report about the *Sierra Park* bein' wrecked on Sabina Island?"

"But Hoskin said——" The man checked her with an impatient shake of the head as he drove home his argument:

"Remember what ole Storrs said this mornin' when you piled over the rail and drilled a hole through his cap? 'I give you my word,' he said, 'I thought your father had sold me out—— I thought I'd have to fight Skipper Lofgren for what lies under this deck.' 'Now what do you make of that?' Spike challenged.

"A lie!" the girl flamed. "A lie——just like that other one when he said he'd never seen me before." Spike was dogged.

"Let's figure it my way an' see how it works out. Say that Storrs sees your father take the *Sierra Park* through the Golden Gate and is counting on his landing the Chinese owners' salted cotton at Magdalena Bay. He's all ready with his schooner, the *Lonney Lee*, to slip down there at an agreed time.

"Then he reads the report of the *Sierra*

Park being abandoned on Sabina Island. Maybe that same night four plug-uglies, includin' your li'l friend Spike Horn, breeze up to the lonely house in the cabbage fields where Cap Storrs is hiding handy to his schooner. He and his gang jump those four. Storrs finds on one of 'em—that's me—a bankbook with a credit for \$100,000 dated just two days back.

"So," says he, 'you're the boys who hired Cap Lofgren to double-cross me; or you're hired by him to keep me from goin' down to that Sabina Island place an' gettin' my rightful share of the opium.' Words to that effect. So he shanghai's us aboard the *Lonney Lee*, an' thinks he's got the game in his own hands——thinks he'll get that opium before Cap Lofgren can get back from Guaymas to lift it.

"Doesn't that make sense?" he finished triumphantly.

"Just as sensible to believe Storrs and Hoskin had it planned to kill my father before ever the *Sierra Park* left the Golden Gate," the girl stubbornly defended. "Hoskin was Storrs' man. He would follow orders. Storrs would then get all the opium instead of having to divide it."

"Why did Storrs bring rifles down with him, then?" Horn wanted to know. "Why did he tell Doc Chitterly he'd have to fight somebody at the end of the voyage if he had everything cut and dried with his man Hoskin?"

Horn banged a fist into a horny palm. "I tell you, girl, it's plain as the hands on a clock. This fellah Hoskin's the main wolf—the prime double-crosser. Ole Cap Storrs has got his number by this time, just like I have."

Karelia Lofgren sat silent for a long time, revolving the weight of the man's arguments. Finally:

"I'll go out and ask Cap'n Storrs, for the truth," she said. Horn gave her a delighted grin.

"Now you're tootin'. I'll go along for company."

She looked up to where the first pyrotechnical set pieces of the sunset was shooting scarlet flares fanwise to the zenith. "Tomorrow, then, Mate. And thank you," she said.

CHAPTER XVIII

ANGELO RENDERS A RECESSIONAL

SPIKE had not taken a dozen oar strokes from the shore on his return to the *Lonney Lee* when a sound from the stranded steamer caused



him to give a quick look over-shoulder. It was the *chut-chut-chut* of a gasoline winch there aboard the *Sierra Park*. A cargo boom hitched to the foremast lifted and swung outward. Spike saw a huge dripping bundle lifted high and then lowered to the steamer rail. Hands were busy with lashing ropes. The bundle tipped and splashed into the sea.

Then a horrid sight. Water was lashed to sudden foam when the boom's burden dropped. Snouts were pushed up. The object spilled from above was worried into fragments, and each went darting off under hidden tow.

A chill stirred Spike's back hair. How near he himself had been to that loathsome partition! Those were hides the sharks were worrying. Captain Storrs, wounded as he was, evidently was losing no time getting down to those precious cotton bales.

Doctor Chitterly's flowing beard hung over the *Lonney Lee's* rail as a beacon when Horn drew alongside. Anxiety was written large on the worthy physician's features.

"Horn!" he called before Spike was close enough to throw him his painter. "Hear that infernal racket?"

Spike had heard the witch notes of a home-made flute almost from the moment he pushed out from the shore. Now a particularly rasping run of high notes smote his ears. Doctor Chitterly gave him a nervous grasp of the hand as he came aboard.

"Horn, I'm afraid we're in for it with that fellow Angelo. He's been doing this ever since you went ashore—making squeaks on that piece of broom stick. When I protested he just patted something in his pocket and grinned shockingly. That rat poison, maybe that's what he patted. I—um—well, I tell you frankly, Horn, I think he's clean daft and I'm afraid of him."

Spike strode down the deck to where little Angelo rocked on a tub, home-made flute to lips and eyes closed in an ecstasy. One opened at the sound of approaching footfalls. It was all white, that staring basilisk eye. It told Spike he had to deal with something abnormal.

"Here! 'Nough's a-plenty, kid." This soothingly. "Time to eat. Get busy with the grub." Angelo continued to blow, his single opened eye enormously staring. Spike tried a new tack. "Tomorrow, you and I'll go over there together." He jerked his head toward the hulk. "You know what's over there."

Angelo took his lips away from the

flute's vent. "Diamonds," he said and caught up his wild air again.

"For you and me—eh?" Spike whispered this with an elaborate show of secrecy. The flighty spirit of the flute player rose to the bait. Both eyes fixed themselves upon Spike. Lips under the glossy black mustache curled upward in a sly grin. "One time Capitan he tell-a me boil two pot coffee—one weeth cigar for you? Remember heem: how I change-a da pot?"

"Tonight two pot coffee; one for you an' me—one for—" The black head jerked significantly toward the quarter-deck where the doctor and the Iron Man were. A hand stole into an inside pocket of the little cook's jacket and half withdrew to show the neck of a bottle.

"For the rat ver' good. For men more better." He winked.

Spike's hand shot out in a flash. But not quick enough. The flute player dropped the bottle of poison back into his pocket and struck out like a cat.

Spike's body launched itself against his; he was knocked off his tub. Together they rolled on the deck, Angelo screaming mad Italian curses. His body was like a watch-spring in its release of furious energy. Hardly had Spike imprisoned thin wrists when a kick from behind landed squarely on the base of his skull, stunning him. He fought to master the swooning sickness—fought and slowly conquered.

Teeth were buried in Spike's left wrist.

A worrying sound issued from the Italian's throat. Grimly Spike lifted his arm, and with it the clinging head. He banged the



head upon the deck with a thud—again—again. Chitterly and the Iron Man had come running at first sound of struggle.

"Get it—in his pocket!" Spike grunted. The Iron Man knelt to rummage where a nod of Spike's head indicated. Just then with a gurgle and horrid turning back of eyes little Angelo passed into epilepsy.

A bottle which was ver' good for rats went spinning overboard.

The mad flute player died that night after many hours' suffering of a character to wrench the nerves of the three survivors.

And all through those dark hours sounded the *chut-chutter* of the gasoline winch aboard the *Sierra Park*, where the

indomitable Judah Storrs was driving yellow men to uncover treasure in the waterlogged hold.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BALANCE SHIFTS

DAWN of his second day in involuntary command of a beached hulk, and Captain Judah Storrs had himself carried by two Chinamen up to the aerie of the *Sierra Park's* high bridge—carried because a useless burning arm forbade his climbing the steep ladder unaided.

Here was his aerie which he had occupied all the day before since, within an hour of their forced transfer from the *Lonney Lee*, he had put his crew of six yellow men to work in the stinking hold. Most of the night, too, for the matter of that; when dim oil lanterns in the hold gave light to the wretches clambering over and straining at the slimy hide bundles, with Hansen at the winch.

Captain Storrs chose the bridge for his aerie, prompted by two good reasons. One was that it gave him a view of the gulf behind the cove, a fine clear vista of miles of flat water stretching eastward in the direction of Guaymas and the other Mexican mainland ports. Second compelling factor lay in the circumstance that by locking the rear door to the wheelhouse Storrs had left but a single way of ascent to the bridge—by way of the steep ladder from the main deck below. Concealed under the cushion of his chair were two long bladed knives from the galley. Any head with a coiled queue pushing up the ladder to this lookout possessed by the captain would have to parry a knife stroke.

This morning of his renewed vigil, Judah Storrs was sorely ill, burning up with a fever which spread to all his members from the purple hole that had received Doctor Chitterly's rough surgical attention the day before. He had dosed himself with quinine discovered in a medicine chest in the late Skipper Lofgren's cabin; but all the drug apparently availed was to set his brain pan in motion like the walls of a bellows, expanding and collapsing with waves of black blindness between. Yet an indomitable will, which seemed to be a force apart from his stricken body, drove from him like lightning to play over the bent backs of the Chinamen in the hold.

He would get that cotton on deck and break it out for the opium before—!

Waxing dawn light found the wounded

man on his high bridge forever turning his head to search the eastern horizon. He was looking for a sail or a plume of smoke there. That would be the signal of Hoskin's coming—Hoskin returning from Guaymas, after unexplained delay, to get the opium he had so tidily cached here in the dish cove of Sabina Island.

Let Hoskin come, and Captain Storrs would be helpless to prevent his taking what he wanted. Helpless! Without a weapon save two butcher knives concealed under a cushion. About as capable of resistance—so ran the bitter thought through the sick man's brain—as a rag doll with one arm torn off!

It was all clear to Storrs now. Karelia Lofgren's revealing words flung at him in the screech of a fury yesterday had uncovered the double dealing of that snake Hoskin. Captain Lofgren, true to his pact with Judah Storrs, had died when Hoskin determined to double-cross them both. And he, Judah Storrs, would have gone on a wild goose chase to Magdalena Bay—was, in truth, poised for that flight—had he not seen back in San Francisco at that last saving moment Hoskin's report of the abandonment of the *Sierra Park*, a wreck, at Sabina Island.

As for Spike Horn, Chitterly and the others, they were, after all, innocent of any guile. Just fools! One of them a dangerous fool.

I have stressed the presence of two knives under the cushion of Captain Storrs' perch on the bridge. Last slender props in a threatened moment of extremity. For those six Chinamen sweating and gagging in the hold lived only under the rule of fear. Let them once discover their master had no firearms to enforce his will upon them and they'd turn beasts. Judah Storrs knew this well enough. He was gambling on the thin chance the yellow men would remain blind to his helplessness.

Once their eyes were opened—well, he had those two butcher knives for the last epic moment.

Again the winch was cackling, and hides were feeding the sharks. Captain Judah's roving eye discovered unwonted activity aboard the *Lonney Lee*. He saw a long bundle with tarpaulin wrapping lowered into one of the boats alongside. His curiosity pricked him and he went back into the wheelhouse for a pair of binoculars. He ticked off aloud identity of the figures following down into that boat: the doctor—that dumb Iron Man—ah, Horn, worse luck! So it was the flute player they low-

ered away in wrappings. H-m-m! Might better have been that wolf pup Horn.

With a sort of ironic pleasure the crippled rake-hell on the *Sierra Park's* bridge followed with his glasses a pantomime on



the beach. He saw Karelia Lofgren stride down from a long rock dike

to join the group; saw two of the men scooping out sand with a fire shovel from the schooner's galley. Then the

doctor removed his great hat and turned his face up to the blinding new sun while the others bowed their heads.

"Oh, I'll bet he puts up a fancy prayer!" grumbled Judah Storrs. Just then came a hail from Hansen below.

"First bale o' cotton comin' oop, sir!"

Instantly the funeral ashore was blotted from the skipper's mind. He arose in his excitement and started for the ladder, then thought better of it.

"Break out that bale, Mr. Hansen, and see if you find anything in it."

Storrs watched the Swede and a Chinaman attack with a crowbar the single band of strap iron remaining about the swollen bale. He saw several shaven yellow heads peep over the hatch coaming like the heads of curious rats. The man on the high ridge burned with impatience.

The iron strap snapped. A knife ripped open the burlap sacking, and leaves of soggy cotton fell outward like thick pages of a book. Hansen prodded and shredded the mass until all the deck under the cargo boom was a dirty white.

Suddenly he stooped and picked up a round iron box, such as might have been made by screwing together two boiler tube caps; a thing to span between thumb and little finger. Cackles of surprise from the watching Chinamen.

Hansen rooted out another box—another. Five in all.

"Bring those up to me," Captain Storrs ordered. "And fetch a wrench from the engine room."

He turned to bellow at the shaven polls lining the hatch coaming: "Back to work, you swine! Swing that tackle over! Lively now!"

Judah Storrs knew full well the seed of curiosity had been sown in fruitful soil

and it would not be a matter of long before ugly cupidity would bloom.

Fifteen minutes later another misshapen bale oozed water on the deck. Under Captain Judah's chair high above five round tins had been piled; tins which had fitted neatly in their resistant containers and which were covered with red paper whereon gold ideographs glorified Heavenly-dream Compelling Flower Magic.

A prankish gust of wind caught one of these labels which had been loosened from a can by infiltration of water and whisked it out through the pipe rail before Captain Storrs' chair. The skipper saw it writhe and flutter like a wounded butterfly down onto the deck.

"Hansen!" he bawled to the Swede who was standing with a hand on the winch brake. The mate looked up dully.

"Grab that paper before—" The gaudy label stirred like a sentient thing, took brief wing, balanced on the hatch coaming and then dropped into the black maw where six Chinamen clambered about in slime. Skipper Storrs groaned in agony of spirit.

"Now the lid's off!" he whispered.

So intent had he been upon what was going forward below him that Storrs did not see the *Lonney Lee's* yawl put back from the shore with the girl Karelia substituting for that passenger who had been left beneath a mound of sand on the beach. Nor did he see the small craft put off again from the schooner and head for the *Sierra Park*, Spike Horn at the oars and the girl with him.

Splash of oars jerked Storrs' gaze over-side just as the yawl was coming up under the pendant falls of one of the port davits.

"Why, by the great——!" The man on the bridge gazed open-mouthed. "That hell-cat of a Finn girl smells opium a mile away, huh!"

Karelia swarmed up the ropes and balanced herself easily on the steamer rail. Storrs saw the curl of her bare toes over the round of the wood; his eyes traveled upward and caught the glint of a revolver's chambers where they showed, with the butt, over her strap belt. Then his eyes met hers. A marvel: she gave him a vague half-smile.

Then came the burly figure of the man Storrs hated with a corroding hatred—for all that he might be innocent of any part in a plot to bilk anybody out of hidden opium. Storrs received his upward flung grin of salutation with a stony face.

Horn, too, wore a weapon under his belt,

Storrs' very own, to recover which that moment the saturnine skipper would gladly risk his life. Just let him get his hands on that revolver and there'd be no doubt who was who aboard this blasted hulk!

One of the Chinamen was standing by the hatch when Karelia and Spike leaped to the deck. He made no sign of recognizing their presence but waited, slope-shouldered, hand out to steady the heavy block about to be lowered into the hold. Hansen, at the winch twenty feet away, had just thrown on the brake for lowering away when the two visitors started down the deck past the hatch.

It happened in a twinkling. The seemingly inert Oriental shot out one bare foot in Spike's path, and as he tripped a hand darted out to grasp his shirt and propel him over the coaming. Even as Horn pitched headlong into the gulf the revolver was twitched out from under his belt.

Karelia whirled and her hand went to her belt. A grinning yellow man pressed the barrel of the captured weapon against her breast. His free hand snatched out the revolver before her fingers could touch the butt.

"Nice Mis-see; be good," the fellow crooned.

CHAPTER XX

JUDĀH STORRS, STRATEGIST

FOR an instant the onlookers caught in breathless astonishment were frozen in their poses: Karelia wide-eyed before the grinning yellow man who had disarmed her so neatly; Hansen at his winch, mouth agape; up on the high bridge Captain Judah half risen out of his chair.

Karelia's scream, which was like a battle cry of the ancient fen people, her ancestors, broke tension. She whirled away from the Chinaman and with a bound was at the side of the hatch looking down the shaft of yellow sunlight where it illumined a square of blackness below. There a block of cotton bales arose like an island from the midst of inky water ten feet below the deck level. A squirming mass of legs and heads writhed atop this pedestal.

"Mate!" she called, and jumped.

Spike Horn in his plunge down the hatch had been lucky. He struck, head and shoulders, on two bent backs of Chinamen stooping over the lashings of a bale about to be hoisted. His breath was jarred out of him but otherwise he was uninjured. Before he could recover from the double

shock of his surprise and his fall five half naked bodies hurled themselves upon him. On his back and fighting furiously, Spike felt himself being forced along the rasping surface of burlap toward the edge of the square of bales lifting above the bilge; below that was water—and drowning.

Then Karelia's cry and the jar of her body as it plumped squarely upon the tangled knot of bodies covering his. Spike with a supreme effort made a wrestler's "bridge" which lifted the squirming mass. What with the surprise of Karelia's flying attack, holds on Spike were loosened. Now with the bowing of his back he managed to send two of his assailants slipping and clawing desperately to save themselves from dropping off the cotton island.

Spike, looking up under a smothering armpit, caught just a glimpse of a fighting fury. Karelia, on one knee, was striking out right and left with short arm jabs. Coolly. Craftily. Like any ring general, she landed her blows where they would have most telling effect and parried the clawing hands that reached for her throat. With every piston stroke of her arms the heavy cables of her hair leaped from her bosom as if enlivened with some fighting reflex.

Came a bawl in Cantonese down the hatch from the possessor of two precious revolvers on the deck. Instantly the five Chinamen on the cotton pillar ceased fighting and made for the iron ladder giving egress from the hold. They went up the rungs like frightened monkeys. Karelia, taken back by this sudden shift of tactics, sat back on propped hands and let them go unhindered. She was breathing hard.

Spike gave her a look of mingled awe and admiration. "Girl, you're a wonder!" he wheezed between labored breaths. "If you hadn't taken the high dive down here I'd've been a goner."

"Come; we've got to get out of here and find out what all this means." Karelia strode to the ladder and began mounting it.



Spike was following when he saw the girl above him suddenly recoil. A yellow hand gripping a knife had swung a menacing arc just above her mounting head. A simian face was pushed over the coaming.

"Mo' bettah you no come topside." Implication in that gibberish was sufficiently plain. After a second's indecision the two on the ladder accepted a situation they could not combat—swish of cold steel at unprotected throats—and they descended to the cotton.

There in the square of dazzling sunlight which made the rest of the hold all the more black by contrast the two exchanged sober looks.

"Somebody else's move—not ours!" was Spike's trenchant comment.

"Not hard to guess who that somebody is, Mate," came bitterly from the girl. "You and I were great boobies to risk coming aboard here and stumbling into Cap'n Storrs' trap."

Spike shook his head argumentatively. "Not so sure ole Storrs has a hand in this business, unless it's his game to get hold of our guns. They've been getting this cotton. You saw it spread all over the deck. Maybe if the Chinks've found out what's in these bales they've decided to count themselves in on the deal. An' they drew two fine aces when they saw them handy in our belts.

"Anyway," he bravely appended, "we're not in bad for long. Over on the schooner the doc and the Iron Man—when they don't see us come back—well, they've got two rifles an' they'll come across to find out what for."

Karelia had a reply on her lips when a harsh sound interrupted. It was a grinding and heavy dragging on the deck above; over that the thin whine of the winch. A shadow fell athwart their well of sunlight.

"The hatch cover!" Karelia gasped and bounded for the ladder. "They're shutting us in!"

Again that bared yellow arm and icicle glint of a knife at the ladder's top—a shaven poll and snail-like eye.

"Mo' bettah no come up." The head darted back.

Something slammed down like the clapping on of a mausoleum's sealing plate. Darkness engulfed them.

Meanwhile there was interesting comedy-drama on the deck above the trapped twain.

When Captain Judah Storrs witnessed the lightning-quick transfer of power resident in two small contraptions of steel and vulcanized rubber his heart turned to water. Just by so much had he lost his last chance to possess a fortune in black gum; he with his two butcher knives opposed to

six Chinamen possessing two revolvers. Last chance gone unless, desperate hope, he could out-think the Celestials; oppose guns with guile. The man's resourceful brain steeled itself for the encounter when he saw the five entombed Chinese hailed out of the hold by the sixth on deck who had turned the trick of possessing the weapons and eyed the six yellow rats standing with slant eyes turned up to the bridge.

Captain Storrs found his first inspiration when he witnessed the pantomime of the swinging knife played over Karelia's ascending head. "Mr. Hansen," he belatedly, "hoist out your tackle and couple onto the hatch cover ready to lower away."

The skipper was counting on the Chinamen's acquiescence in his move; it would appear he was playing their game when he ordered the sealing of the two invaders' prison. Nor did he misjudge the effect of his strategy. Two of the Chinamen jumped to couple the swinging block hook to the ring of the hatch cover. Hansen threw power into the winch. The steel framed cover dropped into place with a ringing clatter.

Then once more the mutinous yellow men clotted into a knot about the man with the two revolvers, their shifting little eyes turned up to the huddled body of Skipper Judah in his chair on the bridge. In the absence of any provocative move from him, initiative was slow to form with the men so long accustomed to bend their backs under authority. Their Number One man, he who had lifted the revolvers, consulted with his fellows in low tones.

Captain Storrs played a desperate card: "You there; bring those guns up here to me."

Number One shot back a defiant grin. "No can do."

The fetter of whisker about the master's mouth tightened in old time determination. He sternly repeated his order. For answer the Number One man passed one of the weapons to a fellow and together, ignoring Hansen at the winch, they walked down the deck to the foot of the ladder leading up the Storrs citadel.

"Stop right where you are!" The white man made a mendacious move of his left hand to an empty coat pocket. Number One grinned up at him out of tiny eye slits.

"No fool-ee me. I t'ink maybe-so levol-vah you no hab got. I t'ink maybe-so mo' bettah we mak-ee chjn-chin."

Storrs temporized, though the soul of him was cold.

"What've we got to talk about—that crazy man and woman down in the hold?" he asked.

"We talk-ee opium mo' bettah. How much-ee opium go China-boy if he no shoot you?" Storrs tipped back his head in a laugh which cost him some pains to achieve.

"Ho-ho! So that's the game, eh? Suppose I say not a damn' bit of it? What then?"

Captain Judah's high hand seemed in a fair way of carrying through. Possessing initiative on their side and convinced through the white man's temporizing, so unusual a procedure for him, that force, the final argument, was in truth theirs, yet the yellow ruffians were baffled by the other's cool attitude of self-sureness. Sheer force of personality—call it brain power—gave Judah Storrs a weapon the Chinaman did not know how to fend.

Seeing their hesitancy, the man on the bridge pushed precarious advantage.

"Look here, you Mow-lows! What's all this talk-ee-talk about? You know yesterday Doctor fellow shot me here—" he pointed to his wounded shoulder—"and Horn fellow moved you all over this steamer side. Stole my schooner, Doctor fellow and Horn fellow did. No schooner, no get away—no get back to Frisco, eh?"

All right. Now we get Horn fellow down below. Got his gun—two guns. Got his boat. Why not go over to schooner and catch her when we can? Then when we catch schooner we'll talk about opium."

The two armed Celestials blinked dully up to Captain Storrs as

they digested his suggestion. Evidently it found weight with them, for they turned back up the deck for a conference with their fellows. For several minutes the white diplomat on the bridge heard the parrotting of outlandish voices. He hardly dared breathe while the issue of his daring attempt at a digression hung in the balance. Finally Number One came back to the ladder foot.

"Chinaboy t'ink plitty good first catchum schoonah."

WHEN Captain Judah ordered the hatch cover dropped he thought he had effectively removed Karelia Lofgren and the fiery Spike Horn from a situation quite delicate enough without being complicated by their intervention. But just there lay a fatal flaw in his reasoning.

So while the parleys between the grizzled Machiavelli on the bridge and the armed spokesmen of the Celestials progressed a capricious Fate moved to drive at the last slender prop of Judah Storrs' security.

When they found themselves in Egyptian darkness and with the dank atmosphere of the hold tightening an unseen bandage about their throats, the man and the girl sat stunned on their island of cotton. Wordless. Only their hands crept gropingly out, like hands of children on dark stairs, to meet and join in a grip of mutual heartening. Their plunge into the abyss, the writhing struggle with ape-like creatures, the clangor of doom in that falling hatch cover: all these flickers of action, confused, inchoate, made the ensuing darkness and silence the more terrible by contrast.

Karelia spoke first. "It's up to us, Mate. We can't expect any favors from Cap'n Storrs."

"Who wants any?" was Spike's valiant sally against the deadening depression he felt creeping around his heart. "I've coppered every ace ole Storrs has played so far. Guess I can do it again."

And far back in some obscure recess of his brain the beginnings of a thought pushed up like the swelling of a germinating seed. Hardly a thought, perhaps; rather that vague and pestiferous feeling that an idea is there ready to be released if only will power concentrate upon it. Something to do with light; there should be light somewhere in this water-logged abyss of blackness.

"Glory!" The exclamation came explosively. "The hole in the deck—you know: where the deck was blown through, like Storrs said yesterday when he an' me rowed over to have a look at this wreck. Look, girl! Look hard all 'round. There must be a hole where light shines through."

They strained their eyes to pierce the darkness which was like a muffling mass of wool under which they sat buried. No points for orientation existed. They could not know where bow and stern lay; which way was longitude in the steel vault en-



tombing them. Finally the girl's hand tightened over his.

"Look! Up there!" She lifted his arm to point direction. "Just a spot of half-dark—not so black as the rest."

Spike concentrated all his will to see. Yes, there was a place where the blackness thinned ever so slightly. Almost he could call it light. Resolution was formed instantly.

"I'm goin' to take a swim, or walk, up there and have a look-see."

"Oh, Mate!" for just a split second the heart of her quailed before the hazard of such adventure. Then, "Go and good luck," she said.

Spike slipped off his shoes and gave her hand a squeeze for farewell. "You keep saying, 'Here I am, Spike,' so's I can find my way back. Anyway, it'll help just to hear you say it."

He felt his way to the edge of the island of bales and let himself drop. His feet touched a submerged foundation of burlap below his depth and he came up swimming. Two strokes and he struck a dank wall from which soggy hanks of cotton came away in his exploring grip.

"Here I am, Mate," came low reassurance from the blackness behind him.

Now he could not see the thin patch in the blanket of dark which was his goal. He could see nothing. Only he felt a wall of slimy burlap, smooth, without even handholds. His feet were treading water. With every agitation of his legs bubbles of foul smelling gas arose to burst about him.

Hand over hand, from right to left, he pulled himself along the unseen wall. His thrashing feet struck a submerged ledge and he was able to lift head and shoulders out of water. The ledge broadened and ascended at a cant, indicating a submerged bale dislodged and forced upward until, as he crawled, nearly the whole of him was free of the slime.

"Here I am, Mate," tolled the voice far—so far—back in limbo.

Now he saw his objective plainly; even the vague shoulders of stacked cargo were suggested by the filtered light. But his way was no longer over cotton. Instead, slimy bundles of hides which



Instead, slimy bundles

stank abominably. The bundles were like so many corpses, slick and with the feel of putrescence about them. They rolled sluggishly when he put his weight upon them, threatened to topple over on his head.

Now in water to his knees, he crawled until he was directly below the hole in the deck, perhaps ten feet over his head as he knelt. Light through it was dimmed where burlap from one of the bales opened on deck had dropped over the hole to screen it.

There was no way he could lift his head through the jagged aperture even if he had dared. But with two there, one giving the other a back up, it could be done.

Spike began retracing his perilous trail. From hide bundles to cotton and from cotton to water. Furiously he strove to print unseeable landmarks on his mind; to point a chart by this handhold and that crevice. Ever and again a strong voice out of the dark served to guide him.

At last he pulled himself up on the island. He felt a hand wavering through the dark. In his exultation he let his own dripping hand travel up Karelia's arm to the shoulder, to the neck. He laid his palm on a smooth cheek with a light touch of caress.

"Karelia girl, you can make it. But it's mighty tough. Together we can—"

Spike felt a strong arm circle his neck, felt his head drawn over. Lips brushed his cheek, then rested for one delirious instant upon his lips.

"I thought—I was afraid you'd not come back," she whispered.

Ten minutes later one on the deck of the *Sierra Park* might have seen a breadth of burlap strewn there stir strangely, then very slowly lift. A pair of black eyes under streaming wisps of hair appeared under the burlap cowl. They swept the length of the deck. Deserted. Not the figure of a man in sight.

Karelia lifted herself through the hole which the burlap had covered, knelt and gave a hand to Spike below. Together they stood blinking in blinding sunlight. The prodigy of an untenanted hulk was not easily realized by two who had set themselves to meet the hazard of a rush by six angry Chinamen.

A shot!

They bounded to the rail. There on the flat water was a crowded yawl midway between the hulk and the *Loney Lee*. A puff of smoke was just shredding away from the rail midway of the schooner's

shoreward side. The watchers on the *Sierra Park* could distinguish the black hat of old Doctor Chitterly cocked behind the slender spear of steel jutting out from his shoulder.

Even as they looked the doctor's rifle jetted smoke again and a tiny spout of spray sprang up from the yawl's waterline. A figure arose in the yawl and pointed a finger at the rifleman aboard the schooner. The finger launched a thin smoke pencil.

An idea burst in Spike's brain with the explosiveness of a shrapnel shell. He whirled upon the girl.

"The ole doc—too tender hearted—won't shoot to kill! We've gotta get Storrs back here. Where do they keep the kerosene—paint—any kind of oil that'll burn?"

Karelia's eyes questioned him, but already he had started on a run down the deck toward the quarters behind the bridge. The girl left a second trail of water where she followed.

"Fire!" the man called over his shoulder. "Start a fire anywhere! What do we care what burns? Storrs'll come rar'in' back here when he sees smoke!"

"But we—what will happen when—?"

"I've got all that arranged," was the confident assurance as Horn turned into the paint closet Karelia designated. "Go to the kitchen and find some dry matches."

She found him sloshing kerosene out of a can where he had dragged it forward. Onto the strewn cotton; onto the deck indiscriminately. Whatever her fears over the plan half revealed to her, Karelia was not one to doubt the ultimate worth of Spike's judgment. Not after that blind groping and battle toward the light he had made first alone and then at her shoulder so short a time ago. The simplicity of her mind was wax to strong impressions. Spike Horn had put his imprint there indelibly. He had proved himself a man—first man to whom Karelia ever had deferred.

He threw a lighted match into the oil steeped cotton. Flame leaped up, and a thick column of black smoke.

"Now the reception committee gets busy," Spike shouted boyishly and dashed back to the paint closet. He returned with a quart can of linseed oil in either hand. These he placed out of danger from the fire and raced back to the paint closet. Two cans of gasoline were added to his store of inflammables.

They went to the rail to look out over the water where a naval battle in miniature had been going on. The yawl was now racing

back toward the *Sierra Park*, spray flying from two sets of oars. The heavy figure of Captain Judah, half raised from a seat in the stern, was bent in objurgations for speed.

And over yonder where the *Lonney Lee* lay anchored could be seen the figure of Doctor Chitterly hastily scrambling down the ladder to where the Iron Man held the second yawl close alongside.

"Good old Doc!" Spike chuckled. "I knew this would fetch him, too. The old boy is playing the rescuin' hero part right now."

Behind where the twain, screened by ratlines from observation of the approaching yawl, were discreetly observing the approach of the boat, a spreading pillar of flame roared upward. The deck boards of the *Sierra Park*, long bleached in the tropic sun, were fair tinder. Horn's emergency measure had written the doom of the steamer and her outlaw cargo.

The yawl drew under a sea ladder which had been lowered overside to accommodate the descent of the crippled Storrs on his sally to recover the *Lonney Lee*. Spike with set features ran crouching along the rail, an uncovered can of linseed oil between his palms. He paused where the ladder came over the rail, lifted himself for an appraising squint at a line of trajectory over and down.

A bellow from Captain Storrs who had seen the shock head at its instant appearance above the rail.

Flicker of a match—quick lifting of a flaming meteor overside—a tumbling cascade of fire.

Doctor Chitterly and the Iron Man, straining at their oars not fifty yards behind, looked over-shoulder at the sound of hideous shouting.

They saw a boat, all aflame, shoved madly off from the steamer's side; saw a white man—it proved to be Hansen—make a wild spring for the ladder and cling there, saved. Then commenced the leaping of living firebrands into the sea.

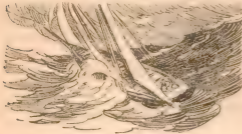
Madly they bent to their oars on rescue bound. Their yawl leaped through the water. But faster than the yawl, faster almost than the eye could follow came rushing and ravenous the thin black fins.

A hand was laid on the yawl's gunnel—a white hand. Doctor Chitterly saw it and dropped his oars to reach for it. He saw a strange trepidation run through the fingers—a fluttering as they loosened their hold. The hand disappeared.

CHAPTER XXII

CURTAIN

EVENING, and with the passing of the sun a fresh offshore breeze stealing across the tepid waters of the Vermilion Sea. To the west peninsular mountains carried along their summits the last fiery stripes of the sunset; below



that, purple velvet. First stars winked palely from the opposite field of the heavens.

With a creaking of blocks and gurgling forefoot the schooner *Lonney Lee* breezed along a course north and east of what had been her anchorage in a cove of storm and passion. Guaymas bound she was; Guaymas on the Mexican mainland, where Pullman cars come down from Arizona to lift folk over an imaginary line and into a land where life's viands are not burning with too much chile.

Affairs aboard the *Lonney Lee* were running very sweetly. At the wheel was the wooden faced Hansen; he who never bothered about what number was going to turn up on Fortune's wheel, who presented always to the world's rough toe so indifferent a mark that there was nothing sporting in that toe's delivering a kick. Hansen, sole survivor of the *Sierra Park's* last crew, was following a course set for him by a new captain, Karelia Lofgren, and was reasonably content.

In the galley the Iron Man found himself at the strange business of assembling a meal of sorts. For the first time since that night of bad luck in San Francisco when a roistering mining man named Horn, down from Goldfield, took him away from the *Thalia* and his art, a strange

snatch of song bubbled to the Iron Man's lips. Home! At last he was bound home where once more he could sing "Asleep on the Deep" between spoonfuls of beer for an enthralled audience.

Under the awning which spread over the quarterdeck good Doctor Chitterly sat on a camp stool intent upon several little domestic jobs. First with a pair of scissors found in the late Judah Storrs' cabin he trimmed the frays on his left cuff. Then he trimmed the frays on his right cuff. Next he unscrewed the yellow diamond from its resting place in a sadly soiled shirt, blew gently upon it and polished it on his knee.

As he worked the worthy discoverer of Squaw Root Tonic rocked gently back and forth. From the depths of his great chest came a rumble almost resembling a purr.

"And now consider the liver, lad-ees and gentlemen: how it works to hurl deadly poisons into all the unsuspecting members of the human frame. Of the liver Titus Aldivius Seneca, the great Roman physician, said——"

Two figures far up in the bow where the belly of the jib screened them from casual glances of anyone behind. They stood, hands locked, looking over the back course to where the low hump of Sabina Island showed against the lesser dark of the peninsula range. Low on the island's shore burned a single red eye—the *Sierra Park* in her last winding sheet.

They talked in muted voices, these two, of those mysteries of life and love which when first discovered carry such profound significance to the discoverers. Said she: "I did not know; I could not believe that love comes so suddenly. It is funny."

"Not funny," he put in reverently. "It's well—un—funny."

"Funny," she mused on, "how one day I fight you for a rifle so I may shoot you with it. Next day when I see you risk your life for me I—I kiss you. How do you account for that, Mate?"

He gave a boyish laugh and leaned to bring his lips very near her ear.

"You couldn't help it, girl," he hoarsely whispered. "What I go after I get, pronto!"

INDIAN HUNTING ARROWS

THESE were made with firmly bound heads with rounded shoulders instead of barbs, and with the transverse axis in the same plane with the bowstring notch, which would cause them to fly through the air with the edges up and down, standing vertically so they would slip between the vertical ribs of game, which ribs of course lay at right angles to the earth.—

C. E. M.



THE TAKING OF CLOUDY MCGEE

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "On the Prod," "The Sundown Prodigal," etc.

WHEN YOU SET A .22 CALIBER MENTALITY UP AGAINST A TWO-GUNMAN WITH .45's, YOU DON'T EXPECT TO SEE MUCH OF A FIGHT. BUT WHEN THE PERSONALITIES OF AN OUTLAW AND HIS TRACKERS GET MIXED IN A DOUBLE SHUFFLE, THE ROW TAKES ON A DIFFERENT ASPECT

IT WAS easy to see that fate had been kind to Ferdinand P. Putney, because he was not in jail. In fact, he never had been in jail. But he was comparatively a young man yet. He was six feet three inches tall, would weigh about a hundred and forty, and wore a size eleven shoe.

His face was very long, his eyes pouched, rather inclined to redness, which gave him the mien of a very old and very wise bloodhound. His almost yellow hair grew without much opposition from the barber, and he wore a derby hat of a decided green tinge.

Ferdinand P. Putney was the lawyer of Lost Hills town. The folks of Lost Hills were not given to carrying their troubles to the law; so one lawyer was enough. Ferdinand had been many things in his forty years of life, but that has nothing to do with the fact that he had studied law—a little.

And there was another rather prominent man in Lost Hills, whose name was Amos K. Weed. Amos was the cashier of the Lost Hills bank, mate of his own soul, (Ferdinand P. Putney was the captain)

and a bottle-drinker after working hours.

Amos was a scrawny individual, five feet six inches tall, with a high, wide forehead, pinched nose, beady eyes and long, slender fingers. His shoulders were slightly stooped and he shuffled when he walked. Amos' life consisted mostly of looking up and down a column of figures.

But for many years Amos had dreamed of being a great criminal, a master mind; of smashing through things like a Springfield bullet. But his .22 caliber soul had held him back. Amos usually figured out a perfect crime, dreamed that he was about to be hung, and discarded the plan.

On this certain day Amos closed the bank at a few minutes after three o'clock. He carried his hat in his hand, and his breathing was slightly irregular. He fairly slunk away from the bank, shuffling his feet softly, as though afraid his departure might be heard.

He covered the half-block to Ferdinand P. Putney's office in record time, and found the lawyer at his desk, tilted back in a chair, his big feet atop a pile of dusty books on the desk. Amos slammed the door behind him and stood there, panting

heavily. Ferdinand shifted his gaze from the book, which he had been reading, and looked reprovingly upon Amos.

"Well?" queried Ferdinand softly.

"Well!" squeaked Amos. It is likely he intended to thunder, but Amos' vocal cords were all of the E-string variety. He came closer to the lawyer, his Adam's-apple doing a series of convulsive leaps, as though trying to break its bounds.

Ferdinand closed the book and waited expectantly for Amos to go further in his conversation, which he did, as soon as he had calmed his jerking throat.

"Putney!" he squeaked. "We're ruined!"

Ferdinand Putney slowly lowered his big feet, placed the book on the table and stood up.

"This," he said huskily, "is terrible. Just how are we ruined, Amos?"

"They—they didn't strike oil!"

"Oh!" Ferdinand stared at Amos. "You mean—you didn't strike oil?"

"Us! You got me into it, Putney! You know darn well you did. You advised me to soak every cent I could get my hands onto in that Panhandle oil field. You did! You did! You did! You——"

Ferdinand got into the spirit of the chant and began beating time on the desk-top.

"And so you did, eh?" said Ferdinand. "How much, Amos?"

"Fuf—forty thousand dollars!"

"I didn't know you had that much."

"I—I didn't!" Amos' voice went so high it almost failed to register. Then he whispered, running back down the scale, "It was the bank money."

"Mm-m-m-hah," Ferdinand nodded slowly, wisely. "I'm going to have a hell of a time keeping you out of jail, Amos."

"You're as guilty as I am," shrilled Amos.

Ferdinand shook his head. "No lawyer was ever put in jail for giving wrong advice, Amos. But I'll do my best to defend you, as soon as they put you in jail."

"You—you wanted your cut out of it," choked Amos. "That was the agreement. You hinted that I might take a few dollars from the bank. I bought a third interest in a well, and they never struck oil. I'll tell 'em—the law—that you helped me; that you advised me to steal from the bank; that you—you——"

"If you keep on talking that way, Amos, I won't defend you."

"Defend me? You talk like I was already arrested."

"It probably won't be long, Amos. Are

you sure they'll miss it?"

"Miss it? There's only ten thousand in the bank right now, and the bank examiner is due almost any day."

"We are lost, the captain shouted, as he staggered down the stairs," quoted Ferdinand. "That's worse than I anticipated, Amos. You have practically looted the organization, and the Lost Hills depositors are not the kind that——"

"I know that all by heart!" wailed Amos. "They'll hang me."

"But there is still ten thousand dollars in the bank," mused Ferdinand. "Does Jim Eyton suspect you?"

Eyton was the president of the bank, a big, bluff sort of a person, who trusted Amos implicitly.

"Not yet," moaned Amos.

"Hm-m-m-m-m," said Ferdinand judiciously. He rested his head on one hand, thinking deeply.

And as he racked his brain for a solution out of the difficulty, a man came down the wooden sidewalk, bareheaded, his sleeves rolled to his elbow. It was Miles Rooney, the editor of the Lost Hills *Clarion*, a weekly effort, seven-eighths syndicate matter and one-eighth sarcastic editorial.

He was a living example of the fact that the Lost Hills *Clarion* was not a paying proposition. His sparse hair stood straight up in the breeze and in one bony hand he clutched a piece of paper.

"What am I going to do?" he demanded, handing the paper to Ferdinand. "I ask you, Putney."

Putney read the paper slowly. It said:

Editor of Clarion: I ben redin what you sed about me and i want you to no your a liar and it aint so ive all way had a firs clas repitashun amung men and i aint no menis to no budy and nothin like it and im goin to maik you wish you keep your damn nose out of my bisnes.

y'rs resp'y Cloudy McGee.

Putney placed the paper on his desk and squinted at the editor.

"You wrote an editorial on Cloudy McGee, eh?"

"Yes."

"Do you know him, Mr. Rooney?"

"I do not," Mr. Rooney flapped his arms dismally. "I don't need to know a man of his reputation in order to flay him in print, Mr. Putney."

"He's a bad egg," put in Amos.

"Bad?" Putney lifted his brows. "He'd just as soon kill you as to look at you. If

I was running a newspaper, I'd either say nice things about a killer, or I'd say nothing."

"What satisfaction is your opinion to me?" demanded the harassed editor. "How can we stop him from coming here?"

"We?" Putney shook his head. "He has nothing against me. I have never seen the man in my life. This is a case for the sheriff—not an attorney."

"Sheriff!" The editor spat angrily. "He and I do not speak. I wrote an editorial about the inefficiency of our sheriff's office, and——"

"Now he won't help you save your life, eh?"

"It amounts to that, Mr. Putney."

"You might apologize to Cloudy McGee, Mr. Rooney."

"I might!" snapped Mr. Rooney. "But when Cloudy McGee meets me, will he wait long enough to let me do it? The man has a terrible reputation. Why, there's a thousand dollars reward for him. Will a man of his type be satisfied with an apology?"

"It would establish a precedent," murmured Putney. "Still, there is only one thing for you to do, and that is to wait and see. McGee is a bank robber, I believe."

"Exactly."

"According to that letter, he will be here soon. If I were in your place, I would shut up shop and go away for a vacation."

"Couldn't we get out a restraining order, Mr. Putney?"

"Yes, we could do that. But it is not likely that the sheriff would serve it. Would you know Cloudy McGee if you saw him?"

"Not at all. No one in Lost Hills has ever seen him."

"McGee is a gambler," remarked Amos Weed, who remembered seeing a general description of McGee on a reward notice. "They say he'll bet on anything. You might make him a gambling proposition, Rooney."

"Bet him that he can't hit me three times out of four eh?" retorted Rooney,

as he picked up his letter and went away. Putney knitted his brows, as in deep thought, while Amos Weed gnawed a finger-nail.



Suddenly the lawyer got an inspiration. He

leaned across the desk so suddenly that Amos almost bit his entire nail off.

"Watch for McGee!" snapped Putney. "You're in a bad fix, Amos. You might as well die for a goat as a lamb. You say there is ten thousand dollars left in the bank—in cash. All right. What do I get for my scheme?"

"For your scheme? Tell it to me, Putney."

"On a fifty-fifty basis, Amos. If you win, I get half."

"And if I lose?"

"You've already lost, you poor egg."

"All right," eagerly. "Fifty-fifty, Putney."

"That's a bet, Amos. How soon will the bank examiner come?"

"I don't know. He's due any old time."

"All right. Cloudy McGee is also coming—to kill Miles Rooney. You see McGee before he kills Rooney. Not that we care what he does to Rooney, you understand; but he must postpone it."

"McGee is our meat. Watch for him, Amos. And as soon as you see him, bring him to me. But do this secretly. If there's any killing going on—remember I'm a lawyer, not a target."

"I'm no target either," declared Amos. "I don't know Cloudy McGee, but I'll do my best. You've got to get me out of this. I took your advice once—and lost."

"This is a cinch," assured Putney. "Just let me get at McGee."

TWENTY miles south of Lost Hills was the town of Salt Wells, from which place a stage line ran to Lost Hills. In a dingy little room at Salt Wells' only hotel, two men sat at a table playing poker. It was early in the evening, and both men were too interested in the game to light a lamp.

One man was tall and lean, with deep-set eyes and a long, damp-looking nose. He breathed through his mouth, and regularly he wiped a long, gnarled finger across his nose, in lieu of a handkerchief.

The other man was also fairly tall, but not so thin. His face was also tanned, but his fingers were more nimble with the cards. He seemed greatly amused over his good luck. On the table between them was a cartridge-belt and holstered Colt six-shooter, and a scattering of currency.

The man with the bothersome nose spread his hand, his watery eyes triumphant. But the other man spread his hand, and without a word he picked up the belt, gun and money.

"Anything else?" asked the winner.

"Nobe." The other man got heavily to his feet. "I'be cleaged."

"All right, pardner. It was a good game eh?"

"Good gabe for you."

The winner smiled and left the room, a huge sombrero, with an ornate silver band, tilted rakishly over one eye. The loser looked gloomily after him, flirting a forefinger across his nose. He dug in a pocket and took out several little bottles and boxes, which he studied closely. Each and every one was a guaranteed cure for colds.

He selected a tablet from each receptacle, put them in his big mouth and took a big drink from a broken-handle pitcher. Then he put on a derby hat, yanked it down around his ears, and went heavily down the hall and into the street.

For several moments he stood on the wooden sidewalk, looking up and down the street, before crossing to the Road Runner saloon, where he leaned against the bar. The sleepy-eyed bartender shuffled around behind the bar and waited for the order.

"Rog and rye," thickly.

The bartender placed the bottle and glasses on the bar and watched the man toss off a full glass of the sweet whisky.

"Yo're the only man I ever seen that drank rock and rye all the time," observed the bartender. "Got a cold?"

"I hab. It's killid be by iches—dab id!"

He sneezed violently, clinging to the bar with both hands. When he looked up there was a great fear in his eyes.

"Why don'tcha take somethin' for it?" asked the bartender.

"Take sobedig? I've tried id all." He shivered, and poured out another drink.

"Had it long?"

"Nod this wod. Sobe day I'll ged pneumodia and die—dab id."

"A feller don't last long when he gets that," declared the bartender hollowly. The sufferer shook his head, shivered and sneezed.

"You ought to take care of yourself, pardner."

"No use," wearily. "I'be fought id all by life. It'll ged be sobe day—dab it."

"It kinda takes the joy out of life, when yuh know darn well it'll get yuh in the end," sympathized the bartender.

"Pneumodia is bad," nodded the man tearfully. "Shuds off your wid."

"Why don'tcha see a doctor?"

"Nobe."

"Scared?"

"Whad you don't know won't hurd yuh."

He poured out another drink of sweet whisky, shuddered violently, ran a finger across his nose and buttoned up his collar.

"How far is id to Lost Hills?"

"About twenty miles north of here."

"Thang yuh."

The man with the pneumonia complex went out into the night and approached a hitch-rack, where several riding horses were tied. After looking them over he selected a tall sorrel. Loosening the cinch, he removed the blanket, mounted and rode north, wearing the blanket around his shoulders, holding it tightly around his throat. He sneezed several times, as though bidding Salt Wells good-by, and faded away in the darkness.

AMOS WEED was not to be caught napping. There were not many strangers ever seen in Lost Hills, but Amos spotted one that night. He was rather tall, slender, but was not dressed conspicuously. Amos dogged him from place to place, wondering if this could possibly be Cloudy McGee.

The stranger went from game to game in the War Path saloon, showing only a mild interest in the gambling. He picked up a



billiard cue and spent an hour or so, knocking the-balls about the old pool table, paying no attention to anyone, while Amos lumped in a chair, watching him closely.

He followed the stranger to the Chinese restaurant and watched him. This man wore no gun in sight. He seemed of a serious disposition, ate heartily, which was something Amos had been unable to do since he had heard of the well failure. He knew it must be a failure, when they did not strike oil within the four thousand foot depth.

The stranger left the restaurant and sauntered around the street, with Amos following him at a distance. Miles Rooney was getting out his weekly edition, and several interested folks were watching the flat printing press through the *Clarion* window. The stranger stopped and watched the operation.

Amos came in beside him, also watching the operation.

"Pretty slick, the way it prints 'em, eh?" said the cashier. The stranger nodded.

"Stranger in Lost Hills?" asked Amos.

The man nodded quickly. "Just came in today."

"Going to stay with us a while?"

"No, I don't think so. At least, not long."

"Drummer?"

"No-o-o-o. Bank examiner."

"Oh." Amos dropped the subject and got away as fast as possible. This was terrible, he thought. If the bank examiner was in town, tomorrow his theft would be discovered. Amos felt of the knot which was already galling his left ear.

Then he galloped down to Putney's house, almost fell in through the front door, and blurted out the news.

"I tell you, we're sunk, Putney!"

"You are, you mean," indignantly.

"O-o-o-o-oh, hell!" wailed Amos. "I might as well blow out my brains, I suppose."

"Well," said Putney judiciously, "it might save complications. Might be safer to shoot the examiner."

"But I can't shoot straight, Put! You sure advised me into a lot of misery. What'll I do?"

"Give yourself up."

"And get hung?"

"Start running."

"Run where? I haven't got enough money to make a getaway."

"Well, you can shoot straight enough to kill yourself, can't you?"

"Oh, you're a hell of a lawyer! Didn't you ever give any good advice to anybody?"

"This ain't a point of law, Amos—this is emergency."

"Uh-huh. You sure are good in emergencies. Give up, run, or shoot myself. Any damn fool could give that advice."

"Then keep on looking for Cloudy McGee. That's your last chance. He might show up, you know."

"Where there's life there's hope," sighed Amos. "I'll do it. In the meantime, you think of something, Put." Amos went back to the street, hoping against hope.

AMOS WEED was the first one to spot the stranger with the big hat and the silver-studded hat-band. He remembered that the reward notice had mentioned the fact that Cloudy McGee wore that kind of a hat. Amos was both frightened and thrilled. He saw the stranger go into the War Path saloon; so he went

to the hitch-rack and looked at the stranger's horse.

On the back of the saddle cantle was the single initial M, in a silver letter. M must stand for McGee, reasoned Amos. He rather thrilled at the thoughts of meeting a man like Cloudy McGee, who flaunted his big hat and an initialed saddle before all the sheriffs, who would be only too glad of a chance to gather him in and collect the thousand dollar reward.

Amos sauntered back to the saloon door, and met the stranger, who was just coming out. He glanced sharply at Amos and started across the street, with Amos trotting at his heels. The man stopped and looked at Amos. It was dark out there, and Amos' knees smote together, but he summoned up his remaining nerve.

"Mr. McGee, can I talk with you for a minute?" he said.

The tall stranger started slightly. "What about?"

"Business," Amos swallowed heavily. "But not here in the street," he hastened to say. "Nobody knows who you are, except me. But you shouldn't wear that big hat, you know." It pleased Amos to give advice to Cloudy McGee.

But McGee didn't seem to mind. He waited for Amos Weed to continue.

"You follow me," said Amos. "I want you to meet a friend of mine."

"Just a moment," said Cloudy McGee. "What's the game?"

"The game," said Amos nervously, "is to make some easy money for you."

"Easy money, eh? Say, I don't believe I know you."

"I'm all right," quavered Amos. "I'm cashier of the Lost Hills bank."

"I see. All right."

They went to the sidewalk and headed down the street to where Ferdinand P. Putney kept bachelor hall in a little two-room building, just off the street, on the south end of town.

It was a great thrill for Amos, to walk with Cloudy McGee, on whose head was a thousand dollars reward. Cloudy stopped to light a cigarette, and Amos shivered as the match illuminated McGee's ornate sombrero. Amos was afraid that Jim Potter, the sheriff, might see him.

A man was coming up the street toward them, but Amos did not know who it was. The man watched Amos and Cloudy McGee go in the front door of Ferdinand P. Putney's home. Against the lamplight it was easy for this man to see the huge sombrero.

The man sneezed several times, cleared his throat raspingly and walked over toward Putney's front door. It was the man who had stolen the horse in Salt Wells. He had ridden almost to Lost Hills and turned the horse loose, not wishing to be arrested for horse stealing.

Ferdinand P. Putney drew up three chairs, after shaking hands with Cloudy McGee.

"I—we were looking for you, Mr. McGee," said Putney. "Mr. Rooney, the editor of the Lost Hills *Clarion*, said you were coming to—er—see him soon."

Cloudy McGee nodded indifferently, and Amos mentally decided that the killing of an editor was merely an incident in the life of such a man as Cloudy McGee.

"You are a man of action," said Putney, looking upon McGee with considerable favor. "What would you do for a thousand dollars?"

McGee grinned. "All depends."

"I'm going to lay my cards on the table," said Putney. "A man of your caliber appreciates honesty."

"Such is my reputation," nodded McGee.

"All right," Putney stretched out his legs and squinted at Amos, who was not at ease. "Our friend here, is cashier of the Lost Hills bank. Some time ago he stumbled upon a flattering oil proposition, and—"

"Now, don't lie about it, Put," wailed Amos. "You advised me to put every cent—"

"If you will pardon me, I will tell Mr. McGee the story, Amos."

"Well, don't leave yourself out, Putney."

"As I said before, Mr. Weed saw the possibilities of this investment, and, not having sufficient funds of his own, he took forty thousand of the bank money, in order to take a third interest in the Panhandle Number 7 well, a Texas oil company. It promised enormous returns. Today he received a communication to the effect that at a depth of four thousand feet, they have struck nothing. The average depth of that field is much less.

"It puts my friend in a bad position. The depositors of this bank are not of a forgiving nature, and in the event of an embezzlement it is doubtful whether the law would ever have a chance to pronounce sentence upon Amos Weed."

"They'd lynch him, eh?" asked Cloudy McGee heartlessly.

Amos shivered.

"I am doing my best to save my friend's life," continued Putney. "The forty thou-

sand is gone. And the only way we can explain the loss is to have the bank robbed. You know how to do things like that, Mr. McGee. There is already a thousand dollar reward for your arrest; so another robbery won't make much difference to you, one way or the other."

"Well?" queried McGee thoughtfully. "How much do I get?"

Ferdinand P. Putney did some mental arithmetic. He knew there was ten thousand dollars in the bank. It would be just as simple to make this a fifty thousand dollar robbery as a forty thousand dollar robbery—and there would be ten thousand to split between himself and Amos.

"Suppose," he said, "that we give you a thousand dollars. You don't need to pull off a regular robbery; just come in the front door, fire a few shots, run out the back door, get on your horse and beat it. As you go through we'll hand you the one thousand."

McGee shook his head quickly. "You might hand me a package of nails."

"Oh, I see. You think we might not hand you the money."

"Be a fool if you did, Putney."

Putney turned his head and considered Amos.

"Don't look at me," wailed Amos. "I've got no thousand."

"I guess that's no lie," Putney turned again to McGee.

"How do I know you'd do the job?"

"You don't. But you've got to take some risk."

"How about you?"

"I take plenty, don't you think? I've got to outrun the sheriff."

"That's true," nodded Putney. He turned to Amos. "If I give Mr. McGee a thousand dollars, you've got to make good with me, Amos."

"I will," whispered Amos. "All I want is to get out of this mess."

Ferdinand P. Putney went into the next room. He did not trust the bank, because he knew Amos Weed too well. In a few moments he came back, carrying a thousand dollars in currency, which he counted out to Cloudy McGee.

"I'm banking on your honesty," said Putney. McGee pocketed the bills.

"No one can ever say I was crooked in business," he said. "When is this deal to be pulled off?"

"Tomorrow morning at exactly ten o'clock. There hasn't been a customer in that bank at ten o'clock for months. Am I right, Amos?"

"You're right," whined Amos. "Nobody ever comes in that early."

Cloudy McGee shook hands with them on the deal and left the house, promising Amos Weed to keep his big sombrero out of sight.

"Well," sighed Amos, "that's settled. If the sheriff does kill Cloudy McGee, he won't squeal on us, Putney."

"He better not," grinned Putney. "But the deal ain't all finished, Amos. You go down to the bank and take out every cent of that ten thousand dollars. Nobody is goin' to wonder if you go in there this time of night, because you often work late."

"You—you mean I'm to swipe that money, Putney?"

"Sure thing. We split it two ways—I take six thousand and you take four."

"Aw-w-w-w-w, what kind of a split is that? We were to go fifty-fifty."

"That's all right. I get a commission for putting the deal over, don't I? That thousand I gave him, I gave for you. It was just a loan, Amos. Take it or leave it."

"Aw, I'll take it, Putney. I hope he don't fall down on the job."

"He's a heaven-sent angel, Amos. Now, you go and get that money and bring it up here."

Amos went, but he went reluctantly. As he left the house he did not know he was being followed by the wet-nosed stranger, who had listened, with an ear glued to one of Putney's window panes.

It was not difficult for Amos to enter the bank and come out with the money. At that time of night there were very few people on the streets of Lost Hills. He had the money in a gunnysack and carried it concealed as much as possible with his coat.

He came down the sidewalk, past the doorway of an old shack, when a big man pounced upon him, forcibly took the sack away from him, and sent him spinning with a punch on the jaw. Amos saw stars that the Lick Observatory had never dreamed of seeing, and when he awoke he was all alone and very sad.

Conscious of the fact that he had been robbed and knocked out, he staggered to Putney's place, fell inside the house and gasped out his story. Putney's consternation and wrath knew no bounds.

He fairly danced in his anger, while little Amos held his jaw and stared red-eyed at the wall.

"Cloudy McGee double-crossed us!" swore Putney. "He knew we'd do this,

the dirty pup. Well," Putney waved his arms in desperation, "we'll have to kill McGee and get that money."

"You do it," said Amos wearily. "You can have my part of it. My Lord, that man is strong!"

"But don't you see where it puts us?" wailed Putney. "He's got all the money—eleven thousand. He don't have to rob the bank now."

"But he swore he'd do it, Putney," Amos grasped at any old straw. "He didn't promise not to rob us."

"Well, if you can get any satisfaction out of that," said Putney. "Anyway, it leaves me holding the sack. I've got nothing

to gain, even if he keeps his word. I'm out a thousand. All it'll do is to save your hide."

"Well, isn't that enough, Putney?"

"I wouldn't give a thousand dollars for you, guts, feathers and all. I've sure bought something—I have."

"Aw-w-w-w, it may turn out all right, Putney. Look at the jaw I've got on me, will you?"

"I don't care anything about your jaw. Go on home. When he robs that bank, I'm going to—" Putney hesitated.

"What are you going to do?"

"That's my business. Now go home."

Amos went. And as he hurried home he noticed a light in the living-room of the sheriff's home.

Perhaps at any other time Amos would not have given this a thought, but just now his nerves were in such a state that everything looked suspicious.

The big stranger with the damp nose had engaged a room at a little hotel, left his bundle there and gone to the War Path saloon, where he got into a poker game. In a little while Cloudy McGee came in, bought a drink, and tackled the roulette wheel.

Several times the damp-nosed stranger glanced at Cloudy and found him looking. The first time they nodded, but the other glances were of suspicion instead of friendship.

"You've got a bad cold, stranger," observed the dealer.

"Yea-a-ah—dab id."

"You ought to take something for it."

"I hab," the stranger swallowed heavily.



"F I was you I'd see a doctor," declared one of the players. "I had a friend that died from pneumonia. Started just like your cold."

"I thig I'll see a doctor in the mornig—dab id."

AMOS WEED slept little that night, and he got up in the morning with his nerves all frazzled out. He did not eat any breakfast. He had heard of condemned criminals eating a hearty breakfast just before their walk to the gallows, and the very thought of food sickened him.

As he walked toward the bank he met the damp-nosed stranger, with the derby hat crushed down over his head. He sneezed just before they met, and Amos jerked as though someone had fired a gun.

"I'm lookig for the doctor," said the big man thickly.

Amos sighed visibly and audibly, as he pointed out the doctor's residence.

"Thag yuh," nodded the sufferer, and went on. Amos looked after him, wondering who he was, and then went on to the bank. It was about ten minutes of ten, when Amos opened the doors and went in, closing them behind him. The bank did not open until ten o'clock.

Amos looked out the front windows, his heart pounding against his ribs. It was within ten minutes of the time that would see him saved or sunk. He went to the rear door, throwing back the heavy bolts, which would give Cloudy McGee a chance to make his getaway, if he were still going to carry out his plan.

A glance showed that McGee's horse was behind the bank. Amos Weed's hopes arose like a well-filled balloon. At least Cloudy McGee was shooting square. Then he saw Ferdinand P. Putney coming down the alley behind the street, carrying a double-barrel shotgun. Amos closed the door, peeking through a crack, watching Putney, who came in behind the bank.

He looked all around. A huge packing case and several smaller boxes gave him a hiding place, into which he crawled. Amos drew away from the door, his eyes squinting painfully. It was evident to him that Ferdinand P. intended to intercept Cloudy McGee and try to get back his money.

And Amos realized that Putney was going to ruin the whole scheme. If Cloudy was forced to stop and argue the case with Putney, it would give the sheriff time to catch him, and then there would be no chance to prove that McGee had stolen the fifty thousand.

Someone was knocking on the front door! Amos trotted to the front. It was the depot agent. He showed Amos a telegraph envelope through the glass of the door.

Amos went to the door, shaking like a Hula dancer, and got the message. It was for him. He jiggled back to the rear door and looked out. Then he almost swooned. Seated on the boxes, where Ferdinand P. Putney was concealed, was the sheriff, Big Jim Potter, smoking his pipe.

Amos staggered back to the front door. Seated on the sidewalk across the street was "Slim" Caldwell, the deputy sheriff, watching the bank front. Amos reeled. The clock was striking the hour, and at every chime Amos Weed jerked inside his clothes.

Then he unlocked the door and went drunkenly toward his desk, where he slumped in a chair, staring with unseeing eyes. The door opened and a man came toward him. He opened his eyes. It was the man he had directed to the doctor's office. Amos shook his head wearily. Nothing mattered now. He was still holding the telegram, and now he opened it mechanically, his eyes scanning it quickly. It read:

PANHANDLE NUMBER SEVEN BRINGS IN GUSHER AT FORTY TWENTY FIVE STOP CONGRATULATIONS

GRIMES SUPERINTENDENT.

Amos fell back in his chair, the world reeling around him. He opened his eyes. The stranger with the cold had crouched back against the wall, a gun in his hand, as Cloudy McGee came in through the doorway. Slim Caldwell, the deputy sheriff, was running across the street, almost to the door, when the stranger behind it flung up his gun, covering McGee.

"Put 'em up, McGee!" he snapped, and McGee's hands went up, a look of wonder on his face.

Slim Caldwell ran in behind him, and the gun covered both of them.

"Who are you?" asked the damp-nosed stranger of Caldwell.

"Deputy sheriff," blurted Caldwell.

"All right. Handcuff that man."

"But—but—" stammered the deputy.

The sheriff was coming in the back door, herding Ferdinand P. Putney ahead of him. He stared at the tableau. The damp-nosed stranger swung his back against the wall, half-facing the sheriff. For several moments things were rather deadlocked.

"Who are you?" asked the stranger with the cold.

"I'm the sheriff!" snapped Jim Potter.

"And I've got you, Cloudy McGee!"



snorted Caldwell addressing the damp-nosed stranger, and covering him. "Drop that gun!"

The man addressed dropped his gun and Caldwell picked it up, but before anyone could stop him, the damp-nosed man had made a sudden dive and knocked the original McGee off his feet, and was sitting on him.

"For heck's sake, what's this all about?" demanded the sheriff, coming toward them, still clinging to Ferdinand P. Putney.

"Pud ha'd-cuffs on him, I tell you!" snapped the damp-nosed man. "This is Cloudy McGee."

"Yo're crazy!" roared the sheriff. "Yo're McGee yourself."

"You thig so?" The damp-nosed man turned back the lapel of his soiled vest and showed them the badge of a deputy U. S. marshal. "By nabe is Morton," he said thickly. "I hobe you're sadsified."

"U. S. marshal?" blurted the sheriff.

"Yeah. I've been looking for Cloudy McGee, bud I didn't hab much of a description, excebt that he gambles quite a lot and is about by size. I heard he was in Salt Wells, or aroud that part of the country.

"I med this sud-of-a-gud and he wod my horse, saddle, hat and my gud. I thought he'd stay there bud he left; so I stole a horse and followed him. I heard hib frame up to rob this bank. They called hib McGee. That feller over there," pointing at Amos, who was almost in a state of collapse, "took ted thousad from the bank last night; so I toog it away frob him. It's ub in by roob."

"Well, for the land's sake!" blurted the man upon whom the deputy marshal sat. "They mistook me for Cloudy McGee, and I let the sheriff in on the deal. I thought you was McGee, because they recognized me by that big hat which I won away from you at Salt Wells, and we framed it to get Putney, Weed and you this morning."

"Is thad so?" The marshal wiped his nose and stared down at the man under him. "Who in hell are you?"

"Me? I'm the bank examiner."

"Huh! Loogs like a mistage—dab id."

The officer got to his feet, grinning widely.

Amos was coming toward them, holding out the telegram.

"I'll deed it to the bank," he quavered. "It's a gusher, and they're worth more than fifty thousand dollars. Just so they don't hang me, I'll agree to anything."

The bank examiner shook his head. "That's between you and the bank officials, you cheap little crook."

"Cheap?" muttered Ferdinand P. Putney. "That man must deal in big money, if he calls a fifty-thousand steal cheap."

The bank examiner took a roll of bills from his pocket and handed them to the sheriff.

"Here's the retaining fee I got from Putney last night. If you want to prosecute him, that is evidence."

"I dunno what I want to do," said the sheriff blankly.

An apparition was coming in through the back door; a gobby-black sort of a person, painted up like a war-path Indian in reds, greens, blues, purples and black. They watched him come toward them.

"My Gawd!" blurted the sheriff. "It's Miles Rooney!"

"It is," wailed the editor. "Look at me! He tied me to my own press and painted me with my own inks. I've been like this all night. I just got loose!"

"Who painted you?" whispered Amos.

Miles Rooney turned his ink smeared countenance upon the luckless cashier, pointing a gobby finger at him accusingly.

"Your friend. The man I seen you standing outside my window with last night. The man you were talking to, darn you! Cloudy McGee!"

"The bank examiner!" exploded Amos. "He—he said he was."

"He is," said the sheriff. "He's examined a lot of 'em."

The real bank examiner and the marshal walked outside, halting on the edge of the sidewalk, where they grinned at each other.

"You ought to take something for that cold," said the examiner. "The first thing you know you'll be having pneumonia."

"Dod be." The officer shook his head. "You can't scare be do more. All by life I've been scared of pneumonia. Never had the nerve to visit a doctor. Bud I seen one today. Ha, ha, ha, ha! Fuddy, ain't id? I feel twedy years you'ger."

"What did he say was the matter with you?"

"Hay fever."



HEADING NORTH

By L. PATRICK GREENÉ

Author of "Sinews of War," "A Bloomin' Idol," etc.

IN AFRICA ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE, THOUGHT THE MAJOR OF THE LAND TO WHOSE BLACK CHILDREN BOTH DEATH AND LAUGHTER COME EASILY. SO, THINKING ALL THINGS POSSIBLE, HE COULD SWAY FATE A LITTLE AND GUIDE HIMSELF THROUGH A STRANGE ADVENTURE

FROM the south blew a gentle breeze; suddenly, without warning, its force increased, assuming the ferocious velocity of a tornado—driving black storm clouds before it.

The white man looked at the scurrying clouds, laughed challengingly, and bracing his feet against the dash board of the Cape wagon drove the eight mules at mad gallop across the veld, heading for the river's ford a full three miles distant.

"Hold tight, Jim!" he yelled to the native who sat beside him.

The Hottentot's white teeth flashed in answer, and, standing up, the squat, powerfully built black flourished his long whip over the backs of the mules; shouting queer sounding, guttural encouragements at them.

The Cape wagon careened from side to side like a derelict in a heavy sea. The black Arab stallion tethered to the tailboard of the wagon neighed fretfully, continuously, until the white man turned and spoke soothingly; then it ceased to strain at the tethering rope, the wild light went from its eye and it settled down to an easy, machine-like stride, easily keeping pace with the frenzied, topmost speed of the mules.

The clouds dropped lower; the darkness deepened. In the distance flashes of lightning glared and thunder rumbled spasmod-

ically. The air was filled with twigs, leaves, bits of sod and small pebbles which the wind caused to dance before its fury.

The lashings of the wagon's tented cover came undone at the back. The wind howled through the opening, whipping the Hottentot's soft felt hat from his head. The off-leader mule shied as it hurtled past him.

"Au-a!" Jim wailed. "It was a new hat, Baas. Where will I get another like it?"

The white man made no reply. All his faculties were concentrated on guiding the mules over the broken, uneven ground—swinging them round boulders and the miniature mountains which were anthills.

The wind ceased as suddenly as it had sprung up. The calm which followed was oppressive, breathing was difficult. It was as if all air which supports life had been blown from the earth's surface, leaving it destitute, leaving an abhorrent vacuum; leaving a vacuum which the clouds, in obedience to Nature's immutable law, were dropping quickly to fill. They were so low now that they seemed to press upon the wagon's top; so low that it seemed as if the Hottentot's flailing whip would cut them to ribbons and precipitate the flooding waters they held.

The pace of the mules slackened and their response to the guiding tug of the

reins was sluggish; they desired to weave their own path through the enshrouding darkness.

"It is best that we stop, Baas," Jim the Hottentot shouted, forgetting that the need to shout had passed with the dropping of the wind—the roar of it was still in his ears.

"I think we can reach the ford and cross before the great dark comes, Jim. I can just see the baobab tree which marks the place."

As he spoke the wagon lurched violently, almost capsizing; the near wheels had dropped into a deep gully. It took the white man's great skill with the reins, required all his patience and knowledge of mules to avoid the disaster which threatened. For a few sickening seconds the wagon teetered perilously then righted itself and rolled on over comparatively smooth ground.

"Best stop, Baas," the Hottentot said again. "You can no longer see the tree."

"True, Jim. But I can see the mules and the ground just before them. We will go on yet."

"*Au-ai!*—What a man you are, Baas," Jim grumbled. "You flee from danger into danger and seek danger by the way. But me, I am frightened."

"Say you so, Jim," the white man murmured absently. He was leaning forward, peering into the darkness. "But you are no child to be frightened at the dark."

"A child is not frightened at the dark, Baas," Jim said sententiously, "but at the evil which lives in the dark."

The white man made no reply. The mules' pace had slackened to a walk. Jim climbed over the seat and made his way into the body of the wagon. Locating the hurricane lamp which hung from one of the ribs of the cover, he lighted it and then sat down at the rear of the wagon, his legs dangling over the tailboard, staring in awed silence through the darkness.

Presently a dull roaring noise sounded in the south, a noise like the hissing of a surf on a sandy, gently sloping shore. The roar increased in volume and out of the darkness a faint, wraith-like mist appeared moving rapidly in the tracks of the wagon.

"Hurry, Baas," Jim called, "the rain comes."

The white man's answer alarmed him.

"How many mules am I driving, Jim?"

"The Baas is jesting or the darkness has sent him mad," the Hottentot muttered. Then, aloud, "Eight, Baas. And you know it. Hurry."

A chuckle calmed his fears.

"I cannot go faster, Jim. I have only two mules; at least I can only see two. And they are fading."

Jim hurried to the front of the wagon. The darkness was now so great that only the sterns of the two wheelers were visible.

"Best stop, Baas," Jim said for the third time.

The white man sighed.

"All right, Jim. But days will pass before we can go on again."

He reined the mules to a standstill.

Quickly the two men got down from the wagon and outspanned the mules—hobbling them and turning them loose. Before their task was done the clouds above them opened, burst like an overfilled balloon, and it rained—not in drops, but in solid sheets of water which bruised the body, chilled them to the very marrow of their bones and turned the sun-parched heat-cracked earth into a slippery sea of mud.

FROM the south came the message of the drums; from a tiny hill-sheltered kraal not many miles from the diamond town of Kimberley, it traveled north; sped to its final destination on the wings of the same wind which marshalled the rain clouds to their devastating attack on the long season's drouth.

From hill top to hill top, from kraal to kraal, its staccato beat passed on, reverberating among the hills, roaring over the plains. The giant tall elephant grass swayed to its vibrations.

White men hearing the drumming, spoke knowingly of a big beer drink afoot. "Niggers always drum like that if they're planning a big beer drink," they said with a complacent snicker of assurance.

Most natives who heard hit themselves frightened, as children are, by something they did not understand. The few who could translate the message of this primitive telegraph, smiled covertly and hoped that no one had seen the blood lust which flashed into their eyes.

At many kraals the signal drummers passed on the message, yet had no comprehension of its meaning—the code was unknown to them. But they never thought of breaking the chain of communication



and lost no time in relaying the message on; first sounding the African "Are you there? Are you there?" until an answering beat announced that the drummer in the next village—aroused from sleep, perchance, or called from a wedding feast—was at his post, listening in. And then the message would throb out—"Tum-tum, chi. Chitum—" again and again until the sender heard the bush equivalent of "Message received and understood."

After long hours the message came to the ears of a wizened old man who lived in a cave high up in a kopje overlooking the river's ford. He was sitting at the mouth of the cave, watching the clouds gathering in the south, watching the tiny dust cloud which traveled before the storm, warming himself in the rays of the sun which were so soon to be quenched by driving rain.

As he watched, the dust cloud materialized into a white hooded wagon drawn by eight mules; the dust cloud it created swirled above it and was made to assume fantastic shapes by the suddenly awakened breeze.

The setting sun was engulfed by black cloud masses; the force of the wind increased, howling about the kopje, shrieking through the passages which, leading from the cave, honeycombed the kopje.

It grew cold.

The old man rose stiffly and entering the cave added more fuel to the fire which was burning there, sniffed the acrid fumes with evident enjoyment and then, wrapping his attenuated frame in a magnificent kaross made of leopard skins, he returned to his seat at the cave's opening.

Almost immediately he was conscious of a drum's beat above the fury of the wind; it impinged upon his ears with the force of a thousand spear heads upon a thousand shields.

He leaned forward, inclined his head slightly, and listened. At that moment he was as one numbed of all his senses, only one was performing its proper function. At that moment he was sightless, he could not smell, he could not feel; he sat as one suddenly transmitted to stone. But he could hear; could separate the message of the drum from the voice of the wind.

Presently the old man sprang to his feet, letting the kaross fall from his shoulders to the ground, and stood stark naked at the cave's mouth. A mad fanatical light gleamed in his sunken eyes, decrepit old age seemed to pass from him; at that moment he was the personification of a nation's spirit.

A smother of smoke emerged from the mouth of the cave, caused by a freakish back-draught, enveloping him. It was caught up and tossed into nothingness by the wind. But long before it had entirely passed away the old man had disappeared and a native goatherd who was hurrying his goats back to his kraal, venturing, because of his haste, to traverse the path which led before the cave's mouth, shook his head fearfully and mumbled a prayer of supplication to the Great Great. Had he not seen Mbike, the Wise One, disappear into nothingness before his eyes?

Fifteen minutes later rounding a spur of the hill, the herd came in sight of his kraal which nestled close against the kopje's precipitous side. A party of warriors, armed with assegais and shields, hurried out of the opening in the thorn stockade which encircled the kraal and took the path leading to the river's ford.

"What's afoot?" the goatherd shouted.

"The Voice has spoken," one answered. "We go to the ford to stop a white man and his black dog from crossing."

The last few words came faintly for the warriors were speeding on their way.

The goatherd nodded importantly.

"I knew it," he muttered. "Did I not see Mbike taken up into the clouds to commune with the Great Ones?"

And he hurried on to the kraal, eager to hear what was to be told, eager to tell what he had seen.

MORNING broke—a cold, gray, cheerless morning, the sun obscured by weeping clouds. The tented wagon looked strangely forlorn, isolated by a sea of mud. Overnight, desolation had dropped up on the veld, it looked incapable of sustaining life of any sort. But here and there green patches showed where young, tender grass shoots were pushing their way hopefully upward; the leaves of the few stunted trees which dotted the landscape were turning so that they could catch a feast of rain drops on their broad surfaces. Several hundred yards to the east, behind a low spur of the tall, gaunt kopje—the baobab tree which marked the ford was not far from the foot of it—coils of smoke indicated the location of the kraal from which came sounds of life—the bleating of goats, a rain bedrabbled rooster's crowing, and the plaintive lowing of cattle.

The black stallion, its ears pricked, stood sniffing at the canvas hood of the wagon,

pawing the ground impatiently, scattering showers of mud over the mules which huddled dejectedly together behind him.

Presently, Jim, the Hottentot, crawled from under the wagon's shelter, a measure of oats in his hands. This he emptied into a shallow box and placed it before the stallion, watched the spirited animal daintily commence to feed, and then lighted a fire on a level shelving of rock—using bark and twigs stripped from a near-by tree for fuel.

This making of fire, no matter how heavy had been the rain, or how water soddened the fuel at hand, was one of the many apparent miracles Jim could perform with ease. Civilization has not been a wholly unmixed blessing; the invention of matches, for example, has cost man a great deal more than the mere ability to make fire with flints or fire sticks.

The fire blazing cheerfully, Jim entered the wagon, emerging immediately loaded with cooking utensils and provisions for the morning meal. In a few minutes the appetizing aroma of coffee mingled with the



wood smoke and rashers of bacon spluttered merrily in the frying-pan.

A sound of splashing water came from the wagon, followed presently by the full throated purring noise

which some athletes make as they vigorously towel themselves. This gave way presently to a lusty, tuneful baritone singing one of the Freebooter Ballads.

Jim listened happily, beating his hands softly together in time to the marching rhythm of the song, then called "O-he!"

The song ended abruptly and a, tousled head was thrust through the opening in the canvas hood.

"What is it, Jim?" the white man asked. His cheeks glowed from the drill of the razor and the bite of the ice cold water.

"In a little while skoff will be ready, Baas. I go now to the river."

"What for, Jim? Water?" The white man's innocent looking blue eyes sparkled; there was a note of banter in his voice. "Surely there is enough water here without going to the river?"

Jim grinned. The night's heavy rain had found several weak spots in the cover of the wagon and he had been too lazy to move his blankets to a dryer spot.

"I go, Baas," he said, with an air of dignified reproach, "to see if we can cross. Also—" it was his turn to banter now—"it is well that we stopped last night when we did. The Baas could not see very well; undoubtedly the darkness and the rain covered his eyes. Yet a boy—too young, even, to mind goats—would have steered closer to the ford than the baas did." He pointed to the baobab tree. "Had we gone on we should have toppled over the bank and—"

"And made a ford of our own," the white man interrupted. "That is why I came this way, hoping to make you swim. Also—" it was plainly evident that the anger in his voice was only feigned—"I had other things to do beside drive, O impertinent one. I had to calm the fears of a Hottentot dog who was afraid of the dark. If I had a sjambok in my hand—"

"You would beat me, eh, Baas?" Jim interrupted quickly. "You who saved me from beatings—and worse—how many times?"

He moved the coffee back a little from the fire; turned the bacon and then walked swiftly in the direction of the river. A few minutes later a sudden dip in the billowing veld hid him from sight.

The white man withdrew into the wagon and took up the thread of his interrupted song as he completed his toilet.

When he presently climbed down from the wagon, fully dressed, he was just in time to save the coffee from boiling over and the bacon from charring. Removing them to the seat of the wagon he sat down and broke his fast with that keen enjoyment known only to men whose life is spent in seeking and finding adventure in some one of the world's vast breathing spaces.

When he had finished there was still plenty left for Jim which he placed on some red embers raked from the fire. Returning again to the wagon seat he cheerfully surveyed the dreary expanse of veld.

"I hope Jim finds that we can cross the bally brook," he said aloud, in English. "It'll be most deucedly annoying if we have to potter about here."

The affected drawl in his voice seemed quite appropriate, quite in keeping with the appearance he presented to the casual observer.

A gold-rimmed monocle propped open his right eye. Without it, one judged, the eye would close because the man did not have the energy, was too lethargic, to keep it open without mechanical aid. His black hair, graying slightly at the temples, was,

brushed back from his high, broad forehead in an immaculate pompadour. His clothes—the khaki colored flannel tunic-shirt, the whipcord riding breeches, supported at the waist by a heavy ammunition belt from which hung a revolver and a magnificent hunting knife, the brown polo-boots and box spurs were of the exaggerated cut and pattern affected by armchair hunters and explorers. At this moment, one of complete relaxation, his facial expression was one of inane boredom; he looked like a silly ass,—and he talked like one. And therefore, following the argument to the logical conclusion arrived at by so many of South Africa's hard cases, he was a silly ass.

He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a hideous wooden idol, colored a deep blood red, and toyed with it absently. It was a queer mascot for such a man to carry about him; on the other hand it was just such a mascot the man he affected to be would carry. Think of the sensation it would cause when exhibited at the club? The workmanship of the grotesque thing was perfect; had been carved by a master of the craft. Anatomically it was correct in every detail—from the horns, five eyes, and tribal marks on its receding forehead to the nails on its splayed toes. It was repellent; the leering set of its face and the manner it supported an enormous belly with its hands expressed gross bestiality.

A dude's mascot.

The white man's long, sinewy fingers closed tightly over the idol; steel lights flashed in his blue eyes and every muscle in his body tensed.

He was thinking of the manner in which the idol came into his possession—of a brawl in a low dive in Lourenco Marquez, of the murder of a red-headed giant of an American. All because of this grinning, blood-red idol of wood.

He thought, too, of the strange story the murdered man had told him before he died; of the beginnings of a gigantic plot which had for its aims the supremacy of the black race and the enslaving of the white; of the mysterious secret society to which this idol was a clue; of the red-haired American's invalid uncle who, with his niece, had stumbled on to the secret and were camped—although probably made prisoners or killed now—somewhere in the region of the

Mountains of the Moon.

A wild story; one which the white man did not altogether believe, yet professed to believe. In fact, he actually believed it sufficiently to give up his old haunts and the practise of his profession—and men said that the Major was the cleverest I.D.B. that ever succeeded in throwing dust in the eyes of the detectives engaged by the Diamond Mining Syndicate. He believed the American's story to the extent of telling it to prominent South Africans, endeavoring to enlist their support, and, when they laughed at him, ran risks in order to outfit himself properly for the trek north that he might investigate for himself.

After all, in Africa all things are possible.

With an impatient gesture he returned the idol to his pocket and looked out across the veld. When he saw Jim plodding through the sticky mud toward him, coming from the direction of the ford, he relaxed once again and a quizzical expression came into his eyes.

"I wonder what the old heathen 'll say," he muttered. "Some bloomin' cock-an'-bull story, no doubt. The bally blighter doesn't like the idea of this trip at all, been tryin' to put me off it ever since we started. He'll probably say that the river's absolutely impassable, or that there are thousands of crocodiles at the ford, or—"

"Do we trek at once, Jim?" he shouted.

The Hottentot raised his head, stared in the direction of the wagon, and increased his pace to a slouching, space destroying run. But he did not answer.

And when he reached the wagon he did not speak but sat down silently beside the fire and ate greedily.

The Major smiled. "Behold, the great one eats," he said softly. "Let no one speak, let no one disturb him. He has done great deeds; his assegai is red with the blood of a thousand enemies; his mouth is stuffed with bacon and a white man's coffee—"

Jim, his cheeks bulging with food, looked up reproachfully.

The Major looked very serious. "And what great discovery have you made, great warrior?" he asked with mock gravity.

Jim tried to speak and nearly choked.

"Swallow, warrior," the Major counseled, "then talk."

Jim gulped noisily, cleared his throat with a long swig of coffee. "See if you can swallow the talk I shall make, Baas."

"I have eaten, Jim," the Major answered,



"but there is room in my belly for many words."

"Well, then, Baas, I have been to the river—"

"And found it in high flood so that it is impassable," the Major interrupted. "I knew it."

"It is in flood," Jim said solemnly, "and it is impassable, but it is not the flood which makes it impassable."

The Major crowded with delight.

"You're a dream of a laddie, Jim," he cried in English. "You always run so also-bloomin'-lutely true to form, don't you know?"

"Me know? Damme yes-no. If I don't see you s'long hullo!" Jim responded breathlessly, almost exhausting his meager stock of English.

"There are crocodiles watching the ford, Jim?" the Major asked in the vernacular.

"Yes, of course. There would be crocodiles."

"Yes, Baas. There are crocodiles, two score of them, with pointed teeth waiting to eat up any who dare to try the ford."

"Only two score, Jim?" the Major exclaimed in disappointed tones. "Surely your eyes are blinded and you did not count aright. What are two score to a warrior like you? We will eat them up—you and I. Come, let us inspan and trek."

He jumped down from the wagon.

"The Baas had best listen to the end of the tale I tell. Men who swallow too hastily have belly aches," Jim said portentously.

The Major sat down on the disselboom of the wagon. "I listen, Jim," he said humbly.

"I went to the river," Jim began again, "first to where it flows near here. It runs between high, rocky banks, Baas, and nowhere save at the ford is a crossing possible. And the river is in flood, Baas, but not yet have the hill floods come down. And, so, as I have said, the flood would



not stop us from crossing. Then I went along the river bank toward the ford, keeping closely under cover—"

"Why, Jim?" the Major interrupted curiously.

"Who shall say, Baas? Save that it is always best to remain unseen in a strange country until it is known whether other men who live in that country are friends or—or crocodiles with pointed teeth.

"And, as I have said, Baas, I came after a little while to the ford; many spear lengths I crawled like a snake upon my belly. At the ford, Baas, I saw two score crocodiles with pointed teeth; aye, and I heard somewhat of their talk."

"I did not know that crocodiles talked, Jim," the Major murmured. "But you were saying?"

"I was saying, Baas," Jim continued gravely, "that two score warriors, armed with assegais, guard the ford."

"Wowe!" the Major exclaimed. "The crocodiles became warriors. What then, Jim?"

"A little I heard them talk, Baas. All night they have waited at the ford—since before starting of the rain they have waited—in order that they might stop a white man and his black dog from crossing."

The Major knit his brows in puzzled thought.

"But they can mean no harm to us, Jim, else they would have come here in the night instead of waiting."

Jim shrugged his shoulders but ventured no reply.

"How long, think you, before the hill floods come down, Jim?"

"Who knows, Baas?" the Hottentot replied with another shrug. "Perhaps not until noon—or tomorrow's noon. Perhaps now. A man might start to cross the river finding the water only knee deep, and be overwhelmed by the flood ere he reached the other side. That you know, Baas."

The Major nodded.

"Saddle Satan, Jim. I will ride to the ford and talk with those black ones who lie in wait for us."

"Best not, Baas," Jim expostulated in alarm. "It is not wise to talk to men whose tempers are as sharp as the spears they carry. Think, Baas; all night they have waited in the cold rain. They are not in the mood for talking."

"Nevertheless, Jim, I shall go and talk with them. Must I saddle Satan myself?"

He walked toward the horse.

Jim sprang to his feet and hurried after him.

"Hasten slowly, Baas," he pleaded. "Au-a! I know you are not afraid of warriors, but these men spoke of a Voice

which ordered them to prevent our crossing the ford. And not even you, Baas, can turn a black man's mind against the wonder workings of their witchdoctors."

"I shall go, Jim," the Major said again, "and arrange for our crossing. If we cannot cross here—and we cannot remain here—maybe they will tell me of another ford."

Reaching into the wagon he brought out Satan's bridle and saddle. Jim took them from him and silently put them on the horse. As he was tightening the girths the low murmur of the river changed suddenly into a loud, sullen roar.

He straightened himself, grinning contentedly.

"With, or without, the warriors' permission, Baas," he said, "we cannot cross now. The floods are down. And look, Baas, here come the warriors."

He pointed in the direction of the ford where a party of warriors suddenly appeared on the skyline, mounting the steep bank leading from the river's ford. They were coming now toward the wagon at a slow, stiff-legged gait.

"The water has got into their bones, Baas," Jim said with a chuckle.

The Major keenly eyed the oncoming warriors; there was something ominous about their silent advance. The Major was reminded somewhat of the tactics of a cat playing with a mouse.

"What does it mean, Jim? Is it this?"

As he spoke, the Major took the red idol from his pocket. The Hottentot looked at it with an expression of disgust and awe commingling.

"Undoubtedly it is that, Baas," he muttered. "It is an evil thing. Give it to them, or throw it away, and let us trek south again."

The Major laughed softly.

"How often, Jim, have you turned aside from following the spoor because the path was beset with thorns? And what joy in living if one treats only a path well-trodden by the feet of men?"

"*Tchat!*" Jim exclaimed and glanced swiftly at the warriors. They were still a good hundred yards away, their pace still slower.

"Hide that thing, Baas," he said. "If they must have one, give them this."

This was one of two clumsy imitations of the Major's idol which Jim had carved during the long hours of uneventful trekking. He had colored it with red paint filched from a kaffir store.

The Major took it and gave the original to Jim.

"Hide it," he said.

"If I were to throw it into the river, Baas—" Jim began.

"I said hide it, not lose it," the Major interrupted sternly. "Now unsaddle Satan. The warriors are close at hand, but you can not, will not see them. Neither shall I. Wait until I speak."

He climbed up into the wagon and seated himself on the driver's seat, facing the west, his back to the warriors. On his knee he placed the idol Jim had carved and looked at it steadily.

The warriors, there were forty of them, swarmed about the wagon now. Some of them were warming themselves at the fire, squatting on their haunches, blowing at the red embers; others stood sullenly about, eyeing the wagon, the horse and mules,



Jim and the white man, with ill concealed curiosity. But their bearing was infinitely more hostile than curious; they bore themselves like men with chips upon their shoulders

and, undoubtedly, they would have welcomed an excuse—no matter how trivial—to color their spear heads with the blood of the Major and Jim, the Hottentot.

Minutes passed.

The Major did not move. Jim, busily grooming the mule, cleverly avoided meeting the stares of the warriors; apparently he was unaware of their presence.

One of them ventured close to the stallion's hind quarters and, not understanding the warning of the twitching ears and thrusting underlip, was guilty of a much greater folly. He pricked the blooded animal's flanks with the point of his assegai.

An outraged squeal, the flashing of hoofs and their thudding impact on the warrior's chest followed with lightning swiftness. The warrior went backward, down, rolled over and over. By some strange chance no bones were broken, his skin, even, was not cut, and the man scrambled hastily to his feet, more distressed by the mocking laughter of his comrades than the pain of the kick.

He shouted threats and abuse at the men who laughed at him; but they only laughed the louder until he, too, was impelled to laugh with them.

Laughter—and death—come very easily

to Africa's black children.

Gradually the laughter subsided, ceased entirely save for a half-smothered chuckle from the man who had been kicked. Last to see the joke he was the last to relinquish it.

Presently all was quiet again. The warriors huddled together now, looking at each other uneasily. Evidently they were greatly puzzled by the attitude of the white man and the black dog, his servant. Doubts arose in their minds. Were the strangers flesh and blood—or figments of their imagination? Or were they, themselves, spirits—invisible, noiseless, without form or substance? How else explain the white man's conduct? All this time he had not moved or given any sign to indicate that he was aware of their presence. Even the laughter had not moved him.

He turned now and looked full at them, through them—apparently not seeing them.

"Jim," he said, "put more wood on the fire."

"Yah, Baas," the Hottentot replied and moved swiftly to obey the order. Looking straight before him, Jim passed through a knot of warriors, guiding his feet so cleverly that he did not even brush against one of the intruders. One deliberately got in his path, menaced him with upraised assegai. Jim did not falter nor turn aside; he would have trodden on the warrior's naked toes had not the man jumped aside with a frightened yelp.

The other warriors shivered. Here and there a man slyly pinched himself, appearing relieved at the ensuing pain.

Having replenished the fire, Jim returned to the horse, passing again through the warriors.

They whispered together.

"At least the horse is no spirit," exclaimed the man who had been kicked.

There were subdued titterings at that and then one of the men—the captain of the party—was pushed to the front and propelled, by men who saw that their path of retreat was clear, toward the Major.

A few yards from the wagon they halted, their assegais a mere nail's thickness from the buttocks of their chosen spokesman.

"*Sauka bona, unlungu!* Good morning, white man," he stammered.

There was no answer. The white man did not look at him.

The leader turned appealingly to his followers; they motioned to him to speak again. He tried to retreat, to back away, but the assegais barred his way, pricked his flesh, drew blood.

"Good morning, Chief," he gasped humbly, desperately.

The Major turned then, a smile of greeting on his face. "Good morning, my father. Good morning, all you people."

"*Au-a!*" they all cried in happy relief. "Greetings, Chief."

They greeted and received greeting from Jim who, squatting on his haunches at the front of the wagon, grinned in happy confidence at his baas. Big beads of sweat rolled down the Hottentot's face; they were not the result of his labor over the horse, but of the severe mental strain he had been under. He had known the temper of the warriors, knew that the game his baas played with them was a dangerous game, knew that a very little thing would have been the signal for his death, and his baas's death.

But his baas's knowledge of the black folk was as great as his own; his baas's ability to use that knowledge was infinitely greater. So the danger was past now. The Major's ruse had succeeded. The warriors were mentally disarmed; they had greeted him as they would a great chief. For the present the Major's word was law.

"What is your name?" the Major asked abruptly.

"Kawiti," the spokesman answered. "I am the son of M'Jamba who is headman of the Kraal of the Voice yonder."

He jerked his thumb in the direction of the kopje.

"And M'Jamba sent you and these others to welcome me to his kraal?"

"Yes, Chief," Kawiti stammered, abashed.

"You lie!" the Major cried. "Or, if you speak truly, where are the gifts M'Jamba sent to me as is the custom? Yet it may be that M'Jamba is very poor and——"

"There is no richer headman in this district than M'Jamba," Kawiti interrupted proudly.

"Then you lied," the Major countered swiftly. "Now what is the truth of it? Let me think." He beat his forehead with his clenched fist. "*Au-a!* I have it. Last night a Voice"—the warriors trembled visibly—"spoke to you, ordering you to watch the ford against my coming. Well? Why are you not at the ford?"

"*Wo-ree!* You know all things, Chief," Kawiti said in awed tones. "Then know you not that the need to watch the ford has passed? But a little while ago the hill floods came down and no man can cross; nor will cross for many days to come."

"And had I tried to cross before the flood waters made the river rise, what then?"

"Then we should have spoken to you and, if you had not listened, the water would have run red with your blood."

"And of yours," the Major said absently.

"Maybe, Chief. But you would not have crossed. As the Voice orders, so we, its servants, perform."

"And what now?" the Major questioned.

"Now we come to escort you to the kraal where you will stay until—" Kawiti hesitated.

"Until the river goes down," the Major prompted.

"Until," Kawiti corrected, "the Voice gives us further orders concerning you."

"And if I chose not to come with you to your father's kraal? What then?"

"You would still come, Lord," Kawiti said firmly. "You are only two; we are two score."

The Major hesitated a moment, then, "Inspan, Jim. We trek for the kraal of M'Jamba," he said.

As he spoke he waved his hand imperiously, knocking the red idol from his knee to the ground.

Kawiti stooped quickly and picked it up; looked at it with idle curiosity and returned it to the Major.

"Aye," the Major said thoughtfully, "we will stay for awhile at the kraal of the Voice. Concerning many things I am as a little child wandering in the dark."

A WEEK passed slowly.

The Major and Jim were housed in two guest huts, fed well, and their animals given every care. To the Major was given the freedom of the kraal save that he was not permitted to go into the council place.

With M'Jamba, the fat, pleasure-loving old headman, the Major was on the best of terms and the people of the kraal reflected their headman's attitude.

In all respects he was treated as an honored guest yet, when he spoke of continuing his journey, he realized that M'Jamba's polite protestations, his urgent entreaty to

honor the kraal still longer with his presence, were but the velvet scabbards hiding the force by which his departure would have been prevented had he insisted on leaving.

Wisely, he never allowed matters to reach that climax. Actually, had he been so minded, the Major had little doubt of his ability to get away unharmed. Armed with revolver and rifle, choosing his time, he could have left; but that way would have meant bloodshed, would have cost him the respect of these people. And that was not the Major's way. He was a man, and a man does not trample upon children who seek to bar his way.

Jim, the philosopher, was quite content to remain at the kraal.

"Here, Baas," he would say, "we are dry and warm at night; there is plenty of food and the beer is good. Until the rains abate somewhat we are better here."

But even Jim's philosophy was shaken when, desiring to set snares for klipspringers on the kopje which overshadowed the kraal, he found his way barred at the gate in the stockade by a party of warriors who ordered him to return to his hut. His contentment vanished now that knowledge that he was a prisoner had been so rudely thrust upon him.

"It is all that red idol's doings, Baas," he complained. "Give it to them and let us go."

The Major shook his head.

"I do not think that these people know anything about the red idol, Jim. And how can I give it to them seeing that I gave it to you to hide?"

"Then I will give it to them."

"No! That you must not do."

"Au-a, Baas! I am afraid. This is a place of witchcraft; they call it the Kraal of the Voice. I am afraid."

"Afraid of a voice, Jim? A voice is only the wind," the Major scoffed. "There is no cause for fear. You should be content. Here we are dry and warm, there is plenty of food and the beer is good."

The Major chuckled at Jim's gloomy face, was silent for a little while. When he spoke again it was in English.



"It's bally funny, Jim, come to think of it. Can't get a word out of these Johnnies. Even old M'Jamba, now—and, my word, how the old blighter can talk—won't tell me about the things I want to know. He shuts up tighter than the well-known clam whenever I talk about the Voice and the reason for keeping us here. As a matter of fact, I believe the old bounder is in mortal terror of the Voice—whatever that is. He's afraid it'll tell him to do something he doesn't want to do. He's bossed by a Voice and a witchdoctor who never seems to appear. And, you know, Jim," the Major let his monocle fall from his eye into the palm of his hand and polished it absently, "I'm beginning to think that when we've discovered the witchdoctor, we'll have discovered everything. What do you think, Jim?"

"Me?" Jim exclaimed. "Godame yes. Think what you say. No?"

The Major nodded.

"Exactly, Jim. And so—Jim?"

"Yah, Baas?"

"You have heard of the witchdoctor, M'Bike?" the Major was talking in the vernacular now.

"Yah, Baas. They talk much of him—with their hands over their mouths. He can turn himself into a baboon, he is a great rain maker, he is the mouthpiece of the spirits."

"And have you heard where this wise one lives?"

"Aye, Baas. In a cave high up in the kopje overlooking the ford."

The Major nodded.

"So they told me. From his cave M'Bike can undoubtedly see the trails leading to the ford for many miles to the north and south. Even if the drums were silent he would know of strangers approaching before they knew down here at the kraal."

"Undoubtedly, Baas," Jim agreed with a grin. "That is no little part of his wisdom."

"I shall talk with this M'Bike, Jim."

Jim shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

"It is folly to thrust a hand into a lion's mouth,

but if the Baas says he will see M'Bike, he will."

"Yes," the Major continued thoughtfully, ignoring Jim's comment. "Tomorrow,

during the great darkness which heralds the dawn, I shall go to the place of M'Bike."

"The guards will stop you," Jim said hopefully.

"The guards sleep at that hour, or at least they shut their eyes, fearing to see spirits."

"But what shall I tell them when they ask for you in the morning, Baas?"

"Say the spirits have taken me, say—say anything. What matter?"

LATE in the afternoon of that same day the witchdoctor, M'Bike, came to the kraal. With him was a man in whose veins flowed the blood of white and black; a man whom the Major instantly recognized—having heard much of him and nothing good—as a vicious half-caste named Maritz. His Boer father had endowed him with a splendid, bull-like physique and low, animal cunning; from his black mother he had gained a great understanding of her people. But whatever good qualities he may have had had been destroyed by the bitterness of his life. The offspring of two races, he was despised by both, a tragic outcast. In time he came to hate those who despised him and applied his strength and craft to deeds of evil. And so men who before had despised him, come to hate and fear him. And on hate and fear he flourished.

He leered now at the Major as he passed by with M'Bike.

"Ach sis, ma-an!" he said. "I will come and talk with you presentlee."

M'Jamba, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, hurried out to greet his exalted visitor.

"Tonight," the witchdoctor began, disdaining any preamble, "you and your people will gather at the council place." His voice was high pitched, nasal, and had a lilting lisp in it. "Last night I saw a vision and it was made known to me that the Voice wished to speak to the people of the kraal. See that you are there and that your ears are open."

"We will be there, O Great One," M'Jamba said meekly, "and our ears will be open. Is the white stranger and his black dog to listen to the voice?"

M'Bike glanced contemptuously at the Major who was standing nearby.

"Aye, let him listen. You guard him well?"

"Well, Great One."

"Yet offer him no hurt, no indignity?"



"As the Voice ordered, so we have performed."

"That is good. So continue until the Voice speaks again concerning him."

He pointed then to Maritz.

"You know this one," he said to M'Jamba. "He is my friend. He comes and goes as he will."

"He is no friend of mine, or of my people," M'Jamba grumbled. "The maidens fear him and——"

"That is sufficient," M'Bike interrupted imperiously. "I have said that he is my friend. But," he turned sharply on Maritz who was grinning evilly, "my friendship can be recalled as easily as it was given. Therefore tread warily and give no cause for offence to the maidens who live here."

Maritz bowed his head in humble submission.

"I go now," said M'Bike and stalked swiftly away.

M'Jamba glared truculently at Maritz, held out his hands in a helpless gesture to the Major, then, shaking his head doubtfully, reentered his hut.

Maritz turned to the Major with a harsh laugh.

"The headman would kill me if he dared."

"I don't see why he doesn't," the Major replied suavely. "It's always best to kill a snake."

"Allehmahtig!" Maritz roared. "For that, Englisher, I will——"

He advanced threateningly, his big clenched fists raised high above his head. He seemed to tower head and shoulders above the Major.

He stopped suddenly. The Major had yawned and stretched himself lazily; the monocle had disappeared and so had the inane expression on his face. His eyes were a cold, steel gray; his mouth indicated a resolute firmness. Also, he was no longer dwarfed by the half-caste; actually he was a fraction of an inch taller. He was slimmer, but his slinness was evidence of perfect physical condition.

"Yes?" he said questioningly.

Maritz laughed ingratiatingly

"We must not quarrel, we two," he said. "It is not wise for two white men to fight where black ones can see."

"We can go into one of the guest huts," the Major said evenly. "Some men hold that there is no disgrace in a white man thrashing a black." He swayed lightly on his feet, but the expected rush did not materialize.

Maritz laughed again, choosing to ignore the insult.

"Ach Gott! I am no fool and you are no fool—yet, for a little while I thought you were one. But now I see that you are verree clever because you make men think you are soft and a fool. So you catch them off guard and—yes, you are clever. I am chilled to the bone by this cursed rain and cold. Let us go in the warm and talk. But wait—your name? Ah, I have it. They call you 'the Major', no? I have heard of you. And me, 'Nigger Maritz.' You have heard of me? Yes?"

"Yes," the Major said shortly, hesitated a moment and then led the way to his hut.

Entering, Maritz sat down close to the red embers of the fire, facing the doorway. The Major, standing up, leaned against the wall, his hands in his pockets.

"Why are you here, Mister Major?" Maritz began abruptly. "Here there are no diamonds."

"I am here because they will not let me go," the Major answered slowly.

Maritz considered this for a moment. "Ah, of course. But why do you travel this way. The police? Maybe they are after you?"

The Major nodded and Maritz rubbed his hands together.

"Yes, I see. It is a pity. You have brains. You should do bigger things than cheating the Syndicate out of diamonds."



"Such as?"
"O-ah! There are many things. Come in with me and I will——"

The Major's eyes narrowed

and Maritz smoothly passed on to something else.

"So you do not know why they keep you here, eh?"

"No, unless it is this."

The Major pulled from his right hand pocket and held out for the other's inspection the idol Jim had made.

"Are you playing the fool with me, Mister Major?" Maritz asked as he handed the idol back to the Major. "What has that oogy thing got to do with it?"

"Who knows? But I happened to see the original of this little fellow. A curio collector in Durban had it; he'd just bought it from a Portuguese half-caste who appeared to be frightened out of his

wits by it. He said it was the emblem—if you know what I mean?—of a secret society which is plotting to rule Africa. Of course that's all bosh; at least I thought it was then. Anyway, it was a good yarn and it struck me—you see what a big belly it has—that if it were hollow it'd be a good place to hide 'stones'. So I had Jim—my servant, you know—carve one like it. He made it in two pieces, so they could be glued together, with the belly hollow. No one would ever think of looking for stones there, would they? Specially not after hearing my little yarn about the secret society. Jolly smart, eh? Why, a detective in Kimberley had the little red cuss in his hands when he was on the trail of stolen diamonds; two big ones they were. They'd just about fill the insides of this little chappy. But of course the detective never thought of examining him very closely. Why should he? So he gave him back to me—just as you did! But something made him suspicious—perhaps Jim got drunk and talked; he does, you know—and the detective came looking for me again. But I had flown; dear me, yes. I was on my way north."

A light of greed came into Maritz's eyes. His fingers opened and closed convulsively.

"Ach!" he murmured. "You are vere clever. So the policeman held it in his hands, and I held it in mine. Let me see it again."

The Major laughed and put the idol back in his pocket.

"Not bloomin' likely," he said.

Maritz scowled, keeping his temper with an effort.

"You do not trust me?" he questioned.

"If you knew me better—"

"I know you well; that is why I do not trust you," the Major said and his hand dropped carelessly on to the butt of his revolver.

"Why do you think M'Jamba keeps you here because of the idol?" Maritz asked. "Do you think they care about diamonds?"

"No; not that at all, my dear chap. I thought, you see, that they might have discovered in some uncanny way that I had it and think it's the real idol. Why then, if the story about it is true—well, don't you see?"

"It's true, all right," Maritz said heavily. "M'Bike is a member of the society; so am I. Well, M'Bike got word by drum talk that you and your nigger were to be stopped. And so you were stopped. See?"

"Amusin', very. Go on."

"M'Bike doesn't know anything about the red idol yet, but he will know as soon as a messenger comes. Maybe that messenger'll come tonight. You won't live very long after that. So—give the idol to me now, just as it is, and I'll take it to M'Bike and explain everything. You'll be free to go, then, by morning."

He held out his hand, scowling as the Major laughed derisively.

"It won't do at all, 'Ritzy, old dear. Quite a weak effort on your part, if I may say so. Supposin' your story to be true—about the society and all that—what power have you over M'Bike? I mean—if he would accept your explanation, why wouldn't he accept mine?"

"Accept yours? Don't be a *verdoemte* fool. How can you go to talk to him? They won't let you leave the kraal."

The Major's face fell.

"I'd forgotten that."

"So you'll let me do it for you. No? You see, Mister Major," Maritz lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper, "M'Bike does everything I tell him. He thinks I'm a member of the society for the same reason he is. Tehat! As if I care who rules this land—nigger or white. No matter; I've done a lot for M'Bike. I found the cave in the kopje there; the ancients used to work gold from it, I think. There are galleries running back into the hill and—Never mind that. I put M'Bike up to a lot of tricks which make these superstitious niggers think he is a worker of big magic.

And in return for it M'Bike does what I tell him.



"Listen; just to prove I'm telling no lies. Eighty miles or so east of here there's a white settler and his wife and daughter.

His name is Johnson. The niggers call him N'dblovu. Almighty! He's as strong as an elephant; haven't I felt the weight of his fist? He beat me with a sjambok before all his niggers; and they laughed and threw filth at me. And all because I dared to look at his white-faced daughter."

Maritz's eyes contracted to pin points; he muttered a jumble of threats in the vernacular. At that moment he was all native; an evil blood lust had full control of him.

"Yes?" the Major questioned softly.

"As soon as I was freed I rode here," Maritz continued, "and talked with M'Bike, gave him a message from the society." He laughed harshly. "He believed it—the fool—and so tonight the Voice will talk and in two days the warriors of this kraal will leave for the place of Johnson and wipe him out. He and all that he has will be destroyed. And my hands will be clean. None can point the finger of guilt at me."

"You forgot me," the Major commented mildly.

"You! Don't you understand yet? Unless you see eye to eye with me, you will die also. And if you lived and told all that I have told you, who would believe you? What proof have you?"

"If I thought it any good to kill you—" the Major said and drew his revolver a little way from its holster.

Maritz did not flinch, laughed at the threat.

"It would do no good," he boasted. "Also—see how well I know you—you can not kill a man in cold blood."

The Major's hand dropped from his revolver.

"I do not kill you," he said in a hollow voice, "because it has suddenly come to me that the time of your death is at hand but that I am not the instrument."

Maritz shivered. He was not entirely free from the superstitious fears of his mother's people.

"Why talk of death?" he said and swallowed hard. "Tell me: Have I not proved my power over M'Bike? And I proved my cleverness? He sends out these warriors of M'Jamba, thinking to further the work of the society, little thinking that I use him for my revenge."

"Well?"

"Well!" Maritz repeated sarcastically. "Suppose that I whisper into M'Bike's ear that you are a spy? Au-a! We talk too much. Give me the idol and I will arrange for you to be set free. If you do not give it, then I will take it."

"If you can take, why beg?"

"Because there is no time to waste; because any moment further word may come to M'Bike concerning you and the opportunity be lost."

"But not my opportunity. When they find that the idol I carry is only a copy—they will set me free."

"You think so?" Maritz sneered. "And what can you do to make M'Bike believe that the thing is not the real one? And I shall not be silent."

"I still think you are bluffing, 'Ritzzy. If

you are in such a hurry and can take what you want, why don't you take it now?"

"Don't be a fool, ma-an. We are much of a size, we two. You can draw your gun and shoot as quickly—perhaps quicker than I. If I go out and call warriors to help me they will not listen; I have no power over them except through M'Bike and to reach M'Bike is not always possible. Not until tomorrow can I talk with him and then he would have to give word to M'Jamba through the Voice. And so, because I am clever I do not take risks. Therefore I bargain with you, Mister Major. Give me the diamonds——"

"Diamonds?" the Major echoed blankly.

"The red idol, then, Mister Major. The red idol with a belly fat enough to hold two large stones."

"No!" the Major said decidedly. "I won't give it to you now. But I'll tell you what, 'Ritzzy. Give me until noon tomorrow and if M'Bike hasn't sent word to let me go free by that time I'll give you the idol."

"And all that it contains?"

The Major appeared confused.

"You're deuced clever, 'Ritzzy. Can't put anything over on you. All right—I promise. I'll give you the idol and all that it now contains."

"Don't try any tricks, Mister Major," he warned as he walked toward the door of the hut.

"I won't," the Major said fervently.

A COCK crowed—anticipating by two full hours the break of day; hens clucked sleepily; a dog barked, then yapped shrilly as its master kicked it; the oxen in the cattle kraal lowed protestingly.

Then all was silent again.

A dark shadow crawled slowly over the ground, entered a hut and there, in the fire glow, took form and substance.

"It is time, Baas," whispered Jim, the Hottentot, and shook the Major into wakefulness.

The white man dressed quickly, every faculty on the alert. When he was fully dressed, revolver in holster, heavy cartridge belt about his waist, he went to the door of the hut and peered into the darkness, listening attentively.

"It is well, Jim," he said quietly as he came back to the fire, sitting down and spreading his hands to its warmth. "In a little while I will go. First tell me what the Voice said to the people of the kraal."

"Au-a, Baas. I was glad you were not there. You would have said things that

would have caused our death—of that I am sure. The Voice ordered the warriors



of M'Jamba to go to the place of a white man and wipe him out. The Voice said that he, and his people, were enemies of the Great Spirits."

"And how liked M'Jamba and the people

this command, Jim?"

"Not well, I think, Baas. But they will obey—not daring to disobey. In two days they set out."

"From whence sounded the Voice, Jim?"

"There is a clump of thorn bush growing out from the kopje just beyond the reach of a tall man. The Voice seemed to speak from behind those bushes."

"And you were not afraid of the Voice, Jim?"

The Hottentot chuckled softly.

"The voice, Baas, was the voice like that of a very old man who had an impediment in his speech."

"Such as a lisp, Jim?"

"Au-a! You heard, Baas? You were there after all?"

"I was not there, Jim. I went to sleep as I said I would. But I have heard that voice before."

Jim nodded.

"Was the man Maritz at the council place, Jim?"

"Yah, Baas. He was drinking much with the young men—making them drunk. He was drunk also, but only his legs. His head, I think, was not drunk."

The Major rose to his feet.

"I go now, Jim," he said. "When men ask for me in the morning, say that baboons came and carried me away. Say that one of the baboons talked—with a lisp. Be sure the man Maritz hears of it. And when Maritz leaves the kraal, follow him if you can. I think that no one will say you nay; the warriors will be busy elsewhere, preparing for their trek. Now I go."

"I will come with you, Baas, as far as the stockade."

Noiselessly they left the hut and made their way slowly through a darkness intensified by a thick, mist-like rain.

A dog sniffed at Jim's ankles, commenced a low, threatening growl, and then was still. Jim had stooped quickly and his

hands were very powerful.

A fire gleamed dimly through the darkness. It was straight ahead of them. As they neared they saw the guard of the opening in the stockade squatting about the fire, blankets draped over their shoulders, talking excitedly about the forthcoming raid on the place of the white man.

The Major halted abruptly. The warriors were all facing toward the opening in the stockade and to reach that opening he would have to cross a bar of fire light.

"Wait, Baas," Jim whispered. "I will make them hide their eyes."

The Major was suddenly conscious that Jim had left him. He went forward slowly, very slowly, until he came almost within the radius of the fire light. And there he halted again, the opening in the stockade barely six feet distant.

To the right and behind the guards suddenly sounded a loud rustling noise as if some wild beasts were trying to break through the stockade; the barking of a dog ape followed.

As one man the warriors covered their faces with their blankets fearing that M'Bike the Wise One was about to work a great wonder working, fearing to see—and so die—a manifestation of the spirits.

The Major sped forward, passed through the gate and was swallowed up by the night before the warriors dared to uncover and question each other in awed tones.

DAWN came swiftly, gray clouds evaporating before a yellow molten sun. Shafts of light penetrated into the cave of M'Bike, smothering the pale flames of the fire.

The witchdoctor sat erect, stretching himself, wincing with the stiffness of old age. He rubbed his rheumy eyes and then crawled on hands and knees closer to the fire. And there he sat, his kaross draped about him, blinking stupidly at the flames, shivering like a mangy cur. At this, his moment of awakening, M'Bike was only a decrepit old man—an object of pity rather than fear.

The light in the cave grew stronger and, suddenly, M'Bike was conscious that some one was sitting opposite him.

"Au-a!" he exclaimed fearfully. "What make you here, white man? Do you mean to kill me? Take care—" his voice quavered—"I am not unprotected. The spirits —"

The Major laughed mockingly.

"I am not to be frightened by talk of spirits," he said. "Neither have I come to

kill you. I come only to talk. But sit closer to the fire—old bones are cold bones."

M'Bike splashed water from a nearby gourd into his face. He gasped at the coldness of it, but when he again looked at the Major his eyes were brighter. He looked keenly at the Major and nodded approval.

"I think you are a man," he said. "And I think, at least I have been told, that you are a friend of us black ones. Speak then; you will not lie."

"And you will not?"

"What need?"

"Listen. I will tell you what I know. You dream of the days when your people were all powerful, when the white men were unknown.



And you work for the return of those days, forgetting that the evil of those days was greater than the present evil, forgetting that blood ran freely where now all is

peace."

"And what good is peace, white man?" M'Bike said sharply. "Our men are becoming weaklings. White men are everywhere and father men like Maritz. Wowe! Better that the blood of my people be spilled than it should be so diluted."

"True," the Major agreed sadly. "The white men are greatly to blame in many things. Still, some day you people may again be supreme in this land, but never if fools like you disobey the orders of the drums."

"I have never disobeyed, white man," said M'Bike.

"Say you so," the Major said sharply. "Then whence come the orders?"

"I do not know," M'Bike peered at the Major with trouble filled eyes. "Sometimes from the north, sometimes from the south, sometimes—"

He paused irresolutely.

"And sometimes the man Maritz whispers in your ears," the Major prompted.

"True. We work together. He is wise, and if the beer be good, what matter the color of the pot?"

"And are you so sure the beer is good? So sure that the man Maritz works for the good of your people? Think well of the many things he has told you to do. In what way have your people been helped?

Always his word is 'Kill'. How does that help?"

"The enemies of the Spirits must be killed," M'Bike muttered.

"Tchat! And have the drums ever bidden you kill?" The Major added in English, "I'll be done if they have."

"No," M'Bike said uncertainly. "I have wondered at that."

The Major's eyes gleamed.

"Then think of the things Maritz has ordered. Who has gained but Maritz? Au-a! He uses you for his own ends."

"If I thought that," M'Bike began and rocked back and forth, pulling at his fingers making the joints crack. "Yet," he continued presently, "he has assisted me in many ways."

"I know," the Major interrupted wearily. "He showed you this cave, he showed you the passage which ends near the council place. He taught you how to play you were the Voice of the Spirits; he taught you many tricks whereby you can throw dust in the eyes of the people."

"You know too much, white man," M'Bike said wrathfully.

"But I have told no one—yet," the Major said softly.

"Nor will not?" M'Bike implored, seeing his power slipping from him, fearing still more the laughter of the people of the kraal.

"Nor will not—unless you fail to see your folly."

"I am in the dark; I can not see. But my ears are open. Speak."

The Major sighed with relief.

"Then listen again. The drums ordered you to stop me—and it was done. Yet you do not know why that order came. Have you heard of this?"

He took out the red image and handed it to M'Bike.

The old man blinked uncertainly, turned it over and over, then clutched it tightly to his bony chest.

"I have heard of it; it is strong magic."

"And that is all you know?"

"All."

The Major was disappointed. He had hoped to discover more about the red idol.

"By chance," he said slowly, feeling his way with care, "that thing came into my hands. You were bidden to stop me because men seek it—the men whose orders come to you by the drums. Soon they will come here and ask for it. I give it now to you that the honor of returning it may be yours. But, heed this, now. I told the man Maritz that that thing was only an

imitation, that it was hollow and had two diamonds hidden in its belly. He asked for it, begged for it, bargained with me, promised to free me, to make you let me go, if I would give it to him.

"In a little while, I think, he will come here. The Hottentot, who is my servant, will have told him that you carried me off in the night. He will ask for the idol—listen to him—sift out his lies—watch him. And then judge how great has been your folly to obey the behests of such a man. Now bind me that we may play the game properly."

Muttering to himself M'Bike rose and bound the Major hand and foot, following the Major's instructions so that though the white man appeared to be tightly bound he could readily free himself.

Then M'Bike sat down again, staring fixedly at the idol as if hoping that it would come to life and assure him that he was pursuing the right course.

The cave grew lighter. M'Bike did not move, did not speak, did not take his eyes from the idol. The Major watched him anxiously.

The ringing sound of nailed boots on solid rock sounded just outside the cave, a grotesque shadow was thrown on the floor.

M'Bike covered the idol with his kaross.

A moment later Maritz entered the cave and looked doubtfully at the witchdoctor, then at the Major. Seeing that the latter was bound he burst into laughter.

"Ach sis, ma-an?" he shouted gleefully. "Did I not tell you there was danger in waiting?"

He turned his back on the white man and squatted on his haunches close to M'Bike.

"How comes the white man here—and bound?" he asked.

"Because the Voice so ordered it."

"Why? Do not talk to me of the Voice."

"In the night the drums spoke," M'Bike said smoothly, "and I obeyed their orders."

"I did not hear the drums," Maritz said suspiciously.

"Doubtless you were asleep. I never sleep."

Maritz laughed.

"And said the drums anything about an idol?"

"Aye—they told me to take it from him."

"Good." Maritz rubbed his hands together. "It was for that I came here. You are to give it to me."

He held out his hands.

"The drums did not say that," M'Bike objected.

"Fool. How can the drums tell everything. I order you, that is enough. Give me."

The witchdoctor fumbled nervously with his kaross then, greatly reluctant, handed the idol over to Maritz.

"Almighty!" Maritz shouted in English as he jumped to his feet. "You are clever, Mister Major, but I am cleverer. In the belly you said, yes?"

He looked carefully at the idol, then craftily at the Major.

"It may be that you have played a trick on me," he continued. "Maybe you took the stones out after I left you yesterday. I will see now. If they have gone—you will pray for death a thousand times before you die."

He squatted down again, put the idol on the floor and taking out a large knife stabbed at the idol with its stout blade, endeavoring to split it open.

"It is well glued together," the Major said and chuckled.

M'Bike, seeing in the half-caste's action an act of great sacrilege, jumped to his feet and with hoarse cries of rage rushed at Maritz, clawing at him with talon-like fingers.

Cursing, the half-caste rose and with a wide sweep of his powerful arms sent M'Bike hurtling from him. M'Bike rushed back to the attack, deaf to Maritz's threats and expostulations, grappling with him, clinging to him with his arms and skinny legs.

"Old fool!" Maritz roared. "Let go, let go."

He brought the haft of his knife down on the old man's head with stunning force and M'Bike dropped senseless to the ground just as the Major rushed to his assistance.

Maritz turned and grappled with him, caught hold of the Major's wrists. They stood thus for a moment, glaring wildly at each other. Then Maritz's eyes dropped and the Major laughed softly.

"You slim devil!" Maritz cursed and then, exerting all his force, endeavored to bend the Major's arms, attempted to break them.

The Major's knees bent, as he felt as if



he would collapse under the strain. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. But he laughed merrily.

Maritz looked at him with astonishment, relaxed for a moment his awful strain. When he tried to exert it again he found that he had lost his advantage. The Major had succeeded in forcing his hands lower, thus getting a better leverage.

Maritz loosed his hold on the Major's left hand intending to concentrate all his strength on the right. As he did so the Major swung hard for his stomach. Maritz doubled up, but held on grimly. Suddenly he gave ground, pulling the Major off his balance and at the same time kicked him viciously below the knee.

The Major stumbled and fell headlong on top of M'Bike, nauseated by the pain.

Swearing triumphantly Maritz dropped on top of him, the knife flashed in his hand.

Before he could drive it home, the Major turned over on his back and caught hold of Maritz's wrist, staying the blow. They struggled furiously, rolling over and over, Maritz attempting to strike his knife home, the Major exerting all his strength to prevent it.

The Major was on his back now, Maritz stooping astride him. One of Maritz's hands was closing about the Major's wind-pipe; the other, the one holding the knife, was descending slowly, implacably, despite the Major's frenzied efforts to ward it off.

Black spots floated before the Major's eyes—the pressure on his wind-pipe increased—the light seemed to grow very dim—the cave, Maritz, everything material seemed to be dissolving. He felt consciousness slipping from him.

He laughed, a harsh croaking laugh, and relaxed suddenly.

Maritz was thrown off his balance, almost pitched forward on his face; the knife dropped from his hand as he strained to recover himself.

And at that moment the Major suddenly shifted his grip, holding on to the sleeves of Maritz's thick shirt, and he doubled up his legs, planting his feet in the half-caste's belly. Then with a jerk he straightened his legs, pulling forward at the same time.

Maritz went flying through the air, floundering grotesquely, landing on his head with a dull crack.

His legs twitched, he tried to draw his feet up under him, tried to rise, groaned and slumped forward again.

The Major rose to his feet and stood swaying uncertainly; fingering his bruised throat, breathing painfully; tugging ineffectively at the revolver in his holster.

He peered about the cave, feeling that he was alone in the world—meteors flashed past him at incredible speed. He ducked to avoid them; one was heading straight for him. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again he saw M'Bike the witchdoctor bending over Maritz. A knife flashed in the old man's hands.

"You have made a mock of me," M'Bike screamed, "dog that you are!"

The knife dropped downward. When it rose again it was stained with red. M'Bike struck again and again.

Like a man in a dream the Major stumbled forward.

"You mustn't do that really, old fellow," he mumbled in English.

The witchdoctor looked up and laughed harshly.

"He is dead now, white man," he said contentedly. "This dog who has shamed me, who lied to me, who caused me to bid my people do evil things—he is dead. Four times he marred the idol with his knife—see?" He held out the idol, pointing to the marks Maritz had made. "Four times the knife drank his blood. Truly, the idol is avenged; and I, also, am avenged. He is dead and my folly is a thing of the past. I see with a clear eye now, thanks to you, white man."

He rose to his feet and taking the Major by the arm led him to the cave's opening and made him sit in the sun. From a small gourd he took a handful of spicy smelling ointment and with this he skillfully massaged the Major's throat.

"All my wisdom does not consist of tricks," he chuckled.

"It is good, M'Bike," the Major said presently. "And now what?"

"A little while ago," M'Bike said slowly, "it came to me that it would be well to kill you; you know too much, white man. Then a wiser voice spoke to me. You have shown that you are my friend and the friend of all black ones. You have pointed out evil and helped to rectify it. Therefore I make a bargain with you: For my part I promise to let you go free if you will promise to keep secret the things you know concerning me."

"You do not promise enough, M'Bike," the Major answered.

"What else, then?" M'Bike asked.

"You must promise not to send the people of M'Jamba on any errands of death; you must excuse them from the task you put upon them only yesterday."

"But of course," M'Bike assented

promptly. "The orders of death came from Maritz. He is now dead—there will be no more such orders."

"It is agreed then," the Major said slowly.

M'Bike rose to his feet.

"Where go you?" the Major asked.

"I go to speak to the people of the kraal; as the Voice. I go to give them orders concerning you; to go to recall the order that was given yesternight. Come with me, if you will, and listen."

"There is no need for you to go," the Major said slowly.

M'Bike looked at him sharply.

"No?"

"No. This morning, before you awoke, I crept down the passageway which leads through the hill. To the opening that is close to the Kraal's council place I came. And there I saw M'Jamba and certain of the old men talking together. They were greatly worried, I think, concerning the order to kill the Voice had given them.

"And so I comforted them. Unseen, I spoke to them. They thought I was the Voice. I told them there was to be no more killing. I said—and mark this well M'Bike—that if at any future time the Voice spoke of killing then they would know that that was an evil voice and not

the Voice of the Spirits. Such a voice they were to disobey; if they heard such a voice they were to come to the cave of M'Bike and there search for what they would find. Also, I said that the white man and his Hottentot servant were free



to go when they would."

M'Bike's eyes blazed wrathfully; expressions of anger, chagrin and admiration struggled for mastery.

Presently he smiled.

"Au-a," he said softly. "You are all wise; you could not lose."

He flung his skin kaross about the Major's shoulders.

"Take it," he said, "You are worthy of it; it is worthy of you. I am only a child,

lacking complete understanding." He buried his face in his hands.

"But your heart is right, your feet are now set upon the right path!" the Major said gravely. He rose, thoughtfully stroking the magnificent kaross. A moment he stood there, looking down pitifully at the old man.

Then he stooped and placed the kaross on the ground beside M'Bike.

A moment later he had left the cave and was striding quickly down the hill toward the kraal.

IT WAS high noon. All the people of the kraal were at the ford to see the crossing of the white man and the Hottentot, his servant. The flood waters had passed and though the river was high, it was fordable.

The sorrow M'Jamba's people felt at the departure of this white man who had so quickly won a place in their affections, was more than counterbalanced by their joy at the removal of the shadow under which they had formerly lived. Assured that their young men would never again be sent out to kill, relieved of the fear of retribution, they could spend the days in feasting and dancing; in marriage and the giving of marriage. Their crops would prosper, their herd increase. Freed of the shadow they could—as children of the sun should—live for the day's pleasures with no thought of the morrow.

The ford crossed, the young men who had acted as pilots liberally rewarded, the Major shouted fast farewells to the people on the other side, waved to a tiny black speck sitting outside a cave high up in the kopje, then climbed up into the driver's seat of the tented wagon and gathered up the reins in his powerful hands.

"Ah, there!" shouted Jim the Hottentot and cracked his long whip.

The mules broke into a canter.

The Major brought them round in a sweeping arc and a moment later the wagon hit the trail heading north.

"We are well rid of that place, Baas," said Jim. "Had the Voice not spoken this morning not even your wisdom, I think, could have saved us. The man Maritz hated us and—"

"The man Maritz is dead, Jim," the Major said absently. "And I was the voice which spoke this morning."

"Au-a!" murmured Jim. "I should have known. Great is my Baas and I—I am his servant."



NINETEEN

By ROMAINE H. LOWDERMILK

Author of "Honest Endeavor," "Tucker's Top Hand," etc.

NINETEEN ISN'T SO OLD, AT THAT, BUT IT WAS THE AGE AT WHICH KID FURLONG REALLY BECAME A MAN—AND THAT MEANS A LOT IN THE COW COUNTRY

JAMES T. FURLONG, variously known as "The Kid" and "Runt" had been in the Big Basin country six years when Haze Dawson voiced a conclusion that aptly summed up the community opinion.

"That ornry Kid kain't git along with people," Haze declared. "He c'n git along with a hoss er a cow an' mebbly a dog, but when it comes to folks—well, he just won't try. He's snappy an' mean, a downright bad hombre. When he gits in a fuss with yuh he won't fight, but just yuh watch out! He'll git even in some underhand coyote way if it takes a year—two years. But I'd just as soon hire him when I need a hand as anybody, for he's sure a good worker anywhere yuh put 'im. I just kain't make 'im out."

The Kid was about thirteen when he first showed up in the Basin Country. His father seemed to be seeking a location for a goat ranch or a place to start a little bunch of cattle, for he made several inquiries. The Kid stayed with the light wagon in which they were traveling and the day they camped near Sam Tilt's place he threw stones at the Tilt children who trooped out, and ordered them to keep away. He sat by the camp fire, a shotgun across his lap when the father was not in camp.

The day they pulled out, one of the chickens escaped from the coop wired to

the rear of the wagon and flew over the team. They were on a steep grade at the time and in the course of the runaway the wagon was upset and one horse killed. The boy escaped with scarcely a bruise, but his father was dead. Some said it was heart failure, others that his back was broken. The boy stood dry-eyed and sullen as Sam Tilt and two of his cowboys, together with a delegation from the J-slash-T and several women of the district, laid the man to rest in a grave upon the hill where he had met his fate.

When the rite was over the neighbors stood in an embarrassed manner and wondered what ought to be done about the boy. He glared at them defiantly, holding the remaining horse by the bridle as if fearful lest they take it from him.

"Ya think ya're goin' ter see me cry," he challenged, his eyes suspicious, a hint of hardness already about his young mouth. "Well, I ain't goin' to. Can't nobody make me cry."

Mrs. Tilt who was rearing a family of five attempted to comfort him. "Don't be afraid of us, Sonny," she coaxed. "We want to help you find a nice home amongst us. We want to be friends."

He jerked away from her, dodging as though from a blow. "Keep away from me," he warned. "Ya'd lick me fer sumthin' I never done, then lick me some more

ter make me stop cryin'. I know. But," he stated boastfully, "can't nobody make me cry now. My paw, he even got afeard ter lick me. Ain't no womern goin' ter baby me, neither."

It was plain that the boy had been raised hard.

But in the end Sam Tilt persuaded the boy to accompany them to their home where he remained for a week, hostile and aloof, until they got him a job helping the cook on the fall roundup. He kept the pony, Blue, jealously apart from the Tilt horses and set off, following Sam, and riding bareback the twenty miles to the Pitchfork where his work was to commence. He did not utter a word the entire way.

When the roundup was over the foreman of the Pitchfork set him to choring around the ranch. He was no model boy. He hated to get up mornings, he hated to go to bed nights. He shirked where he could and, if intrusted with some rather important duty, forgot it. He was suspicious, unfriendly and brazenly defiant. The foreman and cowboys of the Pitchfork, accustomed to handling headstrong colts, treated him much as they would a stubborn bronc. A little firmness, short stints of labor, and plenty of time to himself in which he could reason out his own shortcomings or go on getting wilder just as he chose. He spent every idle moment reading stories about cowboys.

In the spring the boy turned fourteen. The Pitchfork recommended him to the J-slash-T who needed a nighthawk and sighed with relief.

When he became accustomed to his new duties he did better, he seemed to be taking an interest in it, for the job kept him long hours in the saddle. He liked the riding and the solitary task of herding horses. He stayed with the J-slash-T a year, doing whatever anyone else did not want to do. He was a hewer of wood, a packer of water and a cutter of posts. He opened gates, wrangled horses and drove the team that hauled rock-salt and barbed-wire. The cowboys began to make him a butt of their pleasantries and he resented it. Then they began to tease him.

About that time he passed his fifteenth birthday. No one knew of it but himself. Somehow he got to thinking of the Tilt family and a vague sense of gratitude stirred within him. He remembered Annie Tilt, she of the golden braids and the blue eyes. Annie had tried to give him a doll when he was at their place that week and he had hit her with a chunk of wood. He

regretted that a little. He decided to go over and tell her he was sorry.

It was spring. Green grass was shooting up everywhere, fox-tail, Indian wheat and filaree. He studied certain advertisements depicting high-school youths in fine raiment. He went to town and made a few purchases from the savings left from the fifteen dollars a month he was drawing after paying for the new saddle and his spurs. For three days he was a changed youth.

"The Kid's gittin' tamed down," remarked Slim Hackett, one of the three cowboys who constituted the ranch's winter force. "Ef he keeps on improvin' like he has lately 'twon't be no time till he's pretty nigh half human."

"Tell yuh what," broke in Doc Steele eagerly, "he was ridin' thet new saddle of his today with the stirrup fenders clean down on the bar. When I told 'im he'd ort t' fix 'em like mine, danged ef he didn't git right down an' pull 'em up where they belonged. Any other time he'd cussed me for a week an' probly cut the seat outa my saddle ter git even."

Barney Ellerton had been gazing at the Kid reflectively. The Kid was well out of hearing so he voiced his thoughts. "Sometimes I think the Kid'll turn out all right; other times I think he's one of them kind what's born ter be hung."

On Sunday the Kid donned his new clothes. Alone in the bunkhouse he put on the pair of college-style trousers, which at that period were of an extremely peg-top design; replaced his run-over cowboy boots with a pair of new and shining patent-leather shoes; pulled on the heavy white sweater with the thick roll collar and placed upon his head a small hat of a light green color having a fancy band. He admired himself in the small mirror, holding it at different heights that he might view the various portions of his new outfit. He removed the hat and combed his hair, for it just dawned upon him that it had not been cut since late in the fall and hung prominently below the green brim.

Tidied to his satisfaction the Kid strolled out, heading straight for the corral and the horse he had previously saddled.

"Hey, cowboys!" Slim Hackett roared delightedly as he caught sight of the Kid.



"Lookey what the cat's drug in!"

Doc Steele and Barney Ellerton straggled out from the sunny side of the barn and halted in amazement.

The Kid, conscious of their gaze, walked stiffly toward his horse. But the new shoes began to feel fearfully long and shiny, the college pants very flappy and thin, the white sweater extremely prominent and warm.

"What a hat!" groaned Barney.

"Them shoes!" exclaimed Doc.

"I'm goin' t' shoot a hole through that hat," yelled Slim. "Hold 'im, fellers, till I gits my gun."

Doc and Barney made a rush for the Kid while Slim galloped toward the bunk house.

"Hey, leave me be," snarled the Kid, grabbing off his hat and running blindly. "Leave me be, ya fellas. Dadgummit——"

They headed him off at the corral. He wheeled and attempted to dodge past when his new shoes slipped in the slick wet litter and he went down, Barney and Doc upon him.

"Hold 'im, cowboys," Slim encouraged, coming on the run, revolver in hand. "Stay with 'im!"

In the scrimmage that followed, the white sweater became stained with corral mud, the wide trousers spotted and the new shoes scuffed. Finally someone sent the hat flying into the air. Slim gleefully banged away at it.

"Jus' an air-hole, Kid," he said half apologetically when they let the Kid up.

Had he known, the Kid would have realized that this horse-play marked the beginning of his being accepted as a fellow human being. But he was not built that way, his early experience had all been to the contrary and he dropped back. His improvement slipped from him like a cloak and he went back, back farther than before. He harbored revenge. Cursing them he shuffled to the bunkhouse, brushing straw and litter from his sweater and halting to rub with his thumb the scuffed places on the shining shoes. The glare he cast at the three cowboys caused them to glance speculatively at each other.

"Was pretty tough," Doc Steele admitted thoughtfully.

Doc, Barney and Slim figured up the cost of the things and gave the Kid that amount. He accepted the money, grabbing it insolently and stuffing it into his pocket. He did not thank them, nor had they expected him to.

"Aw, we was only tryin' ter have some fun," Slim explained awkwardly. "Buy

yerself a new layout. We—we didn't mean no harm."

The Kid would not speak to any of them for a week.

One of Slim's stirrup straps came loose while he was riding a colt and he was bucked off. Examination showed that the lacing had been pulled out in such a way as to leave it ready to drop at the first emergency. Doc, who had put in all his spare time that winter making an eight-plait rawhide rope, the wonder of the community, found it cut straight across at three places. And then it was almost a year later when Barney Ellerton got off his horse at Indian Spring and a stone, flung from the rim above, took the horse on the rump and sent it scurrying homeward. Barney walked ten miles that time.

The Kid had quit the J-slash-A and was working for the Diamond A at the time of the occurrence and upon inquiry Barney found that he had been riding in the vicinity of Indian Spring on the day Barney's horse left him, and Barney remembered the green hat and the white sweater.

"More'n a year," Barney declared in amazement. "That Kid held his grudge more'n a year, layin' fer me all that time!"

Work was not always plentiful. Sometimes the Kid saddled up Blue and rode from ranch to ranch seeking a job. Spring and fall roundups always occasioned a need for men, but at other times unless there was special beef gathering or range branding to do there was little use for cow hands. At such slack times the Kid cut posts or built fences. In his reading he found out that if he established a residence on a piece of open Government land he could hold that land by squatter's right until such a time as he became of age and privileged to file on it in the regular manner. So in a slack season he settled on a choice strip below Indian Spring and erected the usual claim shanty. He was scarcely seventeen but he did a creditable job.

In a vague way the Kid longed some day to have a home. The fear and distrust of mankind instilled into him during his childhood made his contacts with his fellows increasingly disappointing. So it was no hardship to spend his idle time on his little claim. He cut posts against the time he would have money to buy wire, he put up a pole corral, a rock and mud fireplace and made a rug of grain sacking. In his gropings the Kid was beginning to try to make something out of nothing. The absolute zero from which he was attempting to create something was not only the raw land

of his claim but—himself. He was not aware of it, but the instinct of humanity was not dead within him. There was still hope for reclamation. He paid ten dollars to register a brand of his own against the time he would have a few cattle.

His activities were viewed with distaste by the cowmen of Big Basin. It is one thing to have a morose, vengeful cowhand in your employ whom you can fire any time you wish; and quite another to have him establishing a place of his own in the heart of the open range. Once let him start a bunch of cattle and no man's calves would be safe; he would ride day and night, steal and slaughter right and left to increase his herd. They set in to freeze him out.

No longer could the Kid secure employment easily. Only at roundup time when men were in demand could he earn anything. He worked one winter in town for a transfer company.

He got work for the spring roundup with the Flowerpot, the biggest outfit of them all. The Kid had just turned nineteen. He had outgrown both nicknames, Kid and Runt, for he was an agile athletic young man, tough physically and mentally, his face bronzed and with a hard, reckless cast.

The work progressed as far as Onion Canyon and the riders were on their first circle of the new day. The beginnings of the day's herd was already winding through the oak brush of the canyon floor, growing in size as succeeding riders drove out of the side washes with bawling bunches to add to the slow moving herd. Dust rose in yellowish clouds and hung over all.

Haze Dawson, now the owner of a considerable outfit of his own, rode along one side of the herd.

"Who let out that YT cow an' calf?" he called loudly to the riders who punched



the drags at the rear. "I saw her hyar but a minute ago."

The Kid as well as every other puncher noted every brand and mark that charged into the herd. Most of them belonged to Basin outfits but there were occasional strays for the "reps" and cows with large, unbranded calves. Such were remarked with interest. Haze, being an owner, had

been quick to notice that a certain cow of his which had been driven into the herd with her big maverick calf was no longer with the bunch.

"Hold up the herd!" Haze threw up one hand in a gesture recognized by all cowmen as the command to halt cattle. "Hold 'em up. I'm goin' to git that ol' heifer back if we gotta hold herd all mornin'."

Haze called two riders and together they loped back up the wash. Soon they returned driving the YT cow and her unbranded calf ahead of them. Cows often "brush up" and are innocently passed by. Any one of the several men behind the herd could have overlooked the YT cow. But Haze Dawson saw in it an act of the Kid.

As the cow trotted into the herd with the long swinging gait of mountain cattle Haze gave the signal to move on. As the herd got under way he reined sharply to the Kid.

"Anytime yuh think yuh c'n pull a stunt like that on me," he threatened angrily, "yuh're bad mistaken."

The Kid glanced up. He stared bleakly at the older man and fumbled nervously at his rope. We welcomed a chance to turn aside and head back a steer that attempted to break back.

"I'm sayin' that any time yuh think yuh c'n pull a stunt like that," went on Haze triumphantly, "on me or any other Basin cow-dog yuh're bad mistaken."

The Kid flapped his rope half-heartedly against the dusty rump of a tired cow and pulled his hat brim lower over his eyes.

Some of the riders glanced at each other, grinning. The Kid was yellow. They all knew it.

Haze was close to the Kid by this time and he reached out and jerked the ragged hat still lower. The brim tore and sagged down ridiculously, revealing one eye. The Kid straddled away at Haze's hand.

"Aw, Haze," he protested.

Haze reined closer. "Thought yuh'd git that big calf fer yore own milk-pen bunch, hey?" he taunted. "I been hearin' how yuh got four or five ol' mossy-backs runnin' under yore iron now. But just yuh look to it yuh don't brand no cows but what yuh buy, ner no calves but what belongs to yore own cows!"

The Kid glared at his tormentor, then flapped another cow with his rope.

"Aw—"

With a snort Haze spurred away and rode up along the herd where he resumed his place at the side. The other riders seemed to dismiss the incident for none

mentioned it. But a slow hatred for Haze Dawson flamed within the Kid.

Late that afternoon another circle had been made and the cattle were on the mesa above Walnut Canyon being held there while the calves were branded. Later the beef cattle would be cut out and shoved into the holding pasture. Orié Tilt, the ten year old son of Sam Tilt, was on his first roundup. He had been punching drags that morning and now he reined close to the Kid.

"I—I seen that ol' cow drop out," he confessed in a low tone. "She went out past me. I—I didn't rully notice her till we'd got past and then I didn't go back after her cause I was afraid she wouldn't drive good and—the other fellers would laugh at me. I—I was 'shamed to holler for help."

"Yeh," replied the Kid. "I seen her, too. But don't say nothin'. She's here now, all right."

"Well, I'm sorry," said Orié manfully. "I heard Haze bawlin' y'u out. But when I let her go past I didn't think anybody'd notice she's gone."

"That's all right," said the Kid. "But next time one slips out on ya, holler fer me. I'll help ya. These waddies like to plague a feller. Don't ya let 'em buffalo ya."

That night the Kid sewed up the torn brim of his hat by the light of the fire. The pasture fence was strong, so there was no need for a night guard over the cattle and the punchers spent the night in their beds.

In the morning it was discovered that the gate of the pasture was open. Whether it had been thrown down by some person or knocked down by the cattle could not be ascertained by the puncher who discovered it, for many cattle had passed out and obliterated all other tracks.

Nothing was said at the time, but the Kid instinctively knew that every man in the outfit blamed him for the occurrence. The incident would necessitate a going over of the entire country covered so far, as every beef steer would hurry straight back to his native haunt. Gates had been found open before, knocked down by cattle or through some fault of the tie-rope or by reason of a sudden gust of wind. But this came so squarely following Haze Dawson's accusation that the men, familiar with the Kid's grudge tricks, without question laid the cause to him.

While they were eating breakfast the Flowerpot foreman found a seat near the Kid. The Kid knew what was coming. He was to be banished from the wagon.

"We're going to have to start all over again," the foreman began diplomatically. "But we won't have to gather anything but beef. The calves are most all branded up. So I guess I'm a little longhanded and have got to let some of you fellas go."

The Kid did not reply. Only he glared in the direction of Haze Dawson.

"So you can let Roy haul your bed in," went on the foreman. "He is going to town this mornin'. I'll give you a note to Gus Brown at the bank. He'll pay you your time."

The Kid ate a few bites in thoughtful silence. There was more to the foreman's speech than contained in the bare words. In the first place he was fired without the offer of a post-cutting job or a fence job. That meant the cowmen had decided to leave him out of their employ after this. And when he was directed to take his bed to town—that meant that his presence on the little claim below Indian Spring was no longer to be tolerated. They suspected him of calf-stealing and then of turning out the beef herd. If Dawson had not made such a holler about that calf yesterday morning they would have had no reason to suspect him of leaving down this gate. His face flushed.

"I'll get you for this, Dawson," he said. "You'll see."

"Any time yuh're ready, Kid," replied Dawson airily. "Fly at it."

The Kid waited until the riders had started back up the valley with the remuda, then he saddled Blue, flung his bed into Roy's wagon and started toward town. Half way he reached down and patted Blue's neck. It comforted him, this realization that Blue was a friend. Blue never suspected him. Blue was always faithful. The Kid drew a magazine from his chaps pocket which he read as Blue patiently plodded toward.

In town he threw off his bed at the feed yard and went to the bank where Gus Brown paid him what was due, then he returned to the feed yard, put up Blue, and paid for three days' feed. He slept that night in the open corral.

And sometime during the dark hours some one stole his boots, chaps and the torn, familiar hat.

He discovered his loss upon awakening and made a thorough search of the premises. He could find no trace of his belongings. Later he went barefooted and carrying his socks to the nearest store and purchased a pair of work shoes and a cap.

He made several inquiries for employ-

ment that morning, but the little city was overpopulated with men seeking work. Besides, his aloof manner was against him. Two cattle buyers who were on their way out to the roundup to negotiate for beef promised him that in case they made the deal they would give him a job with the shipping crew. Tired of the crowds and revolting at further search for work the Kid followed a quiet street to the edge of town, then down through the willows to a secluded spot along the creek where alone he spent the afternoon.

During the night he was awakened by the liveryman.

"Hey, Kid," the man whispered hoarsely, "wake up."

The Kid sat up and reached for his hat as was his custom when being called on night guard.

"Say, is yore real name James T. Furlong?" the liveryman questioned. The Kid nodded, grunting assent.

"Well, then two cattle buyers was here jist now lookin' fer ye. They claim ye an' two other fellers held 'em up on the road toward Anvil Rock this afternoon. Haze



Dawson an' Slim Hackett was with 'em an' seen ye plain as day. They gone ter git a warrant. Better skip."

"But I—I—" The Kid remembered his lonely afternoon.

"But my horse was here—yuh c'd tell 'em that."

"They claims ye was all in an automobile," explained the liveryman excitedly. "I don't know nothing about it. I'm jist a-tellin' ye. Haze says he'd know thet ol' hat anywheres, and yore chaps—"

"But them was all stole from me," exclaimed the Kid, "last night. Ya seen me up huntin' fer 'em in my sock feet this morning. Remember I told ya all about it—"

"Yeah, I know. I know," agreed the liveryman. "But they says that's jist a blind. Ye's doin' it jist t' fix a alibi. They've gone fer a warrant, anyhow. I don't know nothin' about it. I'm jist a-tellin' ye, that's all."

The Kid was up, pulling on his new shoes. He left his bed where it was and

ran to Blue's stall. Hastily saddling he rode out and took the road that stretched away toward Indian Spring. The night was cool and he let Blue take a good trot. The stars looked down accusingly. He was afraid. Once they got him, even on such a charge, he knew he would have but a weak defense. His mind was not slow to grasp the situation. Someone had stolen his outfit and used it as a disguise for the hold-up. The country was full of youthful bandits who stopped at nothing and no doubt three of them with a car had learned of the cattle buyers and planned a hold-up in cowboy rig to more easily halt them on the road without arousing their suspicions.

He reached his cabin below the spring soon after sunrise. He boldly turned Blue loose to graze, got his gun from the bunk, and went off on foot into the oak thickets on the foothills. If they took him they would have to fight. He was through. They wanted to run him out of the country, they blamed him with every cow that dropped out of a herd, every gate that was left open. Now they were after him for a hold-up of which he knew nothing.

All day he lay in hiding. Late he went to the cabin for food. There was enough flour for one batch of biscuit and a half can of syrup. He took the dutch oven and the flour and went to a nook in the rocks some distance from the house, built a fire and baked the bread, then returned to the house and, sopping it in the syrup, ate every crumb. He was hungry. He put a rope on Blue and led him to a grassy cove farther down the creek and there spent the night.

At dawn he saddled up and rode farther back in the hills. This would be the day they would close in on him if a search had been organized. He could make it difficult to capture him in those hills where he knew every crook and turn, every shoulder and cut-bank. But he was hungry and at noon, with no sign of pursuit he headed for the Diamond A line shack over the ridge. He went up the slope, keeping to a wooded arroyo until near the crest. Leaving Blue well screened in a thicket he went on foot to lie and peer over the ridge.

The Kid heard the racket before he reached the top. Lying flat he squirmed up to where he could look across to the steep slope on the opposite side. A horseman was slithering down that slope, driving ahead of him a small bunch of cattle. The clatter of hoofs came across the deep gorge distinctly. The cattle were on the run, the horseman hazing them along with whoops,

evidently eager to get them to the pasture at the line shack as quickly as possible. The Kid recognized the man as Haze Dawson, but gave a short ejaculation of admiration for the rider's disregard of danger as he sent his horse off a rocky shoulder and down a steep headlong flight to head the cattle back to the right course.

As they neared the bottom the cattle thundered down into a steep-walled wash and headed up the canyon. Haze with a whoop dug in his spurs and sent his horse galloping to head them off.

At the place where the horse and rider hit the steep cut, its banks were perpendicular and far too deep to allow for a jump-off. The horse realized this even as soon as the rider and plowed to a halt on the brink of the washout. But before it could wheel away the steep bank broke free and began to cave in, a slowly moving wall of earth, the horse's foreparts going with it; its hind feet across the slowly widening crack, still on the solid footing at the base of the hill.

The horse scrambled, attempting to rear back to safety. Haze Dawson excitedly yanked at the bit. With a crash the caving strip fell forward into the gully, the horse and rider plunging out of sight with it.

The Kid held his breath and waited the result. He scanned the slopes and listened. There was not a sound. Even the wild cattle that Haze had been driving had wheeled and dashed down the canyon and could not be heard. A faint fog of dust hung over the deep washout. The Kid waited five minutes, then went back for Blue and, gun in hand, walked down the slope leading his horse.

Haze must have heard Blue's shod hoofs on the stones for he called weakly for help. The Kid walked to the bank and peered over. An expression of amazement overspread Haze's face which was deathly white and beaded with perspiration. He licked his lips.

"Hello—Kid." He waited, his lips white with pain.

The Kid stared into the hole with mingled emotions. The horse lay almost upon its back, wedged in the rough formation of the cave-in. Its head was doubled beneath it for it had evidently plunged in head-foremost. Haze had managed to get free of the saddle, but the horse had upended after falling and had come down across the cowman's right leg. Haze's other leg lay at an odd angle from his body. At first the Kid thought the man's boot had come off. But closer examination re-

vealed that it was still in place and the limb broken. Haze, face upward, stared up anxiously, his eyes glassy.

The Kid moved back and scanned the hills about him. No one else was in sight. He remembered Haze's recent insult, his own predicament. He leaned again over the bank.



"How come ya here, Haze?" he asked grimly. "I—I found them beef steers—" the man replied in a

faint voice. He closed his eyes and let his head roll to one side. "I's tryin' t' drive 'em in—faster."

"Yah, but whatcha doin' clear over here. The roundup's over beyond Onion now," the Kid sneered. "Ya was takin' such a int'rest in that, ya'd ought to be there." The Kid waited for reply but the man lay silent. He looked as if he were dead. The Kid hoped he was. "Ya was ridin' round tryin' to lo-cate me, that's what!" the Kid flung down at the unconscious man. "Well, ya've found me. Now, fly at it."

He strode to Blue and flung the reins over the pony's neck. One hand on the horn, a foot in the stirrup, the Kid paused. He seemed to be listening. But he was thinking. Could he ride away and leave Haze Dawson down in that cut helpless, injured, a dead horse across his leg?

Slowly, almost reluctantly, the Kid removed his foot from the stirrup, released the horn and let the reins drop again to the ground. He walked sullenly to the cut, found a sloping place where he kicked with his new heels until he formed a narrow steep pathway down which he slid. Then he went to the injured man.

He worked diligently. It was no easy matter to claw the earth and stones away until he could drag the man's leg from beneath the dead horse. It was a terrific struggle to carry the limp form up the slide and finally to lay it face-downward across Blue's saddle. And after that, with the man tied in place, it required skill and care to hold the burden from slipping and coax Blue onward to the line shack. There the Kid laid Haze upon the bare yard by the door and unsaddled Blue. The small spring wagon which was occasionally used

to haul salt from the main road where it was delivered by the ranch truck stood nearby, its shafts shoved into a mesquite out of the sun. The Kid backed it out and looked it over dubiously. It might hold together. He glanced at the sun. Past three. It was eleven miles to town, fifteen to Sam Tilt's and nearly thirty to Haze's own home. Besides, the road to town was good once you left the wash. The Kid did not want to go to town, for there was that matter of the hold-up with which he was blamed. He thought about that as he entered the line shack, gathered up every piece of bedding and canvas and spread it on the floor of the little wagon. He pondered his plight as he got the harness from the hook and fitted it to Blue. He was almost astonished at himself when he backed Blue into the shafts and hitched the tugs. Perhaps he could stop a motor car along the road.

Haze was moaning and mumbling. He struggled feebly as the Kid lifted him into the rig. The Kid got in and flapped the lines. "Git ap, Blue." It had been more than six years since Blue had pulled a wagon. "Git on."

Blue moved sedately down the wash. It was a mile to the main road and the way was strewn with boulders to drive around, stumps to evade. That mile required all of twenty minutes. It was nearly four when they turned into the main road and headed toward town. The Kid shook the lines and urged Blue into a trot.

The spring wagon bowled along easily. Blue's legs pounded steadily. The motion wrested moans from the injured man. The Kid glared at him at first dispassionately, then he turned, seated on the floor of the wagon as he was, so that he could hold Haze's head in his lap.

The Kid kept looking back hoping for a car to come roaring up from the rear into which he could shift his responsibility. He passed two cars going the opposite direction, shabby overloaded tourist's outfits that gave him scarcely a look as they hurtled past. Then a big car with a shining nose bored up from the rear. The Kid stopped Blue and got out in the road gesticulating. The driver however seemed in no mood to halt, for the horn sounded sharply and the big car swept up without slackening. The Kid dodged out of the way, frantically signalling for the driver to halt. But the car zipped past. Old Blue snorted the dust from his nostrils and, when the Kid resumed the lines, Blue took up the steady trot. The Kid glanced at his pas-

senger. Haze's legs were swelling visibly. The boot-top of the injured leg was tight about the man's calf. Haze's face was white and perspiring.

Three miles. The Kid knew the landmarks. He glanced again at the sun. He flapped the lines. "Git on, Blue," he begged. "Keep diggin'." He looked at the little horse critically.

No other cars came along the smooth highway though the Kid looked this way and that, expecting each moment to see one. It hurt him to only sit in the wagon holding Haze Dawson's head while little old Blue was out there running at a lope long after he was tired out; pounding the hard highway gamely at the bidding of his master. The Kid experienced a lump in his throat that was new and strange to him. He had compassion for his game old horse and Blue's sweat drenched body galloping along between the shafts touched a new chord in the Kid's tough and lonely heart. He looked up at the sky. The sun was low in the west and its rays turned to gold the white-capped clouds that drifted lazily.

"Git on, Blue. Keep diggin'."

He knew that Blue was doing his best. Blue was giving all he had—for nothing. The Kid forgot all about the menace that awaited him when he reached the town. He glared malevolently at Haze Dawson, the cause of it all and experienced a brutish desire to throw the man out and let Blue rest. Then he looked at Blue and his ferocity melted, a warm tenderness stole into his heart, he even felt charitably disposed toward Haze. The whole business of life, of sacrifice for others, the complicated machinery of society, seemed to open before him in one great incomprehensible panorama. He didn't understand any of it, but he realized there was more to life than merely each man for himself.

His eyes again sought the sky, drawn to that golden cloud. He swept off his cap and looked straight into that aureate mist.

"Help," he murmured reverently, "help—" As if embarrassed at asking divine aid for himself or for Haze Dawson he amended his petition. "Help—Blue!"

Blue was the one that was doing the work.

Blue made it to the feed yard. But when he turned into the lot he was weaving in the shafts. The rear wheels of the rig had no more than fairly cleared the sidewalk when Blue halted, legs wide spread, his breath coming in gulps and irregular hiccoughs. The harness and shafts creaked

with the see-saw of his respirations. The Kid leaped out and dashed into the boarded off stall that served as the official sanctum of the proprietor.

"Hey!" the Kid demanded loudly. "Git



a automobile quick. Hoss fell over a bank with him. It's Haze. Git 'im to the hospital.

The liveryman and a lounge or two leaped to their feet. A car standing at the curb burst into action and the Kid saw them lifting Haze Dawson into it.

But the Kid was at Blue's head. Blue began to sink; he went down slowly, first to his knees, then with an exhausted grunt his dripping body plumped to the warm earth of the feed lot. The shafts slipped up on his back and the Kid excitedly unbuckled harness, meanwhile propping Blue's head against his shin as he worked so the old horse could breathe easier.

He had barely got the harness free and, placing Blue's head on a grain sack, shoved the wagon aside when a car hummed up and two men swung into the corral.

"That's him," said one of them.

"There's a warrant for you, Kid," said the other as they stood over him where he rubbed Blue's neck with a grain sack. "Highway robbery."

The Kid's face took on its old hard look. "I don't know nothin' about it," he said harshly. "Don't know nothin' about it."

"Well, you'll have to come with us."

The Kid drew back, his eyes shifting. He looked at Blue's heaving side prostrate on the ground, sweat running from the brave horse's trembling limbs. Leave Blue? Leave him after the game run he'd made? Leave Blue flat, with night coming on? He clutched the horse's mane. The old haunting feeling was upon him again. Every man's hand was against him. He hadn't a friend, save Blue. And Blue was dying.

"Come along, Kid," the officer was saying. He laid a hand on the Kid's arm. "That plug is done for, anyhow."

The Kid was brushing a bit of dust from Blue's nose where it had touched the ground as Blue went down.

"Come on." The officer twitched the shoulder sharply, drawing the Kid upright.

At that instant the Kid came up with a blow that had started from Blue's damp

mane. It came with all the Kid's lifting power behind it and caught the officer under the chin, upsetting him like a rotten post. Eyes glinting, savage with sudden fury, the Kid dived into the remaining officer, both fists slugging straight to the stomach.

The officer was reaching for the gun in his hip pocket when the Kid collided with him and the weapon clattered to the hard earth as he doubled up with a grunt. Unversed in fighting, but wildly enraged that these men should attempt to force him away from Blue, the Kid rained blows, rushing in, slugging with his entire weight. No one could have said the Kid was yellow then. The officer cool under the unexpected onslaught, was forced backward a step. He was watching for an opportunity to land a knock-out blow or else make a break for the gun. He stepped back once again. But that was an unfortunate step, for in making it his foot met Blue's hulk and with one of the Kid's solid rights landing at that moment squarely on his chest he toppled backward.

The Kid dived upon him like a mad man. He grabbed the officer's ears and with one vicious thump cracked the man's head soundly upon the hard earth. The officer relaxed.

The Kid dragged him free from Blue. The first officer showed signs of coming to life and the Kid pounced upon him. He remembered reading that officers carry handcuffs and he slapped the man's pockets with an exclamation of satisfaction. Rolling his prey to its face he cuffed the hands behind the back. Dragging the other close he locked him in like manner, running the links through those of the first so the two were hand-cuffed back to back. Then he turned to Blue.

The old horse seemed to have profited by the lapse of time. He seemed to have gained something of his customary composure; his breath coming with greater regularity, the muscles of his legs did not twitch so constantly. The Kid seized a dry grain sack and commenced rubbing, drying off the sweat, massaging the stiff limbs. Evidently Blue appreciated the attention for soon, with a little urging, he rolled to a sort of reclining posture and presently struggled to his feet. Once on all fours he put down his head and shook vigorously, staggered, then shook again. The Kid set to rubbing the side that had been next to the ground. He did not pay the least attention to the complainings of the officers. He did, however, kick the pistol farther

into the middle of the feed lot.

The liveryman's car came rattling back loaded with humanity. Men talking and gesticulating got out and came across the sidewalk into the lot. The Kid recognized the familiar figures of Barney Ellerton, Sam Tilt and Slim Hackett. They came upon the two officers linked together upon the ground. The men halted in amazement.

"Look at the black eye on the big feller," Slim ejaculated in a hollow voice. Craning he peered at the other. "An' look at the jaw on this'n! Say!" He straightened up slowly and gazed into the stall where the Kid was busily rubbing down his old horse. "Say, fellers. That Kid's a fightin' fool! Look what he's done." Slim spread his hands expressively toward the two officers.

"I'd give a dollar to have seen it," said Barney emphatically.

"Five," said Slim.

While the men were releasing the officers with the keys that they took from the latter's pockets and used under their directions, Sam Tilt hurried to the Kid and grasped his hand.

"They tell us that yuh brought Haze in when he got hurt," Sam said admiringly. "I'm proud of yuh, Kid. And—" he jerked his head toward the officers, "—don't be afraid of them. They were workin' under orders, all right, but didn't know we were bringin' in the right fellers. We found 'em, hidin' out with their automobile on that old road beyond Anvil Rock. One of 'em had yore whole outfit. We got 'em yesterday, but just now brought 'em in. Haze, he wanted to go over an' tell yuh. Yuh see, Haze, he—Well, he'll tell yuh, some time. Orié told him—"

The Kid was astounded. He gaped vacantly at Sam Tilt. No man had ever grasped his hand, or talked to him in this friendly tone. He continued absently rubbing Blue with the sack. Beyond Sam Tilt he saw Slim coming with a heavy horse blanket. Slim crowded in and flung it over Blue's patient back, buckling it snugly about him. He grinned at the Kid and jerked his thumb toward the officers who were entering their own car.

"Wonder what them fellers think about it now," snickered Slim. "Say, cowboys, I'd give five dollars to have seen it."

"Ten," corrected Barney, coming up. "Le's all go up an' see how Haze is makin' it. C'mon, Kid. Leave that hoss rest awhile. Yuh'll founder 'im if yuh feed 'im 'fore he cools out more."

The Kid went along like a man in a

trance. At the hospital they were allowed to see Haze. He was conscious, the preliminary work on his broken legs completed but a long stay ahead of him. Haze beckoned weakly to the Kid.

"I—I was mistaken about that cow an' calf—other day," he said in a voice that was barely audible. "Orié told me about him—lettin' it by. I—I—"

"Oh, that's all right," said the Kid magnanimously, though he was surprised at himself.

"—I'm sorry," finished Haze as if completing a speech he had determined beforehand to make. "An' that gate—" his eyes looked to Sam Tilt, asking him to finish it.

"That gate—" Sam Tilt took up the words, "—is fastened to a jack-oak that wabbles in the wind. The wire keeps wigglin' back an' forth, workin' higher an' higher on the gate 'cause that post's bent an' slick. Finally it works clean off of its own accord. It fell down again las' night."

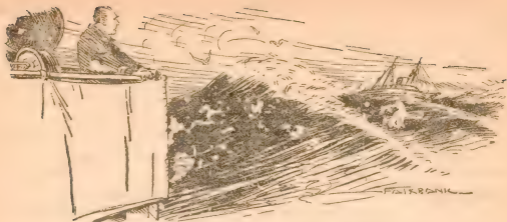
"An' say," murmured Haze, "while I'm laid up here, Kid, I wisht yuh'd look after my stuff. Jest sorter take charge—while I'm laid up. Then, after that, I'd like t' put yuh on steady—I need a man."

The Kid suddenly felt that strange lump in his throat which had been there during Blue's earnest struggle, and his eyes grew misty. He tried to choke it down but two tears cascaded down his cheeks and dropped from the angle of his jaw. His hard young eyes were softer than they had ever been before. He looked at the men, shyly, then eagerly as he saw in every face only good will, a readiness to cancel bygone scores and begin anew. The hand was not against him; they were accepting him as an equal.

He turned from the room and stumbled blindly down the wide steps and onto the sidewalk. Sympathy and friendliness had completely unmanned him; gratitude overwhelmed him. Here was an opportunity for a new start.

His steps took him back to the feed yard where he went straight to Blue's stall. Blue was all right, he was even nosing at the hay in the manger. The Kid flung his arms about Blue's neck and sobbed out loud, his fingers entwined in the patient little horse's mane. For, after all, the Kid was only nineteen, and not much different from anybody else.





THIS RESCUE STUFF

By WIN BROOKS

Author of "Dawn Sound," etc.

A GRIM STORY AND ADDRESSED, PERHAPS, TO THOSE WHO SIT AT HOME WHEN STORM WINDS TOSS THE SEA; WHO VOICE THEIR OPINIONS LOUDLY, AND FLAUNT THEIR JUDGMENT ON THE MEN WHO GO DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS

I WAS second officer of the *Empress* on the New York-Southampton run when Old Man Shipley died on the bridge one warm summer night off the edge of the Grand Banks with New York but a night away. You won't remember old Shipley; he sailed on Blue Line ships for nearly fifty years before he passed out. Died on the bridge, as I say, without any warning whatever. That's where he should have died.

Old Man Shipley had a record few men of the sea can equal; there was upon it no blemish of untoward deed or warranted suspicion. Larry Walters was first officer then, a big black haired fellow of pleasant face and manner, in his late thirties. Walters was on the bridge when Shipley passed to his reward, it being his watch and the Old Man only taking his customary evening turn about ship.

Larry came to me below and said, "The Old Man's dead. Passed away in my arms on the bridge. Heart just gave out, Doc Manners says."

We sat for a time discussing what we should do and finally Larry sent for Harlan Mosst the wireless chief.

"Too bad your spark isn't working," Larry greeted him.

"But it is," Mosst came right back.

"You try again," said Larry. "I think you're mistaken."

"It's perfect. We just talked with Marion and Chatham."

"Well," Larry argued, "Shipley just died. On the bridge. If the radio was working we'd have to flash the owners and get our orders to bring his body in for burial, lie in state for all his old and admiring passengers or something like that. You know the Old Man. He had no family. Never had any love except the sea. How great that love was a few of us have learned. If we couldn't flash New York we'd have to bury him over the side tonight."

Mosst, who had a lot of understanding despite his youth, thinks hard for a long time.

"Come to think of it," he returns finally, "we did have trouble getting her tuned up right the last try."

Larry eyes him steady for awhile.

"We got nine hundred odd first and second passengers aboard. When the owners learn the old buzzer was out of order it might go hard with the wireless men."

"But I tell you it's really not working," Mosst snaps without batting an eyelash.

We slid Old Man Shipley over the side about midnight with ship's officers and crew who had been his friends for many years standing by. Chaplain read service while the engines died. A few words. No eulogy. This man who had loved the sea, had lived on the sea and there had died

went to his last rest. The sea claimed him lovingly and surely. An old friend come home to stay. Somewhere west, northwest of us lay Sable Island.

Toward morning New York easily picked up Mosst's code message to owners: *Captain Shipley died seven-thirty last night. Buried midnight off Sable. Wireless just repaired.*

There was the devil to pay after we landed. Mosst, first on the carpet, proved himself a go-through fellow; his transmission had been wrecked by an explosion or a lightning bolt or a ham sandwich or something of the sort. Didn't he realize that more than nine hundred passengers had been depending for their safety upon the condition of the ship's wireless? Sure, he knew. What of it? Accidents were bound to occur. Well, there was this of it; another such occurrence would mean the loss of his post. Even now the board wasn't sure about demotion.

Walters was next and I kept him company. We had not seen Mosst. Didn't we know the rules of the line providing for the death of a master aboard ship? Sure, we knew. What of it? Well, why the blankety blank blank had Captain Shipley been buried at sea one day out of New York? And how come the wireless of the *Empress* had been out of commission for more than eight hours? We knew Mosst would be reduced, didn't we?

Larry takes a hitch in his belt. It's he who is talking.

"We couldn't have brought him in. You might as well know the real reason. We didn't want to. Old Man Shipley lived all his life on the sea. Land was a foreign port to him. Any land. We talked it over, Stone and I who've known him a long time. So we buried him where we thought he would have chosen."

Sidney Murray who was chairman of the board and an old shipping master himself nearly exploded.

"So you did that?" he roared.

Walters nodded.

"And the story about the radio was the bunk?"

"The bunk, sir."

"Hm." He looked all about the big room. "Been with the Blue Line about twelve years, haven't you, Walters?"

"Yes, sir."

"With Old Shipley first on the *Louisiana* and then on the *Empress*, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hoped some day to be master of the *Empress*, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are."

Murray began to smile. He didn't explode. He looked all around the room again and smiled and kept on smiling as though he had just completed a big deal. Then I got mine.

"Take Stone for first officer if you want him. It's all a little unusual of course. Higginson of the *Southern* should move up. You should get one of the smaller boats. But we've known for a long time that Old Shipley might pass on any day and we've had our eyes open. The job calls for a good man, a good seaman and a little more. There's got to be a lot of the love for sea tradition which Shipley had in the heart of the man who fills his shoes. We guess you've got it. We'll gamble so."

After cigars and a glass we turned to leave.

"This wireless chap Mosst," Murray said. "He has the makings in him. Took a come down for nothing like a good seaman. Fancy you'd better let him stick close."

"I rather think we will," returns Larry.

That was how Larry Walters came to be master of the *Empress* without going through any of the long list of the Blue Line's smaller ships. Except that it gives you a fair idea of the man, the incident has no special bearing upon the story. In Larry Walter's veins there ran a lot of—well, we'll call it sea blood. He was fair and square too; when he thought Mosst was in for it, he didn't hesitate a minute in clearing up that matter of Old Man Shipley's burial at sea even if, for all he knew then, the truth might have cost him the command of one of the line's smaller ships.

Well, the *Empress* did well under Walters and Walters did more than well in command of the *Empress*. From the first they seemed a perfect match. You know the boat? Thirty thousand tons; a little better perhaps. And a pretty picture she makes standing down the harbor on a flood tide at sunset, bound for Southampton, a band playing on her decks and the cream of the trans-Atlantic trade lined along her rails. Many the salute we drew in those days. Not so long ago either.

It was about three years after he'd taken over the *Empress* that I first made the acquaintance of Larry Walters' daughter. She was about sixteen then, a tall freckled faced, lanky kid with pig tails hanging down her back or flying in the wind. She made a crossing with us and proved to be

in a fair way to becoming as good a sailor as her dad. Against her father's orders she stood the bridge with me and we had a job keeping her out of the rigging. Althea, her name was. Regular tomboy.

But more than anything else she spent a lot of time in the wireless room which was strictly against ship rules as you know. Couldn't keep her out of there although Mosst did his best. He'd lock the door



and she'd climb in the deck window. Finally he gave in and taught her a lot about the do-jiggers in the place. Learned her dots and dashes on that trip, she did.

Said she guessed she'd be a wireless operator when she grew up.

But Larry had other plans for her. He told me about them that crossing, told me a lot of things he had never spoken of before. His wife was dead; the girl had been in a convent and had there given promise of developing an excellent voice. He spoke of his ambitions for her one night after she had sung for the first cabin passengers. I wasn't in on that concert but Mosst, who was off duty and attended, told me the next morning that she had sung marvelously.

Walters had made arrangements for her to study in a well known New York class and for two or three years I did not see her; from Larry I had from time to time reports of her progress with her study. He did not speak of her often; when he did it was with great pride and confidence that some day she would achieve more than passing fame on the concert or operatic stage.

Then one day before we were to sail from New York she came down to the *Empress* to say good-by to her dad. Black haired, with big black eyes and a perfect complexion, minus the freckles, she was as pretty a girl as I had ever seen. She brought good news, it seems, for Walters told me the first night out that she had completed her study at home and would be with us on her next trip over. She was going to Germany and Italy to complete her art with a promise of success from the Metropolitan experts.

Sure enough, she was with us when we sailed from New York three weeks later. This trip she did not sing at the first cabin concerts; nor did we experience any trouble

keeping her on deck and out of the wireless room. Rather, it was the opposite, for Mosst left most of the burden of his work to his assistant and spent a great deal of time on deck with Althea.

This Mosst, as I told you before maybe, was young for his job, a good looking chap and as straight sailing as you'll find in arty water. I watched the development of their companionship with interest, thinking at the time what a coincidence it would be if anything serious came of their meeting three years before. Mosst was obviously smitten; the girl on the other hand, displayed more than a passing interest in him.

Walters looked on with a tolerant interest and I knew if his grown up girl ever decided to make a choice that he would look with more favor upon the wireless man than anyone else. But when I tell you that Mosst occupied the greater part of her time I do not want you to get the impression that he was alone in seeking her company; we had three or four eligible bachelors in first cabins that trip and they all fell hard. The wireless man had the inside track, however.

Then came the *Laropia-Sutton* incident and you should remember the part played by the *Empress* even if you don't recall Walters' name. The *Laropia*, out of Halifax and bound for Cherbourg, and the *Sutton*, an old Simpson line freighter, collided in mid-ocean in a fog one late afternoon in April.

Mosst picked up their calls at about sixty-three when we were making a good twenty-seven knots in a calm sea and fair weather. Fog, you know, descends in blankets according to the air pressure in a storm area; the blankets may be a hundred miles or only a few hundred yards square. We were proceeding south of the fog in as nice running as you'd want to meet.

The first message was from the *Laropia*, told us briefly of the collision and gave the information that she was hit hard forward below the water line, but would probably be able to proceed. She did not know with whom she had been in contact and we were at a loss for a time in attempting to determine if the other ship had sunk. Of course we changed our course immediately and headed for the scene, approximately one hundred miles north of us.

About fifteen minutes later Mosst picked up the *Sutton*. She was down by the head with her forward bulkheads flooded and could float only a few hours.

We had proceeded under forced draught only about twenty-five miles when we

struck a fog as thick as a Wales coal lugger. Couldn't see fifty feet from the bridge. But we kept on going, wide open, blasting the old whistle every thirty seconds.

The changing of the course, the incessant sounding of the horn and our increased speed brought a crowd of passengers—we had a full list—on the decks. Mosst was in constant communication with the *Laropia* and now and then got a message through to the *Sutton*. Two other ships fairly close but not as near as ourselves, had started for the scene.

At about ten o'clock we got a flash from the *Laropia*:

S. O. S. Laropia. In immediate danger down bow with sharp starboard list.

Scale, the chief deck steward, brought the message to Walters and myself on the bridge. As we stood there, reading it with the aid of a flash, Lowery, Mosst's assistant, arrived with another.

S. O. S. Sutton. Taking lifeboats. Sea calm. Good luck.

"Good luck!" said Walters. "Good God!" Then, "A flat sea! With any sort of good luck and good God we'll get them all!"

Just after eleven o'clock we picked up a rocket from the *Laropia*. Showing through that fog we knew she must be very close. Five minutes later, and not two hundred yards off our port side, a searchlight picked up a lifeboat, filled with wildly waving men. What must those fellows have thought then, seeing the *Empress* pass, ablaze with light, and save for the cries and signals of the passengers on our decks paying them no attention whatever? Lisbon, one of the cabin men, told me later that at the time he heard muttered threats among some of the passengers.

Walters on the bridge, was saying, "It's calm. We'll get them later. If we stop now we may be too late for the *Laropia*."

We passed three more of the *Sutton's* boats, passed them close by, fog shrouded in the flash of our searches, and came finally alongside the *Laropia*. She sure was in a bad way deep down at the head with her starboard rail forward nearly at the water's edge. Air tight compartments astern were holding her, would hold her for some time; how long no man could tell.

"How'll you make it?" I asked Larry.

"If I were alone I'd run alongside her and lay on. It's calm enough to do it and the best way. But we've too many aboard to risk that. She might take a sudden notion to dive at the wrong moment. We'll

lie in her lee; she's got no headway. And we'll use all boats."

I gave the word to Mosst and he flashed the *Laropia*. We nosed up into her lee three or four hundred yards off with all lights playing on her and saw them make ready their own launchable boats.

Not a big ship, the *Laropia*; half as big as ourselves and she did not carry a full passenger list. Two hundred and twelve souls aboard her, including captain and crew and we took them all off, using the boats of both ships, in something less



than an hour and a half.

Then we headed back and picked up the first of the *Sutton's* boats an eighth of a mile away. Not an easy job in that fog I'll tell you. A little later we got three more, bunched and showing rockets—forty-seven persons, officers and crew of the Simpson line freighter. That was, if you're good at arithmetic, two hundred and fifty-nine lives saved without the loss of one in a little more than six hours after we received the first distress signal more than a hundred miles away. True, it was a calm sea; had it not been I would be telling you a different story.

When we had picked up the *Sutton's* boats we cruised back to the spot where the *Laropia* had been. She was below us then. As we played around, two other vessels, the *Clayton Ellis* of the Ferris-Wiston line, and the *Spearhead*, one of the smaller Blue Line ships came up. To the latter we transferred the *Sutton's* crew and some of the *Laropia's* passengers.

That was a big night for the *Empress*. A big night for Walters and Mosst. A big night for all of us. From New York, signed by Murray, we drew a radio:

Congratulations. Glad Mosst had his wireless working.

THERE remains little to tell about Larry Walters and this rescue stuff except the story of Larry's last trip as master of the *Empress*. Before that came Althea's triumph in her debut at Milan in Carmen or something like that. It was difficult to tell who was more pleased, Walters or Mosst.

The girl toured Europe and sang in London but the fates and sailing schedules

were against our hearing her. Then came word that she was off for home—a cable to Mosst—the guest of a lot of new friends, big society folk I presumed. We were laid up in New York then, on the eve of sailing; it was November and we were making better than average runs with full passenger lists both ways.

I recall Walters saying to me that night, "Althea's on her way. They're planning her New York debut in about four months. You and I'll be there."

"How about Mosst?" I asked him, without cracking a smile.

"Mosst?" he pondered, like I'd surprised him. "Mosst? Oh, yes, I reckon Mosst will be there too." Then we both had a good laugh.

There were a lot of big folks aboard on that last trip of Larry Walters. Some English nobility going back to London, the usual wealthy Americans bound for the Riviera via the season's high toned receptions in the English capital. There was a fellow named Bondhead who had some kind of a title, one of those big, athletic Britishers almost too good looking to be masculine. He gets into the story.

We had a fair sailing despite steady head winds the first three days out. The third night when Walleck, third officer, came on to relieve me I knew we were in for trouble. Overhead the stars were brilliant and the wind still blew out of the northeast. It was no longer steady, however; fitful gusts, signs of shift. And though it was really cold the air was heavy, hard to breathe; you've experienced it, perhaps.

Walleck knew his business.

"Looks like a bad night," were his first words.

I agreed; the glass was falling; trouble sure. But it didn't exactly worry us, you understand; we'd had plenty of bad weather before. Funny thing about ship's officers though; no matter how heavy the weather they may have outridden previously, they are always apprehensive when the barometer is falling. Responsibility is great; it weighs heavily as you shall see.

When I went down to dinner we were making a steady twenty-four in a fairly calm sea. The first trouble came in the dining saloon, a different trouble than either Walleck or I had anticipated. This Bondhead I spoke about had his seat at Walters' table—not from any of Larry's choosing but through his influence with owners—and he had not been able to get down in time to eat with the select coterie

at the master's table. Now, overlooking the fact that I had a full table he insisted upon a seat with the first officer's party.

My first inkling of the incident was when Bondhead raised his voice in argument with Pierce, the chief steward. Pierce in his usual quiet and deferential manner was trying to persuade the man to take a vacant seat at one of the wall tables. Bondhead was stubborn and he was English and he bore a title, all of which meant he must sit either at the captain's or first officer's table. He talked loudly and he patronized Pierce which you'll admit was rotten taste.

Then, with many eyes in the room following him, he approached me.

"This man denies us a place at your table, Mr. Stone," he said.

There was, I saw now, a girl with him, a good looking American girl I had seen on promenade with an older man I had taken to be her father.

"I'm sorry, Bondhead," I told him quietly. "There is no room at the table. It is impossible for either Mr. Pierce or myself to grant your request."

For a while I thought the fellow would try to stare me out of countenance. Then he replied, "Very well. I shall go to Captain Walters. If necessary I shall go over Walters' head."

He turned abruptly on his heel and departed with his lady on his arm.

Later I dropped in to see Larry and found him all smiles. The fellow had been in to see him and had made a perfect fool of himself. He threatened to go to owners.

"Let him," I suggested. "It will be comical. I can imagine Murray reading his letter."

"Or wireless."

"You think he would?"

"He'd do anything if he remains in the humor in which he left here."

As we sat talking the *Empress* lunged forward sharply and rocked ever so slightly.

"There's the first of it"

"Been coming all day," said Walters. "Thought we'd get it before now. Better turn in. It'll be bad weather soon. I'm going to bed after I have a walk around."

Before descending to my cabin I went to



the bridge for a chat with Walleck. Storm was making fast, wind rumbling up out

the south and southeast now, blowing steadily with ever increasing force; no stars were visible. Overhead a great black canopy that seemed to rest on the mast heads.

Walleck said "Glass still falling. I'll take another hour and then we'll be forced to shift our course or cut down; what'll it be?"

"The Old Man said unless the wind shifts, change the course for the passengers' comfort," I told him. "We'll be taking them amidships."

Mosst dropped around on the way to his shift in the wireless room.

"Looks like I might have had business," he said, and was gone.

I looked in the wireless room a few minutes later and found Mosst and Lowery, his assistant, in unusual moods.

"It's this Bondhead," he told me between laughs in answer to my inquiry. "Of course we can't tell you what he sent but if you were Murray and received a Marconi telling you that Bondhead had been denied a seat at the first officer's table, what would you think?" They both roared.

"He didn't mention that he had a regular seat at the captain's table?"

"Forgot it, probably."

"Well, that might make a difference with Murray."

"If we're in for the kind of weather I think we are, he'll get an answer through in four or five days," Mosst declared. "It's double shift tonight."

The *Empress* pitched forward and heeled sharply as if to lend strength to his words; she heeled again. Walleck would be changing the course.

There was a half gale, rapidly approaching the proportions of a full gale blowing when I went to bed. Bad weather for small ships.

I HAD been partially conscious for perhaps a minute of somebody knocking on the door of my cabin before I finally roused myself to the point of leaving my berth. It was one of the deck stewards.

"Mr. Mosst said to call you, sir. Needs you right away."

The ship lurched crazily and pounded, and down below something racked the plates like a giant drill. A racing propellor is a bad sign.

"Just what is it doing out?" I asked the man as I hurriedly donned weather clothes.

"It's blowing a hell hurricane, sir, sure enough."

By the radium-treated hands of the suspended clock it was forty minutes past mid-

night. Five minutes later I stood in the wireless room.

That something was wrong, I knew of course; yet I was not prepared for the sight that met my eyes. Lowery was at the key, silent, impassive, expressionless of face. Mosst sat, leaning forward, the receivers clamped to his head. In the white hard line of his mouth I saw the strain of great emotion; in his eyes I read a story of despair.

Without speaking, scarcely raising his eyes, he handed me four slips of paper upon each of which there was scribbled a bit of his own writing. They read:

S. O. S. Little Barn Door Longitude west thirty stop seventeen five latitude north forty eight stop five one.

S. O. S. Little Barn Door yacht London New York hurricane taking water.

S. O. S. Little Barn Door barely make message need immediate assistance or too late.

S. O. S. yes aboard wireless flood last.

Mosst removed the receivers abruptly.

"You read the last message?"

I nodded.

"It was in reply to my flash. I asked him if Althea Walters was aboard."

Seas smashed and the *Empress* went down at the head and up at the stern and as suddenly reversed this position. The key was silent under Lowery's hand.

"She was coming home on her." It was Mosst's voice, in it a new note. "I had a cablegram before we sailed. English friends."

"You called Walters, of course?" I asked him.

"At the same time I called you. Only by the steward I sent a message to him. He knew of my cablegram."

The *Empress* went down to starboard and stayed down. We had swung about in the hurricane and I knew that Larry Walters was on the bridge.

Lowery's sensitive fingers resumed their tapping at the key.

"He's trying to pick up someone nearer than ourselves." In Mosst's voice, expressionless, there was a counterpart of that which I had read in his eyes.

"We're one hundred and thirty miles from her at least. He said that fourth message was the last. Wireless room flooded. You know what that means."

I went out and left him there because I did not want to look again in his eyes.

Walters stood the bridge, bareheaded to the lash of storm. By his side in sou'-wester, stood Walleck. Beyond the bridge,

not more than a hundred yards, our lights pierced the darkness; there was a running hell of white water out there, fast shifting black mountains, snow capped, they seemed; sleet beat upon the bridge, the decks, upon rail and mast and rigging.

With Walters there was no necessity for words; words at such times are worse than futile if you've noticed. He stood his bridge as any master going to a ship in distress; he drove the *Empress* as she had never been driven before even in the days when Old Man Shipley wore the braid.

A hurricane that night. Not a gale. One of those southeast white cold blows with all the pent up fury of the four winds behind it. And a quick-made sea that knew no lead. Mid-Atlantic in a hurricane, not merely holding steerage way as is the custom of most masters, but driving forward under forced draught.

Below us, in their cabins, were more than a thousand souls entrusted to the care of Larry Walters, to his judgment, his ability. Ahead of us somewhere, a hundred miles and more, a broken yacht tossed helplessly in the terror of wind and sea. Ahead of us somewhere, behind that radio call, Althea Walters and a golden voice.

From midnight until the first gray of dawn Walters held his ship in the teeth of a hurricane which, it seemed at times, must overwhelm us all. As the hours passed the wind blew with less fury, lessened finally to a gale and with the first flush of morning walking the east blew only a moderate gale.

But the seas broke whiter and whiter. On the bridge Walters held to his course. Neither food nor drink passed his lips. Nor words. In the wireless room a man sat, for the most part motionless, taking at intervals from shore his bearings through the receivers.

Despair? Aye, it walked the seas that night and morning. In the posture of the man upon the bridge, in the grim silent work of Mosst.

Full dawn, a lead sky and a falling wind and a lift of sea—and at last, far off, low down on the squall horizon, awash, hidden now and then by the massive waves, *Little Barn Door*.

Morning brought an intense interest in cabins; nobody was allowed on deck, but it was impossible to keep passengers from the news of trouble; the stewards were passing the word. Below us, I knew, eyes were glued to port holes.

Mosst stood beside us suddenly. He had, I saw, regained his composure. As his

eyes rested for the first time upon the yacht, now about two miles away, he said a strange thing.

"I had hoped she had gone."

Walters turned at the sound of his voice, rested his hand upon the wireless man's shoulder for an instant, said nothing.

"Been unable to speak her since the fourth message. There was no other ship near. The *Quiberon* is coming up but can't



possibly make it before noon."

The wind continued to fall. Below us someone gave permission and a few first cabin passengers appropriately clothed, ap-

peared on the promenade.

We bore down swiftly upon the doomed vessel; she was down in the trough of the great seas, far over to port, nearly on her beam's end. With glasses I could make out a number of figures on her deck, in her rigging, clinging there in last hope, clinging that they might not be thrown overboard. Neither Walters nor Mosst, mark you, had used his glasses.

Walters turned to me abruptly and spoke, the first time since he had taken the bridge near midnight.

"Life boats," he said. "Port side."

All hands were on deck. It was the work of two minutes for three boat crews to swing out and make ready as many boats.

Walleck shouted, "Can we make her lee?" and I saw Walters shake his head.

We seemed to reach out suddenly, span a mile of water in a moment, and the yacht loomed directly ahead, one hundred and fifty yards off our port bow. No glasses were needed now to make out those figures in the rigging. Walters' eyes were on the boat; he seized his binoculars suddenly, trained them on the stricken *Little Barn Door*. Not a long time. Long enough. I have seen such an expression upon a man's face only that one time. Then he rang stop and full speed astern, then half speed. Anything less took us out of steerage way.

He turned to me and in his gray eyes I saw again that dullness of despair which had shown in Mosst's.

"Mr. ! one, could any boat live in those seas?" And he motioned, with his head, out beyond the bow.

"I'll take a boat's crew with me, sir," I told him. Funny how you lapse into conventionalities at such a time.

"That answers the question." He spoke briefly, slowly. "No boat could possibly live for five minutes. And there's oil going over the side."

I did not dispute him. He knew; I knew. Men stood ready to go. Yes. Men would have gone. I would have gone, and I tell it to you in no spirit of boasting. Yet no man would have returned. That task that lay ahead was a hopeless one.

Walleck suggested, "If we could get into her lee, sir——"

The answer to that came quickly enough.

"I have fourteen hundred passengers, sir. I cannot take my ship about in such a sea as close to that menace there. For the same reason I can get no closer to windward. We cannot lie to; we must maintain steerage way; without it anything could happen. Unless we can lie to it is useless to attempt to put a line aboard her."

There was silence, a long silence on that bridge, I tell you. Below us I could hear passengers shouting.

Then Mosst asked, "Life rafts? Couldn't we float them down?"

"Life rafts," said Walters, "were made for calm seas. If they are light they capsize in such a sea as this. If they are heavy the seas break over them. We could float them down. If any of those people were unfortunate enough to seize them they could not hold on. Nor could we pick them up.

"There is," he said, a note of finality in his voice, "There is nothing to be done."

I think I mumbled a prayer that Althea did not see us.

"There is," echoed Mosst in that same expressionless voice, "nothing we can do. I knew that pretty well at midnight."

A deck officer came running up the stairway, lurched to the bridge railing.

"This fellow Bondhead wants permission to come up. He says his cousin owns that yacht."

"Nobody allowed on the bridge," I cut him short.

"Wait," said Walters. "Let him come up. What does it matter now?"

He came in a minute, while we backed slowly, ever so slowly, away from the yacht, now down on her beam's end, her masts nearly horizontal.

"That boat," Bondhead shouted, his eyes on Walters, "belongs to my cousin. On it, I have reason to believe, are my cousin

and a number of friends. What are you going to do about it?"

"We can do nothing," Walters told him.

"I'm here on behalf of some of the passengers, too," Bondhead roared. "You're standing by and making no attempt to save those people."

Mosst cried an oath, hysterically. "Take him away before I throw him over!"

"Lord Bondhead," said Walters. "God alone can help the people aboard that ship. If my own daughter were aboard I could do no more." He turned to the deck officer. "Take him away," he ordered.

"Remember, you've tried to do nothing. I'll let the owners know. Afraid, you are! Afraid!" His voice arose above the wail of wind, the crash of sea.

"You damn cowards!" He went down the stairway, half falling as Walleck pushed him.

We turned again to *Little Barn Door*. She was settling fast now, by the head; another minute or two would be her last.

"Mr. Stone," called Walters. "Watch that ship. When she goes down stand by for twenty minutes. I shall be on the other

side of the bridge."

We watched, Mosst and Walleck and I till at last the yacht up-ended and was no more. Women

screamed below. A few men called upon their God. We saw nobody in the water afterward. Bits of wreckage. No life. Negative buoyancy might keep the sunken ship a few feet below the surface for some time. It was dangerous even to remain in the locality.

More passengers' voices sounded, some now raised in anger. They did not know. We could not blame them. Finally, I rang full speed ahead.

Mosst crossed the bridge, put his arm around Walters who leaned against the railing staring unseeingly across the roaring, breaking waters. In that position they remained for more than a minute.

The wireless man started to leave, turned back.

"Any message for owners?" he asked.

Walters faced him; their eyes met across the space from stairhead to rail.

"Yes," Larry Walters said. "Yes. Tell them we stood by and regret inability to save life."





WILD WEST

By BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

Author of "Test of the North," "Rumpakkers," etc.

PART III

*"But who declares the wage too cheap—
Complains because of debts hard-wrung?
My trail is there, on plain and steep—
I saw the West when it was young."*

CHAPTER XIV

THE LINE OF LEAST RESISTANCE

DARK had fallen. The winter night was setting its teeth hard when Robin dismounted in the Mayne yard. He had forgotten about being tired. His brain had kept a strange sort of time to the drum of hoofs on the frozen ground. He couldn't make a decision. His instinct was to stand his ground. Yet he knew the risk of that. Sutherland would be implacable. Once a fighting man himself for a long time Sutherland had frowned on gun-fighting on his range. He had grown old and rich. Both publicly and privately he was strong for law and order, set against feuds. He was a fanatic in loyalty. He would never believe that Mark Steele had forced the issue. He would say he meant to see justice done when in reality he would be seeking revenge on an alien rider who had killed one of his trusted men.

Robin held his decision until he could talk with Dan Mayne. Red Mike stood in a stall. He could ride fast and far. He stood a moment to pat the red horse's glossy hide, thinking that he hated to run. He had been afraid, and he was no longer afraid. He would never be afraid of any man again. Robin had never heard a champion pugilist's dictum that "the bigger they

are the harder they fall," but that was in essence how he felt. Only, as a reward for proving that truth to himself, he did not wish to wear a striped government suit and enjoy free lodging in state quarters for an indefinite period. Adam Sutherland was powerful enough in Choteau County to inflict that penalty on him.

He walked into the house. Mayne sat by the fireplace sucking his pipe. Ivy came to meet him.

"I'm empty as a last year's water-barrel," he said to her. "Get me some supper, will you, hon'?"

"Where on earth have you been all this time in this kind of weather?" Ivy stayed to ask.

"Oh, every place," Robin put her off. "Go on, old girl. I'm starved."

Ivy went into the kitchen.

"Steele jumped me this afternoon down at the Birch Creek line camp. I killed him," Robin said bluntly, as soon as they were alone.

Mayne took his pipe out of his mouth. For a second he looked incredulous. Then a shade of fear crossed his face.

"Good Lord!" he breathed. "The fat'll be in the fire now. The Block S'll be on us like a bunch of wolves."

"On us?" Robin queried. "How? Where do you come in? I did the killin'."

"How?" Mayne echoed. He rose to his

feet, strode up and down the room. "How? Hell, I know Sutherland. He'll make this range too hot to hold me. He'll take this personal. He thought the sun rose an' set around that hound!"

He spat a mouthful of epithets on the dead man. Robin stared at Mayne with a little heart-sinking. This was the reward of loyalty. Mayne saw only his material interests further imperiled by the inevitable denouement. The big fish, angered, would harry the little fish who had troubled the range waters. It came over Robin with a discouraging conviction that for all he was in a way of becoming Mayne's son and right bower he could expect little backing, either moral or financial, in this crisis. Mayne had been furious at Shining Mark's depredations, furious and afraid. Shining Mark would rustle no more Bar M Bar calves. But Mayne had a new fear—Sutherland's anger. The Block S could black-ball him, refuse to handle his stock, bar his riders from roundup, throttle him in a dozen ways.

Something like contempt stirred briefly in Robin.

"I don't see where you need worry," he said.

Perhaps his tone brought Mayne back to a consideration of immediate consequences.

"You'll have to jump out, I guess," said

he. "Sutherland'll get you buried for life if you stand trial, no matter how good a defence you got. How'd the play come up?"

Robin told him briefly. The old man listened, shaking his head.

"You ain't got a chance in the world, unless you could prove Mark was actually stealin'," he gave his opinion. "Thatcher'll swear black is white an' white's no color at all. Gosh, Robin, I wish you hadn't got Steele."

"If I'd 'a' known you'd back water in a pinch maybe I wouldn't," Robin said slowly. "He didn't steal my calves. I could 'a' let it slide. I could 'a' told Shinin' Mark I was deaf, dumb, an' blind about what went on on this range, and he would have left me alone. You're a poor stick, Mayne."

"I ain't either. I'm as game as the next," Mayne retorted. "But I can go broke on lawyers an' witnesses a whole lot quicker than Adam Sutherland, an' get put outa business besides. It's all right for you wild kids to rip an' tear regardless. It's took me thirty years to collect a thousand head of cattle an' a home."

He strode up and down the bare floor mumbling to himself. Robin sat thinking. He would have to go on the dodge. If he stood pat he would be under arrest within

WILD WEST

By BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

Something about the story and what has happened in previous installments.

"Wild West" was a phrase with a definite meaning on the range. It denoted any stirring action in which men were involved. A gun-play, bucking horses, a definite clash on the range over property rights came within that definition. So this is a tale of the old West which was wild—but not wanton. It tells of Robin Tyler, a cowpuncher with the Bar M Bar, a small cattle outfit in a region of big ones, where the steers bearing the Block S brand of old Adam Sutherland ranged on a thousand hills, and denoted the fact that Sutherland was a cattle king and a power in the land. Robin was a devil-may-care, light hearted boy happy in his work and in the fact that Ivy Mayne, daughter of Mayne of the Bar M Bar, had promised to marry him. When, quite by accident, he stumbles on suspicious circumstances that point to the fact of Mark Steele, range boss of the Block S being a cowthief, he rather resents the fact that trouble seems to be coming his way. Steele is a well known character in the Bear Paws country and Robin realizes that to come up against him will be pretty bad business.

Robin meets May Sutherland, old Adam's daughter, and finds that she also distrusts her father's ranch boss, Mark Steele. Then Ivy, young and willful, chooses to get jealous of May and in her resentment against Robin turns to Mark Steele. The countryside at once jumps to the conclusion that Robin's feud against Steele is caused by jealousy over a girl, and Robin dares not say more till he has actual proof that Steele is a rustler. The brand which he suspects Steele owns is registered in the name of Jim Bond, an hotel man in Helena. Mark evidently is conscious of Robin's suspicions and does everything in his power to crowd Robin into a quarrel wherein the latter apparently will be the aggressor—for Mark is a noted gunman. Then Tex Matthews, formerly a rider for the Block S and now riding with Robin for the Bar M Bar, is shot from ambush when he and Robin are investigating a secret corral in the Bad Lands. Robin puts another score against Mark Steele and his companion, Thatcher, but still has no proof. Finally Mark goes too far in pinning a quarrel on Robin and there is a fight. But it goes against the Block S range boss and Mark is shot. Robin, fearing a murder charge in a country where the Block S is so powerful, decides to pay a flying visit to the Bar M Bar, then leave the district.

forty-eight hours. Mayne was frightened. He could see that. The old man wanted only to wash his hands of the whole business.

Ivy came to the door and beckoned. Robin, sitting with downcast eyes, did not notice. She came in, looked from one to the other.

"What's wrong now?" she demanded. "Somethin' is."

"This crazy kid has gone an' killed Mark Steele," Mayne flared up. "We're tryin' to figure what he'd better do."

"I'll do my own figurin'," Robin said tartly. He had already made up his mind.



"I'm goin' to eat an' ride. You can rest easy. I won't mix you up in no big trial."

Ivy stood as if petrified. When Robin put out his hand to her she shrank.

"So," he breathed. "It jars you

like that, does it?" and walked past her into the kitchen.

His food was on the table. He sat himself to eat. It might be a long stretch between meals he thought grimly. But beyond a bit of bread and meat and a cup of coffee food seemed to choke him. He was calm enough. He had no more regret than he would have had at crushing a snake's ugly head under his boot heel. But he quivered inside. He sat alone by the table listening to the mutter of voices in the other room. He had played the game. Because he had played a desperate trump to take the winning trick, he must lose. He felt that. Mayne most of all feared for his security as a little cowman tolerated in the heart of a cattle king's domain. Ivy—he couldn't make her out. Something seemed to be slowly freezing inside Robin.

Ivy came out of the other room at last and stood looking at him as he rolled a cigarette and lit it, nursing his chin in one palm as he blew smoke.

"It's awful, Robin," she sighed. "I wish I'd never gone to that dance. What'll you do?"

"Hit the trail," he answered.

Ivy stood still. She didn't offer to kiss him. She seemed deep in some consideration which had, Robin felt a little forlornly, very little to do with him.

"Will you go with me?" Some obscure impulse prompted that question. "I might never come back."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," she whispered. Then she flung herself at Robin, clung to him. She buried her face in his shoulder, shaking with sobs.

"Oh, it's awful, Robin," she cried. "I can't bear it. It's awful!"

"Can't bear what?" Robin asked.

He had no key to her mood. He couldn't tell whether her grief was for him or Mark or for herself, or whether this tragedy in which she was involved simply oppressed her beyond endurance. But her grief racked him. He knew no way to comfort her. He could not stay to comfort her. For a moment he thought of explaining that this trouble had arisen simply because Mark Steele was a thief trying to cover his trail. But it was a little late for explanation which did not alter facts. They had never told Ivy the real truth. And Mark was dead. It didn't matter now.

She withdrew from his arms and began nervously to gather up dishes. Robin watched her for a minute. Some sort of impalpable barrier had risen between them. Nothing he could say or do would make it any different.

"Well, I got to get organized," he said and rose. Ivy looked at him once, went on with her work. Old Mayne appeared in the doorway.

"What you aim to do?" he inquired uneasily. "Stand pat, or light out?"

"What you think yourself?" Robin asked. It was an idle question. He knew what he would do. He was only curious to know what Mayne really wanted him to do.

"If it was anybody but Sutherland you might come clear," Mayne grumbled. "With the Block S pullin' the strings you'll get manslaughter sure as blazes."

"Suppose I stand trial and get a year, or two, or ten?" Robin went on. "Where'll I be at with you two when I come out?"

Mayne glanced at his daughter, wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. The girl stood silent. Robin looked from one to the other. A faint sardonic smile fluttered about his lips.

"You got a home here any time you come back," Mayne said. "You know that."

There was no warmth in the assurance. Robin felt that when he had ridden out into the night something like relief would be the most definite sensation in the agitated breasts of these two.

"Well, you don't need to worry," he said at last. "I'm not goin' to stand arrest. I don't know as any Tyler ever did, come to think of it. Chances are if they send a

deputy sheriff after me he'll ride careful, prayin' to God he don't come on me. There's a lot of territory between here an' Texas where a man can make a fresh start."

He walked out without waiting for an answer. Mayne followed with a lantern. Robin saddled Red Mike, led him out and dropped the reins at the bunkhouse door. There were a few odds and ends he wanted, clothes he would need. In twenty minutes he was ready, rifle slung under his stirrup leather, a hundred rounds of ammunition belted on, his clothes in a war-bag across his saddle. He turned with his hand on the stirrup and walked back to the house. He couldn't leave Ivy like that. He was sick inside, but he couldn't go without a word.

"I'm gone to the wild bunch, hon'," he put his arms around her.

Ivy sobbed afresh, repeating that senseless, "Oh, it's awful," over and over until Robin stopped her mouth with a kiss that brought no answering pressure from her cold lips.

"I'm gone," he said briefly. "You want me to come back?"

"I don't want you to go," she cried, "I don't want you to go!"

"I got to."

"I guess so. All right," she seemed to collect herself. "Write to me Robin, an' tell me how you make out."

"I'll get word to you," he promised. "Good-by."

Within ten minutes he drew up at his own door. He came nearly to passing the dimly outlined cabin with a glance and a sigh, but he recalled some papers he thought wise to take and so dismounted. He struck a match, got what he wanted out of a tin box on a shelf, and rode on.

The moon was still below the horizon. Robin pointed Red Mike's nose straight for the Block S home ranch and rode fast. The point he bore for lay straight across the Bear Paws where the Montana Central branched off the main line of the Great Northern. He could go in three directions from there. He would be on a train before word of that killing reached the Block S.

He had an idea that pursuit and search would be perfunctory until Adam Sutherland stirred up the county authorities, privately speeded up the mechanism of the sheriff's office. Even if Thatcher or one of the others took horse and rode soon they could cover ground no faster than he. He would beat them to the railroad by hours.

After that—well Robin knew the range men, banked for safety on that knowledge. They would look for him anywhere but on a train. And Robin meant in that hour to turn his back forever on the range and cattle and cowthieves, all that had been his life ever since he could remember. He rode over the high, moon-washed divide of the Bear Paws in snow three feet deep with a maturing plan and a definite purpose and destination in mind. A clean break! A new country, a different country. Everything behind him severed.

From the Bar M Bar to Havre Junction was a little over forty miles in an air-line. Robin dismounted in the outskirts of the little town at three a. m., having ridden the distance in six hours.

He stood patting Red Mike's sweaty neck while the beast nuzzled him impatiently.

"So-long, old boy," he whispered. "You'll be free to roam now. I hope nobody grabs you just because they know I've quit the country."

Red Mike rolled in the snow, shook himself like a dog, ambled away, vanished in the dark. In three or four days he would be grazing with the wild horses on Chase Hill, or by Cold Spring, back in his old haunts. Robin watched him go with a little pang.

Then he took his saddle on his shoulder and passed along a dark lifeless street until he found a livery stable with a sleepy hostler whom he roused off a cot in the office.

"I want to leave this saddle here for a spell," he said.

"All right. Chuck her in the harness room," the man said. "Gee whiz. I'm goin' to pound my ear again."



Robin gained the railroad station without meeting a soul. The saddle would be safe for a month, six months, a year. He was going where he would not need a saddle. If he didn't come back to claim it, no matter.

In a dim corner of the empty waiting-room he changed to his good suit and plain shoes. Then he sat down to await the west-bound passenger.

This train would pass through Big Sandy at six o'clock. There was little like-

lihood of anyone there knowing that Mark Steele had passed out of the picture. No one would dream, if they did know, of Robin Tyler riding boldly west on the Montana Central through Sutherland's home town. If he could get past Fort Benton and Helena without being recognized he was safe. Detective bureaus did not flourish in the cow country. Sheriffs had duties enough at home without going far afield for trouble. The survivor of a private war who quietly left for parts unknown was seldom troubled by the authorities in a distant state.

Robin banked on that. He would go far and he would never come back. It would be a closed chapter. Sitting in that dimly lit room he felt no fear of consequences, no pang of remorse, only a strange touch of sadness. He hadn't wanted it to be that way. Six months earlier he had looked forward confidently, joyously indeed, to a future in the shadow of the Bear Paws, a future that comprised roundup and wild riding, a bunch of cattle of his own, a home on Little Birch—and Ivy to make that home bright. He had loved the sight of the hills in summer, the pressure of the wind on his face as he rode. Life had been pleasantly compounded of hope and ambition and love, the regard of his fellows and a singular sense of oneness with his environment.

He shook himself out of this brooding. It made him ache. It was done, finished. He might drift eventually to other cattle ranges, but he would never ride the Bear Paws again, he would never sit on Chase Hill at sundown and watch the after-glow rose-pink on Old Centennial.

And he would not listen again to May Sutherland's throaty voice. Robin was conscious enough of his mental processes to wonder why he thought of May Sutherland now instead of Ivy, why the image of the one who had wept bitter tears on his shoulder six hours ago grew obscured by a sharp-cut vision of the other sitting on a sorrel horse looking wide-eyed into the west where the plains rolled like the sea.

May would have understood how a man might be caught in a vicious circle and forced to play the only card he held. He doubted if Ivy did.

Anyway, it didn't matter, Robin assured himself morosely. Neither woman could count for much now. He was to all intents an outlaw. Before long there might literally be a price on his head.

He kept his face to the window on the opposite side of the car when the train

hauled up at Big Sandy Station. Dawn was breaking when the Fort Benton stop came. Beyond Fort Benton Robin breathed easier. Once the train passed Great Falls and bore up into the foothills of the Rockies he shook off his wariness and began to view the country with interest. He was in a new country already and the lure of the unknown began to exert its spell.

Robin was for the coast, the far Pacific which he had never seen. He had little of the landsman's curiosity about the sea, but he knew that no one would dream of a cowpuncher with a killing behind him planting his stakes on Puget Sound. He had bought a ticket on the train. As that read Helena was his destination. Helena was at once the state capital and the winter rendezvous and residence of many cattlemen, Sutherland among them. On any street corner he might meet a man he knew. So Robin kept on to Butte. He could make a detour and get back on the main line at a junction west of the continental divide.

Thus he avoided a stop in the last place where he might be recognized. Twelve hours later he was forging along the Hell Gate River, the Rockies behind him, the world ahead of him, a ticket to Seattle and three hundred dollars in his pocket.

The sun blazed in the car windows. The valley beside the track, the hills, the farther higher mountains glittered with frost and snow. Robin with his nose to a pane reflected that it might be worse. They might be burying him instead of Shining Mark. And when a man died he was a long time dead. Thus he comforted himself as the train rolled west.

A porter sonorously announcing luncheon reminded Robin that hunger could be appeased in the dining-car. He had eaten coffee and hot cakes early that morning at a chophouse in Silver Bow. He brushed his hair and followed the porter.

In the second Pullman to the rear he



brought up in the doorway with a start. Three seats ahead, facing him wide-eyed with surprise, sat May Sutherland. A broad pair of shoulders surmounted

by a thick red neck informed him that Adam Sutherland was her vis-a-vis. For a moment Robin's eyes met the girl's inquiring stare. Then he swung on his heel

and went back to his seat in the tourist. The world was too small. There would be no food for him in that dining-car. He did not dare run the gauntlet.

For an hour Robin chafed in his seat. Here was both disturbance and danger. The mere knowledge that May was within speaking distance troubled him in a vague fashion. And if Adam Sutherland laid eyes on him! By now the owner of the Block S must have been informed of what had befallen Mark Steele.

Robin looked up from these reflections to find May at his elbow, smiling uncertainly. He rose. For the life of him he could not help a slightly apprehensive glance past her. She seemed to divine his thought.

"Dad's having a smoke back in the observation," she said.

"Will you sit down a minute," Robin bethought himself of courtesy. May slipped into the seat facing him, looked at him with a sober intentness.

"What has happened?" she asked quietly.

Robin stared. Either she knew what had happened, or her intuition was uncanny.

"How do you know anything has happened?" he countered.

"I don't know," she replied slowly. "But I have that sort of feeling. When you came to our car and turned back. Perhaps it was that. I don't know."

Robin's mind worked fast. If word had reached Adam Sutherland and Sutherland discovered he was on that train, old Adam would have an officer at his elbow between stations. He doubted if May would mention his presence. Yet she might. She was frank. Robin couldn't associate her with deceit or subterfuge. But if he asked her not to mention him she wouldn't—only he would have to tell her why. And why not? She would learn eventually. Robin felt that he would rather she learned from his own lips.

He remembered with a queer glow that she had said, "If there is to be a funeral I hope it will be his."

"I'm on the dodge," he said quietly. "Mark Steele jumped me day before yesterday. I killed him. That's why I backed out of your car. I didn't want your dad to see me. I'm quittin' Montana for good."

He put his hands on his knees and faced her impassively, curious to see how she would take it. A little gleam of admiration warmed him. She had nerve, this slender wisp of a girl. She neither winced

nor looked shocked nor did any of the things a woman might reasonably be expected to do when a man calmly informs her that he has taken another man's life.

"Somehow, I don't seem to be surprised much, nor horrified, nor sorry," she murmured at last. "I suppose he crowded you into a corner. But do you have to run? Haven't you a plea of defence?"

"Not much, as it stands. And I'd need a good one," he told her soberly. "You see Steele kept diggin' into me all fall. He wanted me to jump him so that he could kill me. He drove me crazy that day in Big Sandy. I said before twenty men that I'd kill him. The kind of lawyers and the kind of witnesses that would be against me in a trial would cook my goose. There'd only be my word that I had to get him or he would have finished me. This Thatcher was there. He'll have his own story. He's just as keen to put me away as Shinin' Mark was. All things considered I can't stand trial. I was born free," he ended a little wistfully. "I've lived free and I aim to die that way. I won't take no chance on lookin' out through bars like a caged wolf for doin' somethin' that was forced on me."

"There is more than Ivy Mayne back of this," May said slowly.

"Yes," Robin admitted. "But it don't do no good to talk about that now. Too late."

May rose.

"I must go back," she said. "We are on our way to visit friends. We get off at Missoula. Is there any message I can take back to—anyone, when I go home in the spring."

Robin shook his head.

"Remember me to the hills when you go ridin'," he muttered. "That's all."

The girl's eyes clouded.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and held out her hand. "Good-by, Robin Tyler—and good luck to you."

Robin turned his face to the frosted window. There was a blur in his eyes as well as on the pane. A lump in his throat grew and swelled till it seemed as if it would choke him.

CHAPTER XV

ECHOES FROM AFAR

SITTING on a pierhead jutting from the Seattle waterfront one Sunday afternoon in April Robin surrendered himself to a mood that he had been choking down all winter.

Materially he had done well enough. He

had sought sanctuary in this seaport city and found what he sought. He had walked the streets with an assurance that he was lost in the swarming antheap. So far as Montana, the Block S, those far wide ranges went, he had ceased to be. And since he had not come there seeking glory and fortune by the white collar route he had soon found work that he could do and for which he was well paid.

But he didn't fit. He was an alien in an alien land. These people did not speak his tongue. His ways were not their ways. Even now the lessened rumble of Sunday traffic beat on his brain, a faint distasteful sound, which in mid-week roar annoyed and irritated him with its clang of complicated machinery, its feverish scurrying of crowds. There seemed no more purpose in this medley of unrest than there was in the senseless milling of a herd—except that the human herd went surging this way and that under the pressure of the invisible riders of necessity.

Here on this April afternoon the sun shone on rippling water at his feet. The surrounding hills and Sound Islands all washed clean by drenching rains were bright with spring growth. For weeks, for months, Robin had lived and moved under the gloom of murky skies, gray clouds that wept eternal tears. He had shivered on his wagon in damp fogs that carried a chill like the clammy hands of death. The sun was lost in that gloom. It was all gray, gray sky, gray streets, gray sea. Sometimes the very soul in him turned gray.

He was too far from all that he had known and cared about. In voluntary exile he might have endured with better grace, knowing that he could return if he wished. But he could not go back. If he could not go back to places and things he knew he did not care where he went.

So chafing, he could not fit himself in here. Sometimes he said to himself that it was all in his mind, that men and women, work and pleasure were the same anywhere. Only he couldn't make that a reality for himself in Seattle. Such pleasures as he sought only made him sad. Life flowed about him in a surging stream and he was like a chip in the swirls. He had laid that feeling of loneliness, that de-

pressing sense of isolation, to being a stranger, to living under a sodden, weeping sky that never cleared to let him see the blue. He had never known anything but brightness, air that was crystal-clear, a look that swept to a far horizon. Here the eyes were in a prison, shut in by streets like canyons, miles of houses monotonously alike, dark dripping forests that began where the last suburban cottages lifted among the raw stumps where logging outfits had taken their toll of the great trees.

Robin had said to himself that when he knew people, when spring came, it would be different. It was different; but the difference took the form of a more acute nostalgia. Robin had never wandered among the poets, but he knew spring-fever and he was learning in bitterness of heart the meaning of homesickness.

He turned now to face the city rising above him in terraced avenues. Smoke from ten thousand chimneys cast a haze against the soft blue sky. The rustle and noise and confusion had stilled a little, though not wholly, on this day of rest. There was a transient hush along the waterfront. A sort of beauty hovered upon the Sound. The Olympics stood out blue toward the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Yet the city faced Robin like a maelstrom from which he desired to be afar. He was sick with a subtle sorrow. And the medicine to cure him was a good horse between his legs, a look from some high ridge out over a hundred miles of grassland all green now and sprinkled with blue windflowers. There would be mountains in the distance, too; clean upstanding peaks like Gothic cathedrals rising, as the Sweet Grass and the Bear Paws rose, abruptly from the level of the great plains. The pungent smell of bruised sage, the white tents of a roundup camp in a creek bottom, the howl of a wolf far off in the night—these Robin's heart suddenly ached for—and for something else, that he felt deep within him but would never admit.

"By God, I've a mind to go back and face the music!" he said aloud. "They can't hang me. I'd as soon spend two or three years in Deer Lodge as here."

Of so little value did freedom seem to him in that moment. There was more than homesickness. A man's liberty is dear but so is pride. Only cowards fled the field. He hadn't fought a rearguard action. For four months that inner sense of shame had been slowly accumulating in Robin. All that he cared about, his little cosmos in its entirety, lay under the sha-



flow of the Bear Paws. He had been stampeded into flight from a danger real enough, but which he should have faced.

Robin rose from the weatherbeaten pile on which he sat.

"I will go back," he said to himself. "I've had enough of this. I shouldn't have run."

Within twenty-four hours he was aboard a Great Northern train rolling east through a gloomy pass in the Coast Range. He lay in a berth, his face pressed to a window pane, watching the dark forest slip by, a formless blur in the night, listening to the click-clack of rail-joints under the iron wheels. He felt shut in, oppressed by those walls of dusky timber draped with mossy streamers. Clouds above and a darksome aisle in the forest down which the train thundered. No place for a man hungry for bright sun and blue skies.

At dawn the train dropped into the Yakima country. The land opened up in wide vistas. Cattle grazed on rolling hills, dark moving dots on pale green. Robin threw open a window. He leaned out sniffing. Sagebrush ran up to the right of way, receded into the distance, silver-gray in the first sunlight. He could smell it, sweet in his nostrils as camp-fire smoke to an Arab.

He lay back in his berth with a strange sense of relief. As the sailor sick of shore sights and sounds goes gladly down to the sea so Robin returned to his own country.

CHAPTER XVI

RESURRECTION

AT HAVRE Robin found time between trains to cross the street and find the livery stable.

"I left a saddle here about Christmas," he said to the hostler. "A three-quarter rig Cheyenne with a pair of *anqueros*."

"Yeah, I recollect. Take a look," the man replied.

Robin hauled his saddle out of the harness-room, borrowed a sack to put it in and checked it as baggage on the train. He was under way up the branch line within ten minutes. An hour and a half later he stood on the station platform at Big Sandy, wondering with a mingled curiosity and indifference how long it would be before a deputy sheriff would saunter up and say with a casual wariness:

"Well, kid, I guess you'll have to come along with me."

No, in the face of those purple mountains lifting high in the southeast, the lim-

iless stretch of Lonesome Prairie spreading north to the Canada line, all those familiar places, the troublesome future didn't seem to matter so much. Silent, lonely, sterile here and there, forbidding at first glance to such as were bred to field and



lane and orchard, the plains wove their own charm about the hearts of men. All those leagues of grass and hill and canyon seemed to hold out invisible hands to Robin. Bright with its vernal garment the land smiled answer to his eager look as a maiden smiles to a returning lover.

He stood a minute sweeping old horizons with his gaze. The station agent nodded. No one had arrived. No one had departed. It was too early in the morning for loungers. A man from Sutherland's store took up the mail-sack, said "Hello" to Robin, and departed. Robin followed him across the street. He would put up at the hotel. If he went unmolested for the present—and that was likely enough—he would take horse later and ride to the Bar M Bar. If they wanted him they could come and get him. Months in a strange country had taught Robin that he was not the stuff of which an Ishmael is made.

The moon-faced Teutonic host of the Bear Paw House gazed at him blandly over a varnished counter.

"Ach, so," he said. "You have been away, yes."

No more. Robin signed the register. From force of old habit he suggested a drink. Host and guest went into the bar. Backed by a mirror that reflected polished glass and decorative bottles a bartender Robin had known for years said, "Hello, kid," and set out the drinks. Robin grew a little puzzled. This was carrying the normal cow country nonchalance toward a man who had been in "trouble" to an extreme. He might have been gone only overnight, by their attitude, instead of having jumped the country after killing a well known man.

He drank, and leaned on the bar, gazing about. A rider loped from somewhere about the town and dismounted with a flourish before the hotel. He stalked in, clanking his spurs. Robin knew him, Jack Boyd of the Block S.

"Hello, old-timer," he pumped Robin's hand and slapped him on the back. "Where the hell you been all winter? Have a shot."

"On the coast," Robin said briefly.

They drank. Boyd talked. He was a rattle-tongue, no sequence to his conversation. Robin's wonder grew. What ailed them all? Were they all with him, and trying to make him feel at ease, guessing that he had come back to face trial? Men had done that before.

His gaze for a second turned to the open door. Across the street a livery barn bulked large. Its double doors gaped on the brown earth roadway. A man led out a saddled horse, put his foot in the stirrup and swung up.

Robin stared incredulously. He could see the features, the dark hair under the gray Stetson. The flash of silver conchos on saddle, bridle, chaps, silver inlay on bit and spurs, glinting in the sun; Robin saw these and still could not believe.

He turned to Boyd.

"Who's that on the black horse?" he demanded.

Boyd left off an argument with the bartender to look.

"You been snow-blind lately?" he laughed. "Your eyes still full of that Puget Sound fog? That's Shinin' Mark. You know as well as I do."

"He's actin' meaner'n I ever knew him since he got around," Boyd added in a lower tone. "Some of these days, somebody that's hot in the head and quick on the draw is goin' to get him right."

"Since he got around?" Robin caught at the first sentence, repeated it in an interrogative tone.

"Wasn't it before you went away? No? Well he got careless with his six-gun down in the Birch Creek line camp last winter and shot his fool self. Darned near cashed in. He was on the bed-ground for two months."

Robin listened, with a loud thumping in his breast, a feeling of relief that was like a great weight rolled off his back. He had seen the glaze of death gather in Mark Steele's eyes as his knees sagged under him. He had stood there looking down at the red stain spreading and soaking into the dirt floor. He had seen Mark lie like a log for twenty minutes. It had never occurred to Robin that he wasn't dead. How could a man, even an iron-hard man, survive a .45 slug through the base of his neck, in the region of his wishbone? Yet there he was, reining in a black horse that

curvetted and twisted in eagerness to be off, while Mark talked to the stableman. Robin could see his lips move.

The old passion flickered up in Robin's breast. All the indignity, the calculated insults, the treachery, Tex Matthews' death, Steele's bold thievery, stirred Robin's blood again. The old sores reopened.

So that was how it went? He wondered why. What had caused Steele and Thatcher to take that tack? Accident! Didn't want it known that an unarmed boy had shot him with his own gun. Vanity? Perhaps. It didn't matter.

Tucked within the waistband of his trousers Robin's six-shooter rested against his stomach. He slid his hand under his coat, felt the curved bone handle of the gun and took a step toward the door.



Boyd's eyes had been on his face, in which all unconsciously something of Robin's feelings must have been reflected. Boyd caught his arm as he moved.

"Aw, look. Let him go for this time," he counseled cheerfully. "You got all the time there is to carry on your private war. He's pullin' for Lonesome Prairie. They're gatherin' saddle-stock. He wanted me to ride with him, but I ain't quite ready. Pass it up this time, Robin. Have a drink and let him go. Who wants to throw lead on a spring day like this?"

Robin laughed. He could scarcely have followed up that first impulse since at that very moment Shining Mark gave the black his head and broke away in a gallop.

Robin watched him grow small until he was a bobbing dot on the out trail. Then he said to Jack Boyd, "I guess he'll keep for a while."

"Let's amble across to the Silver Dollar," Jack suggested. "There's some fellows over there."

The afternoon and evening Robin spent were like those of a prodigal son returned. He had not been in Big Sandy since the evening he cut his string and went home full of shame and impotent anger. He had come back under a cloud. That cloud was dispelled. Here on his own ground, among his own peers, he passed the first carefree hours that had fallen to his lot in weary months.

He went to bed at midnight and lay for a few minutes in the dark room staring at the dim walls, smiling to himself. He did not care what came next. Shining Mark was still to be reckoned with. He still had his own word to make good. But that would be man to man, if at all. In Robin's mind the T Bar S and theft still remained a problem to be solved if he desired to remain in the Bear Paws. But the outcome of any personal clash with Mark Steele was something Robin could now accept with composure. Somehow, in his mind, Shining Mark had shrunk to normal proportions. Or perhaps he himself had grown. He couldn't say. But he knew how he felt.

Robin ate breakfast in the morning, took horse and rode south, rode with a heart as light as the little clouds drifting around Shadow Butte. The Butte itself lifted its cone summit high above him. He rode past it on ground softened by spring rains, warmed by a spring sun, green with new grass and speckled with flowers. The creeks ran clear and strong. The Bear Paws nursed snow-caps on the highest peaks, white pyramids on a base of dusky pine. Crows sailed cawing around him. Meadowlarks swung on sagebrush trilling their mating song. Robin lifted his lusty young voice in a ribald version of The Spanish Cavalier, a careless horseman chanting as he rode.

He pulled up a minute on the ridge where he had watched the sunset with May Sutherland, and the singing mood passed. It was all different now. His face turned toward the Bar M Bar. He rode on soberly wondering what his welcome would be like. He stopped once more to gaze at the closed door of his own cabin, but he did not dismount. The new grass was springing thick in the bluejoint meadow. He smiled. He might have a use for that place yet.

Ten minutes later he rode into Mayne's. Old Dan himself stood in the stable door. He stared at Robin, speechless.

"Well, I'm back," Robin announced the obvious.

Mayne shook his hand, but there was no heartiness in his grip.

"You ain't exactly overcome with joy, are you?" Robin challenged. "What's wrong with you—or with me?"

"Nothin'. Nothin' at all," Mayne protested. "Only—Well, things is sorta different, I guess, from last fall."

"How?" Robin's tone was curt.

"Aw, hell," Mayne growled. "I might

as well give it to you straight. Me an' Mark Steele has buried the hatchet. He's bought a half-interest in the Bar M Bar. We was a little wrong about them T Bar S's. Anyway, that's settled. So—Well, you see how it is, don't you?"

"You've took Mark Steele in as a partner?" Robin stared with narrowing eyes.

"Yeah. His old man died in Oklahoma an' left him fifteen thousand cash. It come about kinda offhand. They hauled Mark up here after—after he got shot down Birch Creek, an' we took care of him. He ain't so bad when you know him."

"I see," Robin said slowly. "So because he has a bunch of money to put in with you you've overlooked a little thing like him stealin' your stock. You've taken a cowthief for a partner!"

"That's tall talk, young feller," Mayne growled.

"Maybe. But I've said it. If it worries you I won't talk no more. But you know what I think. Yes, it sure makes it different," Robin muttered. "I'll go see Ivy an' ride on."

"You better—" Mayne began, but Robin had turned his back and was striding toward the house. The old man stood leaning against the stable wall, twisting his scraggly mustache, poking absently at the soft earth with the toe of his boot. His expression was not precisely a happy one.

Robin stalked through the kitchen. Whether driven by eagerness or anxiety he did not consider. Of old Ivy would have run across the yard to meet him. He found her in the living-room sitting beside a window which commanded the yard. He knew she had seen him. She rose as he entered, but there was no welcome in her eyes.

They were darkly sullen, a little frightened.

Robin didn't speak. He came up to her, put his hands on her shoulders, looked searchingly into her



face. What he saw there troubled him with a sudden heart heaviness. To be near her stirred him deeply. Yet as he looked at her he knew that something which had linked them close was gone, extinguished like a burned-out candle.

"You don't seem noway glad to see me," he said gently.

"Did you expect me to be?" she returned. "You never wrote."

"How could I, the way things were?" he asked. "You know I would have sent word. It never struck you I'd either do that or come back because I couldn't stay away from—from everybody and everybody?"

"You ran like a scared coyote," she said tensely. "An' you didn't shoot Mark, after all. He shot himself with his own gun. You were just scared of him."

"Yes? Well?"

Robin paused on the interrogation. He shook her gently.

"Are you goin' to bust everythin' up between us?" he asked quietly. "Is that the way you feel? Did I have to camp right on your trail to hold you?"

"It's already busted," Ivy snapped.

She shook herself free of his hands, backed away a step or two, looking at Robin with a dumb implacable resentment smoldering in her eyes. She turned to a shelf on the wall, took something out of a box and handed it to Robin without a word. It was the little diamond he had given her—their engagement ring. Robin held it in the palm of his hand. A pang of sadness, mingled with a touch of anger stabbed him.

"Maybe it'll do for another girl," Ivy said spitefully. "I don't need it no more."

"Neither do I," he said hotly, and flung the ring into the dead ash of the fireplace. For a moment they stared at the puff of ashes where it fell, at each other. The girl's lips quivered. Robin turned on his heel and walked out of the house.

Old Mayne still leaned against the stable wall. Robin gathered up his reins, turned to ask a question.

"Ivy goin' to marry Steele?"

He shot the words at Mayne with a harshness that made the old man start.

"I reckon so," he said apologetically. "I kain't help it."

"Nobody said you could," Robin flung over his shoulder as he reached for his stirrup.

Dark found him sitting with his feet on his own stove, in a house without food or bedding, thinking, thinking! Tomorrow he would ride back to town. But tonight—here—he was not conscious of hunger nor of physical discomfort as he sat with hands clasped over his knees with an ache in his breast and a turmoil in his brain.

Sometimes it was bad for a man to see things too clearly.

CHAPTER XVII

A CHALLENGE

BEFORE dawn Robin saddled and headed south on the trail of Red Mike. Minus supper and breakfast he was hungry, but his mount was fresh and fed with grazing in the little pasture. Robin was tough. A meal more or less didn't greatly matter. And sunrise brought him a happier mood. Luck also bestowed a double quantum as if to make up for past niggardliness. Ten miles from the Bar M Bar he ate hot cakes and coffee with a lowly shepherd tending his flock on the northern flank of Chase Hill. Within an hour of that camp he found his sorrel horse, ranging as the cowhorse at liberty was wont to range, with a band of the untamed.

The wild bunch broke headlong in the general direction of the Bar M Bar. Robin fell in behind them. The direction suited his book. He had a bed-roll and a pack-saddle still at Mayne's, and a cowpuncher's bed was part of his working outfit. He would need that bedding.

So he loped behind the wild horses until they ran themselves out. Once Robin caught up and jogged at their heels he headed them where he wished. With rope ready he watched his chance. A touch of the spurs, a deft throw, and the rawhide noose closed about Red Mike's burnished copper neck.

Robin led him on to Mayne's, changed his saddle to Red Mike's back and lashed his bedding on the livery horse. He saw Ivy's face for a moment at a window. Her father strolled over to say a word or two. Robin answered in monosyllables, not because he was still angry or resentful—that had all evaporated—but because there was nothing more to say. When the last hitch was taken in the packrope he rode on.

He slept that night at a horse ranch in the foothills half way between Shadow Butte and Big Sandy. Before noon he was in sight of the town, the packhorse trotting to keep up with Red Mike's running walk. He did not know what he was going to do but that uncertainty sat lightly on his mind. He had money in his pocket. An able range rider was welcome anywhere. In all the long tier of states bordering the east slope of the Rockies a man who could ride and rope could be a rolling stone and still gather moss. If the Bar M Bar and the Block S were both taboo there was still the Bear Paw Pool, the Shonkin, the YT and the Circle within a radius of seventy

miles. He did not have to quit Montana, only that immediate section of the Bear Paw Mountains—and that merely because he chose. The south side of the hills had grown distasteful as well as dangerous. On the latter count alone he would not have retreated. He was not even sure he would leave. He would never run again. Once was enough.

But still he was minded to leave Birch Creek and Little Eagle and Chase Hill, all that varied region he had haunted for three happy years. Robin wanted to go clean, to be rid of every tie. Most of them were broken. There remained only that hundred and sixty acres which he had dreamed of making a home. He would sell it if he could, for what he could get. Since the Block S was the only outfit that set any store by land Robin thought he might sell it to Adam Sutherland. Looking far sightedly into a future that should long outlast himself, Sutherland had increased his acreage as his herds increased. Sutherland would give him something for that homestead, although old Adam owned thousands of acres he had got for a song, and sung the song himself. Robin didn't want to see it again. Shining Mark in partnership with Dan Mayne. Mark marrying Ivy. Pah!

Yet in spite of these dolors, riding across earth that exhaled the odor of new growth under a sun blazing yellow in a sapphire sky Robin's spirits gradually rose. A man couldn't be sad in the spring astride of a horse that bounced under him like a rubber ball. Robin whistled. He sang little snatches of song. He pulled up on a hill to stare across the flat in which Big Sandy lay. Space and freedom! Room to move and breathe—and some to spare. The sunrise plains before they were fenced and trammled. A new, new land but yesterday wrested by the cattleman with his herds from the Indian and the buffalo. Robin could not wholly and consciously visualize the old Wild West of which he was a part. He could only feel instinctively that as it was it was good.

Concretely his mind turned upon mat-

ters of immediate concern. Below him, where Big Sandy Creek debouched from the rolling country he saw tents and wagons and a cluster of horses.

"Aha," he said to Red Mike, "there's the Block S. They're in off Lonesome Prairie. They'll be draggin' it to the home ranch to get organized for roundup. I reckon Shinin' Mark'll be in town."

It was out of his way to swing over to the Block S camp. He had no qualms about bearding the wolf—Robin couldn't think of Mark Steele as a lion; a lion in his mind had a certain majesty—but he saw no reason for seeking the wolf in his own lair. Town would do as well. He had no desire to avoid Shining Mark. In fact he had a certain curiosity about what Mark would do or say when they met. To Thatcher he gave scarcely a second thought.

He stabled his horses. By the hitching rack before the Silver Dollar a row of cow ponies drooped their heads in equine patience. Robin walked into the saloon. His gun was belted on his hip, the first time he had ever carried a six-shooter openly in Big Sandy. Steele was not there. Block S men, Jack Boyd among them, greeted him hilariously. Thatcher alone neither spoke nor smiled. Robin looked him in the eye.

"Well," he said casually, "if there's anything on your mind I'm listenin'."

"Nothin' much besides my hat," Thatcher made a feeble effort at grinning. "I'm not lookin' for trouble—unless you are."

That was fair enough in all outward seeming, and Robin felt that Thatcher, for whatever reason, spoke the truth. Most decidedly Tommy Thatcher was not keen for trouble. He showed that plainly enough. It didn't occur to Robin that his own attitude was aggressive, that he was taking a wild bull by the horns with a confidence that made the bull give ground. Thatcher's words and bearing simply gave him an opportunity publicly to close that incident in so far as it could be closed.

"I never went lookin' for trouble in my life," Robin said quietly. "I sidestep it if I can. If I can't—"



He shrugged his shoulders.

"Come on have a drink an' let her slide," Thatcher proffered the peace symbol of the range. Men with bad blood between them didn't drink together.

"It happens I'm not drinkin' today, not with anybody," thus Robin announced to all and sundry that he was not refusing the olive branch merely because it came from Thatcher—although he would have died thirsty rather than drink with a man he felt sure had sped one of the bullets that snuffed out Tex Matthews' life. "Thanks, just the same."

Probably no one but himself detected the sardonic note in that phrase of declination.

He walked on up toward the store. He didn't know Mark Steele's whereabouts and he cared less. He wanted to see Adam Sutherland. The old man was in town. If in seeking the owner of the Block S he ran across Shining Mark that was as it happened.

He didn't have to ask a clerk if Sutherland was about. Back by the bookkeeper's desk Sutherland occupied his favorite roost deep in an armchair. The cattleman's face, round and red about a walrus-like mustache didn't alter its normal placidity as Robin approached.

"Hello, kid," he greeted. "I haven't seen you for quite a spell."

"No, and you maybe won't see me for quite a spell again," Robin answered. "If I can do some business with you."

"Well, shoot," Sutherland encouraged.

"It's nothin' much," Robin said. "Except that I've been away for quite a while. Since I've been back and looked the ground over I reckon I'll move on again. Nobody loves me and I'm out of a job," he finished with a whimsical twist. It was true, but a truth so stated that it contained for Robin the germ of humor. "I thought maybe I'd sell you that hundred and sixty I homesteaded on the creek above Mayne's."

"Oh, did you? You reckon I'm in the real estate business?" Sutherland rumbled. "You got your deed to it?"

Robin nodded.

"How much you reckon it's worth?"

"As much as I can get for it."

"Well, I might—" Sutherland stopped abruptly. Robin saw the change of expression cross his face. He heard the front door click. Out of one corner of his eye he saw Shining Mark come striding down between the counters.

"You might what?" Robin prompted.

But Sutherland clasped his hands over his rotund stomach and leaned back in his

chair, silent and expressionless as a poker player nursing a pat hand.

"Hello, Tyler."

Robin turned his head at Mark's greeting. The quality of the man's voice was the same, arrogant, subtly menacing.

Robin didn't even trouble to reply. He looked at Mark calmly, an outward, deceptive calm for within him something was beginning to burn, a flame that he knew he must keep down. It was like being too close to a venomous snake. Only, somehow, for Robin the snake's fangs were drawn. He didn't know why he felt so sure of that, but he did. He was no more afraid of Shining Mark than he was afraid of Sutherland's elderly bookkeeper who was mildness personified, years of clerical work and domestic infelicity having rendered him harmless. He gazed at Mark with deliberate, insolent scrutiny.

"They tell me you had an accident with your gun down on Birch," he said at length.

"Yeah. Fool thing to do," Steele growled. It struck Robin that Shining Mark was a little uneasy.

"Shot yourself with your own gun, eh?" Robin drawled. "Right in the wishbone, they say. Too bad it wasn't about six inches higher. Seems like I heard, too, that it wasn't quite accidental."

"What you tryin' to do? Provoke me?" Steele asked coolly. "You act like you wanted to open up a package of trouble. I'd sure accommodate you on the spot if I was heeled. You act real bad when you happen to find me unarmed."

"You're a liar as well as a thief," Robin took a step toward him. "Do you want me to prove it?"

Shining Mark's face flamed. He looked at Robin, then at Sutherland sitting quietly in his chair, an impassive listener save that his eyes were narrowly watching both men. Mark stared at Robin. That youth laughed aloud in his enemy's face. A whimsical thought took form in a play on words—steel had lost its temper!

"You're weakenin', Mark," he taunted. "I've just come in from Mayne's ranch. I said you were a liar and a thief. I say it again."

"I heard you," Steele replied, making a visible effort at self-control, although his lean face was burning. "You don't need to say anything to me at all. I'll drop you in your tracks as soon as I get my hands on a gun, you mouthy pup. You sure do swell up when you happen to have a six-gun on your hip and catch me barehanded."

"I beat you barehanded once, and I can do it again," Robin kept his voice low, his tone casual. "I don't reckon you understood why I called you a liar. I know a Texas trick or two myself. You——"

He darted a forefinger at Mark and the man jumped backward, but not so quickly that Robin's fingers failed to tap smartly against something hard and outline it briefly under Steele's coat.



"You got a gun in a Texas holster under your arm," Robin said contemptuously. "And you talk about being unarmed. As if anything you could say or do would throw me off my guard for a second. You swine! When I think that you put the fear of God in me once, I could laugh. That's how dangerous you look to me now."

Robin took off his soft Stetson and slapped Mark across the face. Mark put up his hand and backed away. Behind him Robin heard Adam Sutherland grunt, heard the scrape of his chair-legs. Robin laughed again. He remembered the dead cows in Birch Creek. He remembered Tex Matthews' stiffened body across a bloody saddle, borne by a tired horse, led by a tired rider through a long winter night. He remembered with a bitter clearness Steele swinging his spurred foot from a table in a line camp and saying cold-bloodedly, "I hate to muss up a nice clean camp but you've bothered me long enough."

With those pictures blazing bright in his memory Robin had to laugh—or cry. He did laugh, looking straight into Steele's burning eyes, but there was no mirth in the sound.

"I've said my say," he kept his voice without passion. "If a gun under your arm isn't good enough for you go buckle one on your hip. I'm not even going to bother looking for you, Steele. That's how much I think of you. I won't waste no time nor talk on you after this. If you want my scalp—and you've been after it a long time—you'll have to come after me. If you jump me you won't be able to say it was an accident with your own gun a second time."

Steele turned and walked away. Once he hesitated, seemed about to turn. Robin stood watching him, one hand resting on

the desk, a half-smoked cigarette in his fingers. And when Steele passed through the swinging doors Robin followed, his thought and vision so concentrated on the man ahead of him that he did not hear Sutherland call after him, "Hey, Tyler. Come back here. I want to talk to you."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SEAT OF THE MIGHTY

ABOUT Shining Mark's capacity for ruthless action Robin had no illusions whatever. He did not jump to the conclusion as a lesser man might have done that his open defiance of Steele had driven him to a cover from which he would not emerge. Mark was pretty deeply committed one way and another, and he was growing more cautious, that was all. Robin had simply put him on the defensive. Mark would get him when and where he could. After that exchange before Adam Sutherland Shining Mark had to go through with it; he couldn't hold up his head before his employer if he didn't. Robin knew that when he deliberately called him "thief." That was why he uttered the epithet. He meant to put the shoe on the other foot, make Mark the aggressor if war must ensue. And he had succeeded. The mere fact that certain fibres within him had hardened so that he neither feared Steele nor any other man did not lead Robin to underestimate his enemy. Shining Mark was more dangerous than ever, for all he had backed up from an insult with a gun hidden under his armpit.

So Robin took no foolhardy chances. He went to the hotel, lounged in the bar and the office, and kept his eyes about him. Two or three of the Block S riders wandered in. There was nothing to indicate that they had heard of any new clash. Robin chaffed with them, but he did not cross the street. He had said his say. The rest was up to Mark.

Watching idly through a window half an hour later Robin saw Mark mount his horse and ride to the store, emerge therefrom presently and jog down the street looking neither to right or left, vanishing at last toward the roundup camp.

Robin ate supper, played cards until ten o'clock, went to bed. In the morning he saddled Red Mike and rode south a mile or two. The Block S outfit was gone. Robin rode west toward the mountains to see a rancher he knew. He had all the time in the world. He meant to stay around Big Sandy two or three days. He

would sell that bit of land to Adam Sutherland if he could. Then he would drift. He would go on spring roundup with the YT or the Pool. One of the big outfits would make a place for him he knew. If later his trail crossed Mark Steele's—well, he would never eat his words.

In the evening he went back to town. When he walked into the hotel the rotund host said, "Sutherland, he send the Chinaman for you. He want to see you by his house ven you come in already."

Robin walked over to the Sutherland cottage. Sutherland stood on the top step rolling a cigar between his lips.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. Come on in. Still chilly in the evenin's."

Robin sat down in an upholstered chair in a comfortably fitted homelike room. Sutherland stared at him for a minute.

"You'll know me, I reckon, next time you see me," Robin suggested dryly. That appraising stare ruffled him a trifle.

Sutherland grinned.

"I reckon I will," said he. "What possessed you to jump on Mark Steele roughshod?"

"He had it coming," Robin defended. "Anyway, I didn't jump him. I just told him where he got off."

"Well, I guess he got off all right," Sutherland grumbled. "Now what's the root of this trouble between you and Mark Steele? Strikes me it's more than a girl. Twice you've called me a thief. I got a right to know, I think."

"You have," Robin admitted frankly. "But I'm not goin' to tell you, right now. You'd have only my bare word. If I had a roundup crew to myself for a couple of months I might be able to show you."

"Is it that serious?" Sutherland asked slowly.

Robin looked at him keenly. He couldn't quite make out this heavy-faced man whose brain was of a vastly different quality from his flesh-burdened body or he would never have become a power in the Bear Paws. Sutherland wasn't stupid. Neither was Robin. Only Robin didn't want to talk, now that he had a hearer—where six months earlier he would have poured out his tale.

"Do you know that Steele has bought in with Dan Mayne?" he asked Sutherland.

Sutherland nodded. His eyes were on Robin narrowly.

"This got something to do with Bar M Bar stock, this trouble between you two?"

"Partly."

"You don't seem to want to talk."

"I won't," Robin said bluntly. "If I had a chance I might show you."



"All right, you can show me."

"How?" Robin inquired.

"Well," Sutherland drawled, "you can go to work for the Block S for one thing. You said

nobody loved you and you were out of a job. I'll give you a job."

"I couldn't work for the Block S as things stand," Robin said impatiently.

"You know that."

"Don't see why. You're a cowpuncher. I can use you."

"See here," Robin told him bluntly. "I've ideas of my own. The only way I'd ever work for the Block S would be to run it."

"All right," Sutherland said abruptly. "I'll give you a whirl at being a range boss. Mark Steele has quit me. Think you can fill his boots? It'll take a man."

"I fill my own boots," Robin answered slowly. "That's good enough."

A slow smile spread over Sutherland's face.

"You'll be the youngest wagon boss in Montana, I reckon," he drawled.

Robin didn't answer. But his heart leaped within him. To attain the seat of the mighty at a single bound! It seemed incredible. He had made a reckless statement bear rich fruit. When he told Sutherland that the only way he would work for the Block S would be to run it he had been sincere enough; but that was only an oblique way of stating that he didn't want to be a Block S rider as matters stood. This was a horse of a different color. When it came to that he was a cowman. Responsibility had no terrors for him. If he could handle men? Well, why not? Power is a sweet morsel for any man to set his teeth in. Robin had confidence without vain conceit. He knew himself equal to the job.

Sutherland mused, pulling at his walrus mustache, his rubicund face glowing behind the smoke-cloud of his cigar.

"Yes, sir," he continued, "you'll be the youngest wagon boss in Montana. I'm kinda disappointed in Mark. He was a slashin' good cowman. Maybe gettin'

some money left him has spoiled him. He's quit. Least that's how I take it. He drew all the money he had comin', put Jack Boyd in charge of the outfit, and got on the train this afternoon. So you go out an' take it over. The wagons'll be camped by the ranch. I'll give you a note to Jack."

"All right," Robin said quietly.

"Now look," Sutherland continued. "I don't want you to take up with the idea you've scared Mark Steele outa the country, because that'd be a bad mistake. If he didn't have it out with you right then and there he had his own reasons besides bein' afraid to take a chance. Mark's got a money interest on this range now. He'll be back. I'd be watchful," Sutherland said very slowly, "if I was you."

Robin had no mind to contradict that. He merely nodded.

"I don't want to crowd you," the old man went on in the kindest tone Robin had ever heard him use. "I ain't got to be near sixty and own thirty thousand cattle by goin' through the world blind, deaf and dumb. Maybe a man here and there fools me for a while. See you don't. If I trust a man and he knifes me, I don't forget. You say you can show me somethin' if you have a roundup crew to work with. Well, you got it. And I'm waitin' to be shown."

"I don't want to talk big," Robin murmured. "I'm kinda dizzy right now. But when I spread my hand on the table I think you'll say it's good."

ON A ridge overlooking the home ranch on Little Eagle Robin drew rein for a look. The painted roofs of barn and outbuildings and rambling house glowed in the sun. Windows flashed like beacons. The willows fringing creek and irrigating ditch were one shade of green, the wide meadows another, the pines that clothed the hills above still a darker hue. And there were the white tents of the roundup glistening against the sward, the scattered grazing horses. He could hear far off the sweet tinkle of bells. His outfit! The youngest range boss in Montana! Twenty riders, thirty thousand cattle, a thousand square miles of range under his hand! Robin could have whooped. Yet there was a sobering effect in the magnitude of his task. It wasn't simple. There were added complications no one knew but himself, himself and Mark Steele and Tommy Thatcher. Perhaps Adam Sutherland shrewdly guessed that where so much smoke arose there must be fire.

Robin looked away down Birch Creek

toward the Bar M Bar, thinking of Ivy Mayne being urged along a way that promised unhappiness, driven by impulses her dumb sullen heart could never fathom. Robin had lived all his young life close to nature, striving with nature. He had no bookish sophistication, but he was keenly alive, his mind kindled easily. He had a keen sense of the remorselessness of natural law. Nature's ways were sometimes dark in getting her business done. The individual wasn't so much, just as a single animal in a herd was of no great consequence—but the herd counted. The pain and passion of mating and begetting and dying was no mystery to Robin. What he didn't know he could dimly grasp. Passion was sometimes wrapped up and obscured in material complexities. Conflict was inherent in life itself, from the time a man drew his first breath until he breathed his last.

Looking away toward that hidden ranch he could visualize Ivy with Mark a sinister figure in the background. He felt sorry for her. In the same breath he wondered if May was at the home ranch. Somehow he hadn't wanted to ask.

He shook himself out of these reflections and rode on. He had to dip into a coulee, cross a little ridge, traverse a horse pasture and pass the house to reach the camp. He dipped into the hollow. As he topped the opposite crest a head appeared, a head



surmounted by yellow hair, a pair of shoulders clad in a cream-colored blouse. Close by this figure seated on a flat rock a chestnut horse that might have been a twin brother to Red Mike stood with trailing reins.

Robin drew up beside this vision, answered the smile of greeting with a smile of his own, got down and seated himself beside May.

"I guess I'm kinda unexpected," he observed.

"Not so much," she told him. "I heard you were back."

"The boys would talk, I expect," he remarked. "Still, I guess I have some news they couldn't spread."

"Yes?" she looked curious.

"Might not interest you much, at that,"

Robin drawled. "The Block S has a new range boss."

"You?" she breathed. Her eyes danced.

"Good guess," Robin said. "Kinda funny. Kinda sudden. I don't know which is the most surprised, me or your dad."

"I'm glad," May smiled. Then she sobered. "What happened to Mark Steele? Did you meet him?"

"Yes, I met him," Robin answered truthfully. "Nothing happened. Maybe something'll happen later. I don't know. Don't care."

"I wonder why he said he shot himself by accident last winter?" the girl murmured.

"To save his face, I reckon. He's proud. He don't like to be beaten. I did beat him that time."

May stirred uneasily.

"A girl can stir up a lot of trouble sometimes," she said thoughtfully.

"It wasn't a girl. I told you that before."

"There was a girl, wasn't there?" she whispered.

"There was, but there isn't no more."

Robin crinkled his brows. He looked at May intently. He had refused even to discuss that matter with Adam Sutherland, until he had some tangible proof of his assertions. Why should he feel a burning desire to tell Sutherland's daughter all about the coil Mark Steele had woven around him. Yet that impulse was irresistible. "Can you keep things to yourself?"

"What do you think?" she asked, a touch of color rising in her cheeks.

Bluntly, baldly, with a cowpuncher's vivid terseness of phrase Robin sitting on the rock beside her, the embossed scabbard of his .45 resting against her skirt, told her the tale from the beginning, from the hour he lay on the bank below Cold Spring and watched thieves at work. When he recounted the episode in the Birch Creek line camp May shivered. When he finished she sat staring fixedly at the ground, her hands in her lap, the white fingers locked tight together. Robin bent his head to peer into her face. Her eyes were bright wet, troubled.

"Shucks," he said, "I shouldn't 'a' worried you with all that stuff."

"I'm not—not a worrier," May whispered. "Only I can see it all so clearly. I knew there was some good reason for my hating that man so. It must have been simply hell for you."

Robin swallowed something that came up in his throat. It had been hell. It moved him deeply that this slim wisp of a girl understood so clearly what it had been like. He sat silent for a minute.

Then some unreasoned impulse made him put his arms around her, draw her up close to him. For one long second May looked searchingly into his face. What she saw there must have satisfied her, for she smiled. When Robin's lips touched hers she returned his kiss with a pressure that made his heart leap. And then she snuggled her yellow head against his neck with a contented, happy sigh.

CHAPTER XIX

A COURSE DEFLECTED

MANY a time in the next two days did Robin's eyes turn on the King's castle, sprawling brown and green and white on its knoll above the ranch buildings. Like a fire that had been smoldering a long time and broken at last into flame under the winds of circumstances so love burned in his breast, a new love beside which the old one seemed only a pale flicker—something feeble, born of propinquity and unconscious desire.

Yet for all the commotion that made his heart flutter and set him to dreaming whenever his hands were idle, Robin did not let the spring grass grow under his feet in shouldering the new responsibility Sutherland had laid on him. He set his men diligently attending to the various details that would enable the Block S to start the spring roundup as a smoothly functioning machine.

If the Block S riders wondered at the lightning change in wagon bosses they wondered silently and accepted Robin at his face value. They knew that he had somehow beaten Shining Mark and any man who could do that was to be respected in any capacity. Robin had no strain put on his authority. The Block S crew knew its business. They knew a cowman when they saw him. Robin was born to the range and running a roundup was only a logical step up.

Wherefore he had no need to either train or watch his men. Mark Steele had left few loose ends behind him. There was only the regular routine of getting ready. Robin had time to burn. Some of it May helped him consume. Somehow they did not need to talk much to achieve understanding. Robin was no fool. He knew he had his spurs to win. He did not know

how Adam Sutherland would take him as a prospective son-in-law. When he voiced that doubt to May she only smiled.

"Do you remember saying to me that I'd probably marry a French count or an English lord and live in a castle and wear silk dresses all the time?" she teased. "Do you suppose dad has that sort of ambition for me?"

"Would it make any difference to you—far as I'm concerned—if he had?"

He had his arm around her at that moment. May looked up into his earnest face.

"Nobody ever quite knows what's in my father's mind," she answered slowly. "He never gives himself away. He keeps his own counsel and acts. But I know what's in my mind—and in my heart. He's been good to me in so many different ways. But when it comes to this—there's no use borrowing trouble, Robin. Wait and see. I'm yours. You're mine. Nobody can get around that."

"Is it real?" he asked. "Sometimes I wonder if it's just a fancy of yours—or if I'm dreaming."

She stopped his mouth with a kiss by way of answer.

"I'll penalize you if you say things like that," she threatened gaily. "If it's a dream I never want to wake up."

Robin, sometimes when he was alone, would look away south over the foothills, to the dark line that marked the course of Birch Creek in which nestled the Bar M Bar, recalling a dream out of which he had wakened with a bitter taste in his mouth. But this—this was different.

He would try to peer into the future. When he did it seemed unreckonable. There was still a tangle to unravel, enemies to cope with. Life hadn't become less complicated because he was off with an old love and on with a new.

It became even more complicated before long. At noon of the third day Adam Sutherland arrived. Robin rode over from camp when he saw the bay team and top buggy roll into the ranch yard.

"Come up to the house," Sutherland invited. "I got to augur with you awhile."

They walked across the yard, Sutherland silent and thoughtful. May met them on the porch. Old Adam held her at arm's length admiringly.

"You look like a new twenty-dollar gold piece," he said. "The mountain air sure agrees with you."

Color deepened on the girl's cheeks.

"It always did," she laughed.

"Tell 'em to have lunch ready in half an

hour, an' leave me an' Tyler be for a while," he said. "I got to go back to town right away."

May disappeared within. Sutherland planted himself in a wicker chair on the porch.

"Well, kid," he said bluntly, "I was a little bit previous about Mark Steele. Likewise, I've made other plans about you."

Robin stiffened but said nothing, waiting only with a touch of uneasiness for what was coming. There was bound to be a fly in the ointment, he thought morosely.

"Mark hasn't quit," Sutherland eyed him a moment before he continued. "It seems he only went off for a spell to attend some private business. Likewise, see-in' he ain't got no grudge against you, and don't exactly fancy havin' to shoot you up, an' not proposin' to quit the country just because you're on the war-path, he thought he better give you a chance to cool off."

"Oh, hell!" Robin exploded. "I don't care two whoops about Mark Steele's reasons for anythin'. Come to the point. Have you changed your mind about me runnin' the Block S?"

"Well, not exactly," Sutherland returned unruffled. "But for good an' sufficient reasons of my own," he stressed the possessive, "I've concluded to let Mark run the roundup on the home range again. I got another wagon boss job for you, though."

Robin didn't speak. He couldn't understand. It seemed to him like blowing hot and cold. There was a double disappointment in being deposed before he had fairly taken up the reins—and to stand aside for Shining Mark galled him more than he wished to admit. He rose and took his hat.

"Set down an' listen to me, kid," Sutherland's tone was friendly. Robin didn't sit down, but he stood to listen.

"There's one thing most of us don't like," Sutherland continued. "That's a man that don't know his own mind. Right now you're thinkin' I don't know my own mind. An' you're wonderin' why. Was your heart set on runnin' the Block S roundup this spring?"

Robin looked at him for a second or two.

"What's the difference," he said at last,



"what my heart might be set on? That don't spell nothin' to you. If you figure Mark Steele is a better man for your purpose than me, that settles it. But I don't have to agree with you, do I?"

"Well, I'd kinda like to have you agree with me on one or two things," Sutherland commented.

"I ain't likely to agree with you on anythin' in connection with Mark Steele," Robin declared.

"You might possibly, if you knew exactly what was in my mind," the old man said dryly. "You don't tell all you know, or think. Maybe other folks has the same habit. It's a useful habit at that, sometimes. I'll say this much, I'd a little sooner have Mark runnin' roundup for me this summer than settin' around the Bar M Bar figurin' out ways of— Well, of gettin' even with you, f'instance, for steppin' into his place, an' other little things he's probably got against you."

"So in order to protect me you'll let me go before I have a chance to show you whether I'm any good or not," Robin said ironically. "Thanks awful. Maybe you reckon I need to be spoon-fed a while yet."

"If I didn't I wouldn't waste no time on you," Sutherland grinned. "By gosh, you get sore quick. Didn't I say you still had a wagon boss' job with me?"

"I don't sabe," Robin said impatiently.

"Listen, an' maybe you will," Sutherland replied. "Think you could do any good for yourself—an' for me—if you were turned loose in the Judith Basin an' Arrow Creek country with a roundup crew to gather up five or six thousand head of stock?"

Into Robin's mind flashed a picture of himself riding those lonely bottoms south of the Big Muddy, seeking through bitter weather day after day and finding here and there what he sought. He remembered the bite of the frost, the chill of the winter winds, the glare ice. To cover that country again with a dozen riders at his back—

"Go on," he said briefly.

"I've bought the J7 brand from the Leland estate," the old man explained. "It's to be kept quiet. There's reasons. Nobody knows it only the Leland executors, myself an' you. It's not to go any farther until I'm ready to have it known. I'll send you to Benton with a letter to these people. There's an outfit organized, a hundred an' sixty saddle-horses, some men—I don't know how many. You'll

have to fill up your own crew. Supposedly you'll be runnin' the outfit for the Leland estate, but you'll be runnin' it for me, an' you'll report direct. There'll be money in a Fort Benton bank for you to draw on for pay-roll an' runnin' expenses. You'll cover the usual J7 territory, an' brand up the calves. In the fall you'll ship out everythin' that's fit for beef. That's all the instructions there is just now. You'll have a free hand."

"Why, if you don't mind me askin'," Robin put it directly to his employer, "don't you send Mark Steele over the river and let me go through with what you started me in on here?"

Sutherland leaned back in his chair, folded his hands across the generous round of his abdomen. He didn't alter his placid expression in the slightest degree.

"Darn it," he said quite casually. "When it comes to Shinin' Mark Steele you got somethin' up your sleeve. You won't tell me what it is. Well, I got somethin' up my sleeve, an' I won't tell you what it is. But I tell you, kid, as I told you in town, that I ain't lived to be sixty, I ain't made my way in the cow business by goin' through the world deaf, dumb an' blind. The reason I send you instead of Mark Steele into the Judith Basin is because I think you're better qualified for that particular job. Will you go?"

"Yes," Robin said. "Sure, I'll go."

"While you're workin' that south country," Sutherland continued, "I reckon you better hold anythin' that belongs to this side of the river an' throw 'em across when you're through."

Robin looked at old Adam placidly rolling a cigar between his lips. For a second he had the impulse to show his hand, to tell Sutherland wherein the feud between himself and Mark Steele originated. Somehow, with Steele coming back to run the Block S he couldn't quite. He had called Steele a thief to his face. He might have occasion to do so again. But accusation wasn't proof. Robin hated empty words. There was proof in plenty across the Missouri. Consciously or unconsciously Sutherland was placing him in a position to accumulate that proof in substantial form, in the shape of T Bar S yearlings and two-year-olds beyond what the brand could possibly yield.

"You'll go back to town with me this afternoon," Sutherland said. "Mark's on his way out, an' I'd as soon you two didn't get together, though he promised me he wouldn't start no fuss. I don't want no

gun-play. Will you keep your mouth shut an' your hands in your pockets if you should see him?"

"If he keeps away from me, yes," Robin agreed. "You seem darned anxious to keep peace between us two."

"Dead wagon bosses ain't much good to me," Sutherland drawled. "Dead wagon bosses an' dead cows ain't much good to anybody. You keep that in mind."

CHAPTER XX

SOUTH OF THE RIVER

ROBIN crossed the Big Muddy on a steel bridge at Fort Benton to take his first look at the J7. He found the camp on a river flat, introduced himself to a lean, dark-faced youth in charge, counted his saddle-stock, and began to reorganize. Being short-handed, his first task was to engage more riders. Luck came his way. In a week the J7 was complete—fourteen cowpunchers, two horse-wranglers, a capable cook, wagons stocked with grub. Then the J7 roundup vanished into the heart of the Arrow Creek country and Robin flung his men on circle as he moved from creek to creek.



He rode out of Fort Benton on May the tenth. By the middle of June he was combing the Bad Lands opposite the mouth of Cow Creek. Two days before the Fourth of July dawned he was lying on a bench across from Birch. For all practical purposes the spring roundup of the J7 was over. He had covered the range.

He sat now in the burning sunshine on earth so parched that it was hot to the bare hand, looking over the J7 dayherd—thinking. The herd had watered, and was taking its noonday siesta. Two riders lolled in their saddles on watch, striving to keep awake in that hot noon silence.

The "reps" who had worked with Robin's crew all spring had cut their horses and cattle and gone home. In that herd under his eye only a few Block S cattle showed, a few strays of other northern brands. The bulk of those grazing or resting cattle bore the T Bar S and the bulk of those T Bar S's were yearlings and two-year-olds—the ripe harvest of two seasons' industrious stealing. There was not

among them, Robin surmised, thirty head of the original T Bar S cattle which had been turned loose south of the Bear Paws. Decidedly Jim Bond's herd had shown a miraculous increase.

Robin looked them over and smiled—smiled and went on thinking. For two months he had played a lone hand. Sutherland had given him the briefest outline of work to be performed and left him alone. Robin had done his work. He knew he had done it well. And in addition to legitimate range work the gathering of this T Bar S stuff had exceeded his expectations. He grinned when he thought of what his spring gathering might mean to Shining Mark.

Off in the north the Bear Paws loomed blue out of the heat haze that shimmered on the plains. Robin gazed longingly at those distant mountains. He was hungry for a sight of May. He wanted to talk with Adam Sutherland. He had a crew of lusty, eager youths who had served him faithfully and he wanted them to celebrate the Fourth. He had a fancy for riding into Big Sandy with those fourteen sun-burned riders at his back.

The fruit of his reflection ripened speedily to action. He rode into camp, bade the horse-wrangler bunch the *remuda* and catch him a certain horse. He drew aside Tom Hayes, the hawk-faced rider who had proved himself a capable second in command.

"I'm goin' for a little *pasear* by myself," he said. "You move up to the mouth of the Judith in the cool of evenin'. Tomorrow shove on to the mouth of Eagle Creek. If we can cross this stuff there maybe we'll ride into Big Sandy for the Fourth. I'll be back sometime tomorrow. If I don't," he added as an afterthought, "you hold camp opposite Eagle Creek till I do come."

An hour later Robin was breasting the Missouri River. He had picked a good water horse. He went in naked, holding his clothes in a dry bundle above his head while his mount traversed that half mile breadth of swimming water.

He loped past the empty line camp where he had left Mark Steele sprawled on the dirt floor that cold December afternoon. It was hot in that sage-floored canyon. Robin took to the benchland, where cooler airs blew.

In all the broad sweep of Chase Hill and upper Birch he saw no sign of the Block S roundup. With the Bar M Bar two miles on his right he bore up into the Bear Paws and rode a sweat-lathered horse into the

Sutherland ranch at sundown. A stable-hand told him Sutherland was at home. Robin stalked over to the house. When his spurs clinked on the first front step a yellow head was raised out of a hammock and May came with outstretched hands and shining eyes to meet him.

"It's been a long spring," she whispered. "I'm a patient creature, Robin, but the time has seemed so long, so long!"

"And maybe my time with you will be short," he answered tenderly. "It all depends. Where's your dad?"

"He took his rod and went up the creek to catch some trout for breakfast," May said. "He'll be back soon, I think. Has anything new cropped up? Where have you been all these weeks, and what have you been doing, Robin Hood? You vanished so quickly. What happened? I have asked dad, and he merely grins."

"You got my letters, didn't you? I wrote twice," Robin asked. "I told you I'd gone to run a roundup south of the river. I didn't have much chance to send mail. I've been in the Judith Basin and the Bad Lands all spring."

"You write dear letters," she smiled. "But you don't give much information about what you're doing—only about how you feel."

"Well, isn't that what you mostly want to know?" he teased. "Don't you like for me to say I love you in as many different ways as I can set it down in black and white?"

"Of course, silly," she reproved. "But why didn't you stay here and run our roundup instead of Mark Steele?"

"Didn't your dad tell you?"

"He's like you," she murmured. "He thinks and looks and acts more than he talks. There he is now."

Adam Sutherland came ambling slowly across the yard bearing a rod and creel.

He nodded to Robin, opened his basket to show them half a dozen glistening fish. Then he shouted through an open window. A Chinese houseboy came to bear away tackle and trophies. Sutherland lit a cigar.

"Well, Tyler," he said, "I expect you want to see me about somethin', eh?"

May rose and withdrew, stopping behind her father's chair to pat his head with one

hand while she blew Robin a kiss off the other. When they had the porch to themselves Sutherland turned an impassive eye on Robin.

"I was sort of expectin' you'd turn up," said he. "How'd you get along with the spring work?"

"All right. I'm through except for a day herd we're holdin'. The outfit's movin' in opposite Eagle Creek ford tomorrow," Robin told him. "We've covered the range. Branded out a tally of seventeen hundred calves. Beef stock is shaping up pretty good in the Basin. Feed's good. Looks like it might be a little overstocked, though, on a dry year. Too many sheep outfits over there."

Sutherland nodded.

"I'll move that J7 stuff north next year," he remarked absently.

Robin sat silent a moment.

"Look," he said abruptly. "I've got to stir up somethin'. You asked me twice why I called Mark Steele a thief. I'm goin' to tell you why, now."

Sutherland took the cigar out of his mouth, inspected critically the ash.

"Shoot," he said casually. "I'm listenin'."

Robin began at the beginning the day he lamed Stormy the gray horse by Cold Spring. He spared nothing, no one, himself, Mayne, Ivy, Mark Steele. All that had grown out of Shining Mark's deprivations had burned in Robin's breast so long it was a relief to speak freely. Sutherland sat staring at the porch floor, frowning a little, forgetting to puff at his cigar. Once or twice he shifted abruptly in his chair. Once or twice he stared at Robin with narrowed eyes. Dusk deepened into dark while Robin talked. The crickets chirped in the dry grass. Stars twinkled above.

"So all the young stuff that's been branded T Bar S and thrown over the river on the ice I've got in my day herd," Robin concluded. "There is a little over three hundred head. I expect a roundup of T Bar S's on the home range would show a lot more. Short of killin' Mark Steele if he jumps me—and I suppose he will jump me if he gets a chance because he knows he isn't safe with me on this range—I don't know as I can do any more single-handed. I see no way of provin' Mark owns the T Bar S or any interest in it. I do know that he and Thatcher rustled those calves. I've told you how. The increase in young T Bar S stuff proves it. I'm just as sure they shot Tex and tried to



get me as I am that you're settin' in your chair. But I don't know whether what I know and have guessed would convict 'em in court. There it is. What do you think? And what do you want me to do with those T Bar S's?"

Sutherland rose.

"Come on in where there's a light," he invited.

He led the way into a room originally built of logs and now paneled to the ceiling with oak. Robin had never been inside the Sutherland house before. There was a homelike air of comfort in this room, a peculiarly satisfying atmosphere that Robin could feel even if he did not understand how it was attained. Soft thick rugs lay underfoot. There were deep upholstered chairs, a few pictures on the walls, trophies of Sutherland's rifle in the way of deer and elk antlers, and a great bearskin spread before a yawning fireplace. An oil lamp burned at each end of the room. Sutherland motioned Robin to a chair, shoved a box of cigars across an oaken table, sat down himself and frowned at the floor.

"This ain't so new to me," he said at last. "Only it comes a lot straighter than I expected. Tex Matthews was my man. I sent him to work for Mayne on purpose. A man with cows scattered over a hundred miles square can't afford to sleep. If you've got anythin' there's always some smart feller layin' awake nights figurin' how he can take it away from you. A thief will steal. Men you trust will go wrong. It seems like——"

He fell silent for a minute.

"I hate it!" he began again presently. "For three years I trusted him like he was my son. He's aggressive and he's got brains. But I guess it's the wrong kind of brains, the fox kind. He is foxy. If he has laid off rustlin' this spring, he's pretty well in the clear. I can't touch him on suspicion. Unless——"

He sat tugging at his drooped mustache.

"Like havin' a skunk under your house where you can't get at him, and you can't hardly stand the smell," he said. "No wonder he wanted to kill you."

"And you never suspected him?" Robin asked. "If Tex was your man didn't he tell you anythin'? He knew. And why did you send him to work for Dan Mayne?"

"I wasn't really suspicious of Mark till this winter, not till after he was supposed to have shot himself, an' you jumped the

country. I had nothin' but a hunch last year that somebody was rustlin'. Tex Matthews was on the lookout with the roundup. Another man worked on the outside. I got a notion Mayne might be draggin' his rope. That's why I had Tex edge in there. Tex told me straight he thought Mark was usin' the T Bar S for a blind. I didn't believe him. Not till he was dead. I felt kinda bad about that. There's a big bill for those two to pay, Tyler. But it's got to be collected legal. I don't want no strangler work on this range, nor shootin'—unless deputy sheriffs do the shootin'. The gunfighter's day ought to be over. We got organized law an' law officers. You keep that in mind when your trigger-finger itches for Mark Steele."

"My gun hand don't ever itch," Robin answered slowly. "Only if he jumps me, or even acts like he might jump me, I got a lot of things to remember that don't incline me to be peaceful."

"A man has a right to defend himself," Sutherland admitted. "But you have too much chalked up against Steele to stop at defendin' yourself. You burn inside when you face him. I've seen it in your eye twice now. An' I want him alive," he finished grimly. "I want to make him a shinin' example to cow thieves an' murderers."

"Meantime you keep him in charge of your outfit where he's got all the chance in the world to do most anythin' he wants to do," Robin said tartly. "I don't sabs the play."

Sutherland smiled faintly.

"I want him where I can keep cases on him," he said. "Suppose he does get away with a few calves. What's a few hundred calves more or less? I'd lose a thousand head of stock cheerful, to catch a cowthief out of my own outfit. I'll get them cattle all back anyway, some time. The only question is—how can we nail him an' Thatcher dead right?"

An idea which had lurked nebulous in Robin's mind for days took definite form in that instant.

"Look," said he, "you spoke rather peevish a while ago about trustin' men. Do you reckon you can trust me?"

Sutherland looked at him thoughtfully.

"You got to trust men," said he. "You wouldn't be runnin' the J7 if I didn't have a certain amount of confidence in you."

"Maybe you got better reasons for trustin' me than you know," Robin observed. "Probably I hate a thief and a crook and a

cold-blooded killer worse than you do, even if I have no stock to be stolen. Anyway, I have an idea. Will you stake me to about



five thousand dollars?"

Sutherland stared at him for a minute, reached into a drawer and took out a check-book.

"I suppose," he rumbled as he handed over the green slip, "it ain't any of my business what you aim to do with my money?"

"You'll get good value for it or you'll get it back," Robin grinned. "Now, about this T Bar S stuff? Will you leave 'em to be handled my own way for a while?"

Sutherland nodded.

"One other thing," Robin continued. "Have you figured out any move of your own about Shinin' Mark? Because I'm apt to try somethin' and we don't want to work at cross-purposes."

"No," Sutherland shook his head. "I've kept close tab on him an' Thatcher all spring. They haven't made a move except the old game of throwin' back unbranded calves, which ain't criminal until they start usin' the iron. Ten years back I'd 'a' picked my own men an' treated Mark to a rawhide necktie or shot him like any other wolf. But takin' the law into your own hands ain't either necessary nor good policy no more. I'll have to think over this a while. He'll keep. When I figure out a move, I'll let you know. Meantime, go ahead your own way."

"The boys are kinda wishful to celebrate the Fourth," Robin said. "I might let 'em ride into Big Sandy. Where's the Block S roundup?"

"Finishin' up on the flats east of town," Sutherland told him. "They'll be in for the Fourth. There's to be some sports. I'd as soon you weren't there, kid. You're hot headed. You might run foul of Mark. He is bad. Don't think he ain't because you made him weaken in the store that day. I wouldn't want you to go to hell in a fog of powder smoke from a cowthief's gun."

"I won't make no such finish. You can gamble on that," Robin answered. "Anyway the J7 riders may be in Big Sandy for the Fourth but I won't be among those

present. I've got a good *segundo*, Tom Hayes by name. I'm goin' to let him run the outfit for a few days. Now, I'm goin' to ride. I could use a fresh horse."

"Tell the stableman to give you old Groaner," Sutherland said. "Good luck to you."

Robin turned in his saddle when he was mounted on a strapping bay to look back at the house. A light glowed in the windows of a room he knew was May's. He hated to go without seeing her again. But until the issue between himself and Shining Mark was settled for good he could neither give himself up to love nor be easy in his mind. One thing at a time.

Yet it pleased him to know that Adam Sutherland trusted him without question. Sutherland was right. Men had to be trusted. Life was impossible without that faith. If here and there it was betrayed—no matter. He hadn't failed Mayne, for instance; old Dan Mayne had failed him, and so had Ivy. He wouldn't fail Sutherland. Riding alone in that dark and silent night Robin wondered if old Adam or May would draw back, lack confidence, grow cold, if some deadly pinch came. There was an uncomfortable chill in the possibility. But it wasn't even a possibility, Robin assured himself. Such a thing was unthinkable.

He shook off that slightly pessimistic mood and listened to the crickets, marked a waning moon peep through crevices in



the cloud-scud that wreathed the sky, as he covered mile after mile, riding fast and unwearied in spite of fifteen hours in the saddle. He wanted to catch his outfit at dawn, before the herd crossed the Judith

River. He knew a way to hold those T Bar S's and yet free his riders for a holiday in town. They were a mettlesome bunch and they liked him; they would back him in anything. Robin valued that unquestioning loyalty. He wanted to hold that crew intact for the fall roundup, if—the ugly thought rose unbidden—he lived to boss the J7 through the autumn months.

(To be concluded in our next issue)



FOUR-CLAWED FRIENDSHIP

By H. C. WIRE

Author of "The White Streak," "The Price of Greed," etc.

"YES," OLD PAP MORGAN WOULD SAY WITH A CHUCKLE, IF HE'D TELL THE STORY AT ALL, "IT TAKES A CAT TO CATCH A RAT—EVEN A TRADE RAT." BUT THAT A CERTAIN DESERT SNEAK THIEF WAS CALLED THE TRADE RAT, HE'D NEVER MENTION

PAP MORGAN was beginning to feel his years. There was a time when he could come out to his gold claim in the desert hills and spend six months or sixteen and never know that he was alone. Digging in the dry wash by day, watching the stars after dark, work, eat and sleep, that was his life, and he loved it.

He still loved it, yet tonight there seemed something amiss. Twenty years had seen him leave Lone Pine at far apart intervals, with his grubstake on his burro, a solitary figure plodding off toward the foothills of the Panamints. In that time every gaunt Joshua tree along the flats had become his companion; he had names for every point of rock on the hundred mile stretch between the town and his camp.

But now, as he sat on a box against his shack and looked up at the stars hung low over the ridges, he thought they were no longer as warm and friendly as they used to be.

"Shucks!" he said aloud, and summed up his whole feeling. "You're just gettin' old. Why you danged cuss if you was to go into Lone Pine you'd not stay more'n a week, then be high-tailin' it right back yere. Nope, tain't people you want. Tain't no licker. 'Tain't grub. You're just gettin' old."

Tom the burro came wandering in from

the brush and stood off some distance with two ears dropped forward.

Pap surveyed him seriously. "You ain't no friend. Wantin' to eat, that's all. And I'll bet tomorrow mornin' I'll have to hunt you three miles up the canyon, doin' your durndest to leave me!"

The burro nodded and walked on. Pap sighed. An animal could be some sort of a friend, he mused, but not that grass-burning jack. He let his eyes follow along the desert that began just below the canyon mouth where he had his shanty. Moonlight showed the flatlands in a clear silver scene, yet he saw no rise of dust to mark a possible visitor's approach.

"Tain't likely no one will be by this way for a month. Not till Les Tyson goes into the mountains."

He watched his burro move toward the clump of cottonwoods around his spring. Suddenly the animal stopped. For a moment he stood fixed, then whirled with a snort and ran deeper within the canyon.

Pap rose from his box, staring at the cottonwoods. He thought of a rabbit trap he had put down there in hope of getting fresh meat to relieve the monotony of bacon. But Tom wouldn't have shied that way from a rabbit.

His curiosity drew on him. Finding a shot-gun back of the door, he left the house and went quietly outside. Then before he

reached the fringe of trees, he heard a sharp rattle of the trap chain, followed by a moment of thrashing in the brush.

One hand closed tighter on the gun. "Powerful big rabbit," Pap muttered under his breath, "if it is a rabbit. Which it ain't."

He crept into the cottonwoods and halted some distance from where a shaft of moonlight through the branches fell squarely upon his trap. For a time he could see only the peg and one end of chain, with the other end lost in a pile of brush, until suddenly the pile exploded into a whirling, tearing ball of fur.

The animal uttered no cry; there was not a sound save the crash of dry twigs. Pap moved nearer, the gun raised. A wild cat! As he squinted down the barrel, unable to get a good bead in the confused light, he saw the movement stop and a small head lift to peer at him.

Two eyes blinked. A mouth opened wide in what should have been a terrifying scream, but the silence remained unbroken.

Pap lowered the gun. "Now what kind of a jig is that!"

Seeing the animal was held firmly by one hind foot, he leaned down. It shrank away, again opening its mouth in the voiceless effort.

"Nary a sound," Pap replied. Then aware that this was only a kitten, not yet half grown, he put down his gun and reached out one hand. Something in the helpless way the animal tried to scream aroused his pity.

"Poor little feller. Are ye hurt much?"

The kitten's leg was bleeding badly. It seemed weak from tearing at the wound and lay back exhausted, able to make only a slight struggle when Pap grasped the scruff of its neck.

He had not intended to trap anything but a rabbit, in fact to his knowledge nothing else, except coyotes, ever came so far down the desert hills.

"Did ye stray away from your ma back yonder in the mountains?" he asked.

But this time the kitten seemed too nearly dead to make even its silent answer. Pap released the steel jaws from its foot, saw that the bone was not broken and started back toward his shanty.

His one cherished piece of furniture within the room was a keg sawn halfway through and set on end, part of the full length slabs forming the back of a chair, a gunnysack of straw making the bottom.

Although the back was uncomfortably straight, Pap liked it. "Takes the kink

right out'n a man," he often declared.

Now the bottom seemed a good place for the kitten, so he laid it there while he proceeded about an effective method of cauterization. He bit the lead from a thirty-eight shell, poured the powder over the cut and lighted it.

There was a white puff of smoke, with a sharp jerk from his patient, but the wound was seared and the blood flow stopped.

Pap grinned approvingly. "You're a brave one. There now, I guess you can rest awhile."

But his grin died as the lamplight fell on the kitten's body. Ribs showed through the shaggy hair, its backbone stuck up in a knotted ridge.

"Hungry?" Pap asked. "Must have come a ways all right. I'll bet you were huntin' my rabbit!"

He chipped into a can of condensed milk, pouring it into a miner's basin. "Here lick 'er up."

The kitten did not need to be told, but thrust a red tongue eagerly into the dish. When the milk was gone, it polished off the sides and bottom, then licked its front paws before curling into the straw seat.

"Well doggone!" Pap exclaimed.

For a time he stood looking down at the bundle of fur, saw the kitten was fully asleep and so crossed the room to his own bunk. Once during the night he was awakened by an unusual noise, and discovered two fire points blinking at him through the dark, but when morning came he found his patient again lying in the barrel chair.

In daylight he saw its color was desert brown, striped with gray, yet with a tail that was unbroken yellow.

"Yeller Tail," he said. "I reckon that be your name."

II

DURING the days that followed, his interest turned from doctoring the animal to an attempt at taming it, until within a short time Yeller Tail rode in the empty bucket when he went to the spring for water, and clung to his shoulder coming back. It followed up the canyon and sat nearby while he rocked the sand on his claim, apparently sharing Pap's own excitement when an unusually rich run of gold dust showed in the pan.

Then the firm bond of friendship was established one morning as Pap cooked breakfast, Yeller Tail brought in a rabbit and dropped it at his feet.

"Well, damn your hide!" he grinned. "Tired of my bacon?"

Yeller Tail opened its mouth, but said nothing.

"Say look here," Pap demanded, "ain't you ever going to get your voice?"

The yellow plume waved an answer.

"All right. I aim to understand." So Pap dressed and fried the rabbit, then when it was done, split it exactly in halves.

They were late in getting to work that morning on account of the banquet, and Pap did not climb the canyon slope above where he worked for his customary survey of the desert. When he did go up in the afternoon, a sight met his gaze that sent him running down to the cabin with Yeller Tail still sitting at the claim.

A lone horseman was riding toward the hills, a pillar of dust marking his swift advance. No doubt he was a friend, yet Pap's experience had taught him that placer gold was a big temptation for the few men who might be otherwise.

So he took the tin tobacco box of coarse dust and nuggets from its place on a shelf and thrust it into his shirt pocket. With a gun at his belt he was ready to meet the newcomer. He sauntered out of the door when the man's voice, talking to his horse, came across the desert.

Outside, he watched the dust cloud until a figure burst through,

then his hand dropped from the gun.

"H o w d y, L e s ! " he called.

"Hello Pap, old son."

As the rider swung down, his glance fell on Pap's weapon. "All set

for the Trade Rat," he chuckled. "Seen anything of him?"

"Trade Rat? What do you mean, Les?"

"Haven't you had any news?"

"Not since later than four months ago."

"Well here, I've got a bunch of papers I was taking up to camp, but you can have them."

Les untied a bundle from his saddle pack and tossed it into the shanty.

"Sit down," said Pap. "What do you know?"

They propped themselves on the steps, Les stretching his legs gratefully. "Nothing much. Except there's a sneak going around lone placer outfits this spring. They

call him the Trade Rat. Steals a man's gold and leaves him a slug of lead in the belly."

"A killer, eh?"

"Unless he gets what he wants right off. Look here Pap, if you're cleaning up much you'd better hide it. The sheriff is looking for him, but you're the sort he takes to. And for God's sake don't cross him. Let him go through your place."

"I ain't never let one of them jays go through me yet!" Pap retorted.

"All right. Suit yourself." Les squinted up at the sun. "I'll be going directly, got to make Forty Mile Hole before dark. How the devil do you stick it out down here!"

"Oh, I get along." Pap's voice sounded more cheerful than he felt.

"Want me to move your things to town this fall?" Les asked. "I'll be coming back with a string of mules."

Pap considered a moment. Usually he stayed until late winter. But now that seemed a long time off. "Believe I will, if you're back this way."

He stood up, adding, "Come in and have a bite before you go."

They went in together, Pap going to kindle a fire in the stove, Les turning toward the barrel chair.

Pap had just struck a match when he heard a rush across the floor, and caught a glimpse of the other man drawing his gun. He whirled, seeing Yeller Tail crouched halfway to the chair, claws unsheathed, its plume waving.

Les had jumped up.

"Don't shoot!" Pap yelled. "That's a tame one." He reached toward the cat. "Here you——"

A lightning flash of one forefoot sent him back, a long gash spurting blood from his arm.

"For God's sake," Les gasped. "Are you crazy?"

Pap thrust his arm into a bucket of water. He was silent until the blood stopped, bewildered at the sudden turn in the animal's nature.

"Why, Les," he explained, "I've had that kitten tamed and eatin' with me."

"Kitten!" Les snorted. "Do you call that thing a kitten?"

Pap looked beyond the door, suddenly aware that time had passed and that the kitten he had found was no longer the helpless ball of fur. Yeller Tail had retreated outside and stood with back arched, claws still unsheathed, a cat, as Les had said, almost two feet long.



"They're dangerous," he heard his friend saying. "May be all right when they're little, but you can't trust them. Look at your arm now. What if it had done that across your eyes?"

Pap nodded. "I guess you're right. The fool even turned on me. Now I wonder why?"

"I'd shoot it," Les offered.

"No. I've sort of liked the critter. I'll take it up to timber."

Les ate with frequent glances outside, and repeated his advice before leaving.

When the ranger had gone, Pap tried to coax Yeller Tail to the house. The cat ran from him, yet late that night he saw a dark form crawl through the hole he had cut in the door and climb into its bed on the barrel chair.

Morning brought no change in his determination. Yeller Tail must go. So he put the cat in a box, saddled his burro and rode into the hills until he reached timber. There he opened his cage and waited.

Yeller Tail strolled out, blinked around the trees, then sat down with a questioning look into Pap's face. He felt a queer sensation coming upon him and mounting his burro, rode quickly down the canyon. Only once he looked back. Yeller Tail still sat watching.

III

IT WAS evening again on the desert. Summer had passed into fall. Pap sighed as he heaved the last shovelfull of gravel into his rocker, shook the handle, collected the bit of gold that was separated and prepared to go home.

He turned down the canyon without interest. He knew what to expect, beans in a kettle on the stove, bacon left from breakfast to warm up, and rice. He'd not even made the effort to bake bread the past few months. With a chuckle he remembered how the young cat had taken to his corn meal biscuits.

"Danged old Yeller Tail!" he muttered. "I ain't never going to know why he jumped onto Les that way."

Thought of Les turned him to considering the ranger's offer to move him in this fall. He didn't want to go yet. His run in the canyon claim was holding out unusually good, proved by this single day's gathering of dust that weighted his shirt pocket. Then there was the handful of nuggets in his coffee pot. He had put them there following Les Tyson's visit, for the pot was always half full of grounds.

"Take more'n a trade rat to find 'em there," Pap assured himself. "Gives a lucky flavor too."

He didn't want to go out of the hills so soon, but he would. Nights were getting long. He had counted all the stars that showed between Twin Peaks, and had torn off the old paper he had plastered on his wall, to read the news again.

At the canyon mouth he stopped for water from the spring and recalled how Yeller Tail used to ride in the empty bucket. Somehow tonight everything suggested the cat. Perhaps it was because in the afternoon his eyes had played a trick



on him, making him almost believe he had seen a yellow body crawling through the brush.

Now he discovered the miner's pan lying in the yard, left as Yeller Tail had last eaten from it, and there was the board he had nailed over the hole in the door where the cat had gone in and out.

His eyes were on the door as he approached. Abruptly he halted. The thing seemed to move a crack. Yet looking again he could not be sure. In the dusk it was impossible for him to see whether that dark line at the edge was an opening or just a shadow. He started on with one hand resting close to his belt.

Then even as he took the first step, and before his fingers closed on the gun butt, the door swung back with a pistol muzzle gleaming from behind it.

"Keep your hand off that thing!" a voice ordered. "Now walk to me—slow."

There was a hard cold quality in the voice that Pap understood. It meant what it said and that gun was not a bluff. He walked toward his cabin, soon able to make out the man's face. Pale white cheeks showed above a black stubble. Beneath the brim of a felt hat were two eyes that instantly recalled a name. Pap felt he knew his visitor—the Trade Rat.

A hand reached out for his gun, then felt also around his shirt pocket, discovering his day's run of gold.

There was a moment of silence as the

man opened the sack and poured out its contents. Then he turned savagely. "This ain't all! Where is it?"

Pap shrugged. "You're lookin' at it, stranger."

"That's a lie. Get in here."

Pap obeyed the order to enter his own shanty.

"Now old man, you might as well tell me, see? I'll get what I came for anyway and you'll save your dam' hide. Where's the rest of this stuff?"

"You've got it all," Pap repeated, sitting on his bunk. "Look around if you like. I ain't stoppin' you."

The man's eyes swept over the stove and into a dark corner. "Open the door," he spat, and when more light came into the room, walked toward a tier of shelves. With his gun still covering Pap, he gathered a handful of tobacco boxes.

"If it ain't in any of these," he promised, "you'll find it for me or be feeding the coyotes."

Pap heard the voice but paid scant attention to the words. Returning from the door he had caught another sound, then as he stepped back to his bunk and the outlaw dropped into the barrel chair to search through the boxes, a silent yellow streak hurtled across the room.

The only sound was a terrified human shout, ending in a muffled scream. A turmoil of arms, legs and fur thumped on the floor. Pap leaped up, kicking into the mass.

His boot lifted a clawing bundle and

tossed it to the far corner of the cabin.

"Yeller Tail!" he roared, as the cat scrambled up and stood glaring at him, then opened a silent mouth and promptly climbed into the barrel chair.

IV

A FEW days later when Les Tyson came out of the mountains, Pap met him in front of his cabin.

"Howdy Les."

"Hello Pap, old son."

"Got a passenger for you Les. Been keepin' him locked in the tool shed."

Les herded his string of pack mules together and dismounted. "That so?"

"Yep, got the Trade Rat, I reckon."

"The hell you have!"

"Got something more too. Come in the house. Walk easy though."

Pap tiptoed across the floor. Les followed, also on tiptoe, yet with a puzzled face.

"Look," Pap whispered, pointing to the chair.

Yeller Tail peered up at him, but turned at once to six kittens asleep within her outstretched paws.

"Shucks!" said Les. "That all?"

"Ain't it enough?" Pap demanded. He moved away, chuckling. "She always did have her eye on that chair."

Les followed, laughing now. "Ready to move on with me this afternoon?"

"No," said Pap, trying not to grin. "Guess not. My work here just won't let me!"

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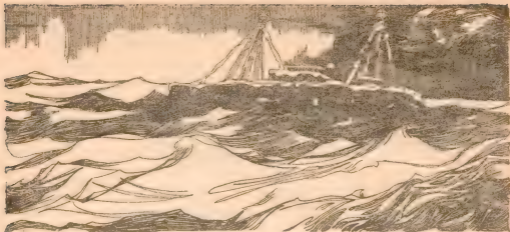
A wandering Texan hits a
California gold-rush

TAKE-A-CHANCE
TAMERLANE

by

Stephen Chalmers





THE END OF BLACK BETSY

By KARL W. DETZER

THE CREW OF THE "BLACK BETSY," LAKE MICHIGAN LIGHTSHIP, SWORE WITH ALL THE BARBED OATHS OF THE SEVEN SALT OCEANS AND THE FIVE INLAND SEAS THAT IT WOULD BE A BLESSED THING WHEN SHE WENT DOWN. AND ONE NIGHT THEY WERE TO REMEMBER THEIR OATHS

CAPTAIN THORESON poked his trim gray beard into the galley at exactly five o'clock and demanded supper. Fat Rose, cook of the *Black Betsy* light vessel, unbent his meager body from above the coal stove, balanced a skillet, and wiped his forehead on a blue flannel sleeve.

"Right away, skipper. Just the bread to cut."

Then he set down the skillet and peered at his commander. An unhealthy green colored the old man's cheeks. Thoreson's blue collar was turned up close under his ears, his blue cap yanked down to meet it. He seemed to have lost weight since dinner, to have aged inconceivably in three hours.

"Anything wrong?" Rose asked hesitatingly.

"No—nothing wrong, Fat—nothing wrong."

There was a flatness to the denial. It needed no keener fellow than the emaciated Fat Rose to know that something actually was wrong; and very wrong at that. Captain Thoreson ate quickly, keeping an eye upon the thick, engraved gold watch lying open before him. He finished in seven minutes and sidled out at one end of the bench.

The lightship nodded pleasantly enough.

But Captain Thoreson steadied himself, legs apart sea fashion, as if even a low swell that hardly disturbed the swinging lamp above the galley table, were too much for his equilibrium. On deck he looked critically at the two wooden masts. Their kerosene lamps already were lighted, three forward and one aft. Honus Mason, the youngest man on board, was just fastening the aft winch, by which he had ground up the single light. It squealed in the rising wind, and Captain Thoreson, when the boy ran below, kicked at its drum, that needed oil, and scowled.

Five winters he had commanded the *Black Betsy* light vessel, that floating lighthouse anchored off the east end of the Black Betsy reef. She was an elder sister in the Great Lakes beacon fleet, a wooden hulled, rheumatic old crone that danced a lively, unbecoming step before all the flirting winds of the upper lakes. An even hundred feet over all and a quarter of that in beam, she wore a broad bosomed, maternal aspect when lying calm at her chain; but once the winter gales began, she forgot her age and her dignity and her summer respectability in a dowdy, senile abandon of graceless motion.

Such a craft is an irritating mistress to a level headed crew. Captain Thoreson hated her. He knew she had thrown over-

side long ago all a ship's devices for wooing men. Rather she nagged, demanded more of care and devotion than mortals give willingly; else with headstrong, shrewish gesture challenged all aboard her and fought them openly.

The men hated her. Master and mate, engineer and quartermaster, seaman and cook, her crew of six, season after blowy season hated her, loathed her, grumbled at the tasks she set them, and swore with all the barbed oaths of the seven salt oceans and the five great inland seas that it would be a blessed night when she went down. No one denied it. When a captain does not love his ship and when a crew detests her, she's better on bottom than afloat. A vessel must be mean and hard and cruel to reel her rightful company.

Fat Rose hated her along with the rest, although he had served only one summer aboard and had seen little of her temper. It was the stories of icy winter nights told by old members of the crew, that put a growl into Fat's thin throat. He didn't blame Captain Thoreson for despising her. He was a good master, this captain, all things considered. A little too easy, Fat had an idea. And a glutton for good weather.

The cook had heard him make predictions. He grumbled through his beard when summer squalls set the decks tilting, "She'll get us yet, me at least. It's a way with ships. Set out to get someone, they gets him! Now it's me this time, see it clear as writing. Maybe some of you boys will swim for it if the wind's right, but me —"

He had become more silent of late. Rose noticed it. The skipper forgot his orders as soon as he gave them. He raised his eyes nervously when spoken to, and likely as not neglected to answer questions. He spent much time in the cabin aft, which he shared with Johnson, the chief engineer, and stood self-imposed watches stolidly, black eyes upon the horizon. There had been talk. Set six men afloat on an anchored vessel half a dozen miles from the nearest sandy spit, out of hail of even a passing steamer, with nothing to do but watch lamps and barometer and keep up steam for the fog signals, hold them caged week after rolling week—they talk. There were whispers in the galley and watch room, confessions among the men that the old skipper was getting old, prophecies.

Fat Rose wrinkled his forehead and shrugged this third night of December as the captain climbed back on deck. To be

sure the old man was upset. He had been abstracted for months, testy for weeks—but not like this. This was fear. What else made a man's cheeks green? Not the wind.

The cook put the crew's food back to warm. Julie Bjorson, quartermaster and oldest inhabitant of the vessel, rolled out of his bunk on the starboard side off the galley, and in wool socks and dungaree breeches, clumped toward the stove. He was a lean, squinting, hairless old panther. Eleven times in his life he had swum away from wrecks. The deep sea had been unkind to him always and he sought peace on the sweet water of the lakes at last; drifted, as many old men drift, to the lightship service. Now, twenty years later, he stood third in command of the *Black Betsy* vessel.

"Who's et?" he demanded.

"The skipper—down like a catsquall at two bells."

"How come that?" asked Bjorson.

Fat Rose fondled a fork. He looked once into the skillet, that sputtered its grease joyously, once up the dark companionway, then at the bald old head of his shipmate.

"Julie," he confessed, "the old man's scairt. Tucker's fell out of him complete."

"Been talkin' about the ship? Mebbe he's right. She's a sloppy old tub, Fat, so's you'll learn when you've swum around a bit. When I was a boy, first took to sea—"

Rose cut him short.

He didn't talk, didn't say he was scairt. Just looked it."

Bjorson was dressing, pawing the flannel shirt into his dungarees, heaving his head through a faded, lop-sided sweater. He threw a slicker around his shoulders.

"Guess I'll go aloft," he grunted.

It was quite dark on deck. The cluster of three lights about the foremast head sent down a melancholy glow upon the white forecabin and the glass of the watchroom. Bjorson squinted about. He could not see the captain. The single lantern on the aft mast, as the mainmast is called aboard a lightship, scattered its beams on gusty air. There was a taste of rain in the breeze, for a moment out of the north.

Smashnose Johnson, the chief engineer, slammed shut the cover to the companion and lumbered forward along the deck, sparks from his pipe playing at pyrotechnics as they whipped overside. Midships he met the quartermaster. Their voices were pitched in guttural Norse phrases. Then another figure bulked out of the shad-

ows, rounded the corner of the deck house and eased toward them. It was Casey, the mate, whistling.

"Hullo," he greeted them.

They answered half heartedly. They did not like Casey. His red head had too much tongue in it for slow individuals. He laughed too much, at them, more than with them. He had been quartermaster on a vessel in Whitefish Bay before he got his promotion, and was full of brave tales of Lake Superior blows. Argumentative the others thought him, a superior sort who scoffed at the foibles of ordinary seamen. He disagreed always, as if disagreeing were part of the mate's job, laughed uproariously at the stories they told for fact. Smashnose Johnson liked him even less than the others did.

"Casey—Mr. Casey!" the engineer called uncertainly after him.

The mate turned. He stopped whistling. It was a silly lullaby always on his lips. Out of place the men thought it, a tune to be whistled ashore in a warm room, not on a lightship wearing out her bottom off Black Betsy reef.

"Huh?" he questioned.

Smashnose Johnson fumbled with his pipe.

"Well?" Casey asked again.

"It's the old man, Mr. Casey," Johnson said. "Somethin's the matter with him, sir.

Up and down all day. Keeps lookin' at the glass. Pops in and out. Talks to hisself, cranky. Et his supper early, all by hisself."

"When I was a lad, first put to sea," Bjorson interrupted, "there was a mate aboard our brig—"

"Well, ain't a skipper got a right to eat his supper by hisself if he's hungry?" Casey asked. He laughed hilariously. "Nothing for a lot of fat old men to worry their heads about."

"Anybody with a pint of sense in his head is bound to worry, Casey," Smashnose Johnson said disrespectfully. "He keeps talking to hisself, funny things—"

"Johnson!"

The voice of Captain Thoreson ripped out like a splitting canvas from the bridge by the watchroom. The three men jerked around. They saw the hunched shadow of their commander leaning over the bridge rail, his cheeks white between beard and

cap. At his back stood Honus Mason, who was still on duty.

"Aye, sir!" Johnson lumbered forward.

"All you men," Thoreson bade. "You, Casey. You, too, Bjorson."

The lashed wheel pulled at its lines in the tidy white pilot house. Captain Thoreson braced himself against it. Perspiration wet his cheeks, in spite of the wind. He spoke uneasily.

"There's trouble making," he began, sucking at his beard. "If there was a seaman among you he'd of seen it."

His four men waited awkwardly. Casey shifted his feet, a disrespectful shuffle. Johnson breathed heavily through his flattened nostrils, which a bellowing second mate had mutilated one dark night off the Azores.

"First it's the wind," continued the skipper. "Bjorson, how's the wind been blowing?"

"Most every way, what there was of it."

Thoreson snapped his fingers.

"There you are! Not every way! It's been backing up agin the sun. Backing up, all the way round. Know what that means? Know how winds blow when they're right? With the sun all the way round. Now for three days—look at your log—backing up every hour."

"Seems like it has, now come to think of it," Julie Bjorson agreed. He squeezed his sou'wester that he carried respectfully under his arm.

"None of you seen it. Fish scales all over your eyes, mebber! But there's one thing you did see! You did see that rainbow, every man o' you. Setting in the rain it was, and you ask why I say it's going to rip!"

His voice rose to a shout, and all except Casey nodded. They had noticed that rainbow, not an hour before sundown, shining through a downpour. Johnson had grumbled at the sight. Bjorson had frowned, and laid the stump of a finger alongside his nose. For it is a bit of common knowledge among seamen, superstition Casey called it, that a rainbow setting in rain is an omen of disorder.

"Look at the glass!" Captain Thoreson cried, his voice squally. "Kicking out the bottom for three days. And know what night this is?"

"December third," Casey volunteered.

Captain Thoreson swallowed hard and opened his mouth.

"December third," the mate repeated.

"We'll all go ashore 'fore long. We don't have much more of this. Navigation'll



close sure in another week. District superintendent'll call us in, ten days at most—"

He stopped. Captain Thoreson had ripped off his right mitten and was shaking his fist. His face was crimson, still covered with sweat.

"Ten days?" he screamed. "We won't see another ten days! I know it's December third. But know what date that is? Four years ago tonight—remember the barge *Jupiter*, went down all hands? And 1912 this night, those two schooners with Christmas trees off Beaver Head. That's not all, mister. My father went down December third, Schooner *Raisen* off the Shetlands—"

Fat Rose opened the galley companion.

"Supper," he hallooed. "Come get it!"

His long neck popped in and the door shut like a trap upon the beam of light that had streaked out jovially for a moment. The men in the watchroom caught their breaths. Casey the mate waved an enormous red hand in protest.

"Heh, skipper," he enunciated lightly, "forget that sign stuff. Sure the barometer's low. Wind's like to rip a bit. But this rainbow business and the third of December and the wind backin' again the sun—"

Captain Thoreson caught him by the arm.

"Aye, and what else?"

There was a quavering challenge in the cry. Casey thrust his bare hands into the pockets of his uniform breeches.

"Bad dreams, that's what's the matter, skipper, old woman stuff."

"Old woman stuff? Old woman?" The skipper's breath caught in his throat. "You'll be drinkin' them words, young man. Drinkin' 'em deep with Lake Michigan for a chaser! You won't whistle when the ship's sinking! Whistlin' don't help when you're up to your mouth in ice water. And as for omens, you've a head full of bones, mister, if you don't give a thought to signs once in a while—"

He faltered. The mate puckered up his lips. In the dim light of the wheel house he saw Smashnose Johnson scowling at him. Then a section of the deck split open again, and Fat Rose once more stuck out his bony neck. He shouted, a short cry trimmed in Great Lakes blasphemy, that had to do with a supper getting cold.

"Go below, men," Captain Thoreson ordered shortly. "You, too, Honus, I'll stand watch. I've et. Just a minute, Mr. Casey, a word with you private."

Honus Mason, who was only a little shore-bred boy in spite of his rating as seaman, made the ladder first. Johnson and Bjorson stopped to listen.

"For all the airs of you," they heard the captain below, "you know well enough the weather's goin' to tear loose. You know we're in a ship no better'n a dishpan—"

"I know that you've got the crew scared to death," Casey answered in an even, unemotional tone. "I know this talk of dreams and signs and things is bad for seamen."

"You'd have us drown?" The captain stretched a shaking hand toward the watchroom window.



"That water's cold, Casey," he stammered. "*Black Betsy* won't lie at her hook tonight. I know! Too many unchancy things. Wind and sky. That feeling. And

the third of December. Plain as death, it is, Casey. We're all going. It'll blow, and blow this night. There's ice an inch thick on the rail right now. It's pulling us down."

"This old boat's o. k., skipper. She's on your mind. You've throwed a hate on her, that's all. Better shake yourself together."

A screech of rising wind interrupted him, rattled the glass in the window lights, puffed wide open the insecurely battened door.

"There she's comin'!"

Captain Thoreson lost control of his voice. His hands went up, clutching into the darkness above his head. He turned toward the door, which Casey had fastened, toward the lashed wheel, back to his mate. "Say that ain't getting thick?" he screamed.

He pointed out of the window that was smeary with drops of freezing water. A cloudy, wavering, dismal pennant of mist flapped past the masthead lights. For a moment it blurred their glow, then blotted it out, then blurred it again. Casey turned to go.

"Ain't had my supper," he said.

"Tell Johnson to kick up his fire," the captain said more soberly. "Got to start the fog signals pretty quick. And, Casey," the mate stopped, his hand on the door, "no more whistling. No more your laughing aboard this vessel. This ain't a fit place to laugh, mister, not the night for it. And one thing more—"

Again the wind interrupted with a shrill

squeal. The master of the *Black Betsy* light vessel shuddered. He clapped his big hands up to his ears, staggered drunkenly, lurched against the wheel, and pawed out to the bridge. The mate started down to his supper. He whistled once, then stopped. No doubt it would be a night of weather. Casey knew it as well as the crew; below in the galley they were talking together in a scared, sober monotone.

"The old man's right," Julie Bjorson said, looking up from his mutton and boiled potatoes, gesticulating profoundly with a fork. "He knows!"

"Aye, she been goin' to blow," Smash-nose Johnson averred.

Fat Rose heard them curiously. After all this was his first winter on *Black Betsy*—he shuffled away from the bench, hunched over the stove, and came back with a fresh platter of fried mutton. He watched the faces of the quartermaster and engineer a little anxiously when he thought them not looking. The lamp, which the wind had set swinging, cast a clean shadow of his protruding, hooked jaw against the woodwork. His first winter on *Black Betsy!* But he hadn't thought old seamen would talk like this.

"That redheaded mate!" Bjorson grunted. "What's he know about weather?"

"Nothing!" Johnson banged the table with the handle of his knife. "He whistles. What kind of dee-sciplin' do you call it, hollerin' and vistin' in the old man's face? We know someday *Black Betsy* sink. Vistin' won't help it. I tell him. I throw his red head overside, and be good riddance."

A gust of chill wind swept down the companionway. The voice of the mate followed it.

"You'd throw my red head overside?" Casey poked his large rubber boots, then his body, staunchly down the steps. Glum looks awaited him. All four men stopped eating and sat with knives and forks clutched solidly in their fists.

"Take a good breath, Johnson!" The mate grinned derisively. "You'll need it. But before you tackle me, better kick up your fires. It's getting thick above. Captain order's steam."

The vessel lurched again, with a sudden tremorous motion that ran along her keel and set the planks quaking. Johnson arose stolidly. A crimson, inarticulate fury scorched his face. He put down his fork with a clatter across his plate, pulled on his cap, and made for the door to the engine room. He halted just inside.

"There's old men aboard this ship, Ca-

sey," he said savagely. "We know signs. We ain't no youngsters, and we ain't got no luggin' airs. And mebbe December third is somethin' unnatural. Mebbe Captain Thoreson has got a gift for knowin' things. Men afore him has knowed when their time's come to capsiz. No dis-reespect for a skipper, I say. If he figgers we're goin', then I reckon we're goin'."

He finished out of breath. The mate laughed.

For half a minute the galley waited in silence. Then Honus Mason jiggled his fork and his tinny rattle stirred Casey up. He puckered his lips. The first notes of his misfit lullaby broke off in another reckless laugh.

"Lord a'mighty, Johnson," he said good-humoredly, "I didn't think the old man had turned all o' you yellow!"

Johnson growled. He shook sweat from his eyes and the mountainous knuckles of his fists swung out. He lunged toward Casey. The mate sidestepped. When he spoke his voice had a grimness his mess-mates never had heard.

"Hands down!" he bellowed. "Go start steam, Johnson, and don't look that way at me, or by heaven—"

He swung around. Captain Thoreson sprawled down the companionway. His legs floundered. In his face was a white terror. He paid no heed to the quarrel.

He was talking to himself, gutturally, his lips working double time. It was incoherent speech, words of a dreamer whose hideous nightmare might develop any minute into fleshy fact. A scream of wind passed overhead and he reeled against a door jamb. Smashnose Johnson lowered his fists.

"Sink all hands," Captain Thoreson muttered. "Glass falling!"

Casey put on his cap.

"It's been falling all day!" he growled. "Faith, and did you leave nobody on watch?" On the lowest step of the companionway he turned about. "Johnson, get up that steam!" he commanded.

Captain Thoreson slumped into a corner.

The rocking grew more violent. Above the table the lamp kicked excitedly. A clump of waves like spiked boots sounded against the ship's sides. Forward the chain rattled in the hawsehole.

Casey's voice, bellowing again for steam to set the fog signals going, stirred Smash-nose Johnson out of his apathy of bewilderment. The engineer plunged aft, where he raked the embers under the boiler, opened drafts, and clanked in a scoop of

fine coal. Fat Rose dropped the bone of mutton he had held for five minutes and, leaving the grease to harden in the skillet, looked about at his mates glumly and went on deck.

The gale met him hilariously out of the north. Spume, flung overside, beat at his face like nails. Ice formed at once all over him. His feet slipped, passing the galley companion. The vessel lunged, picked up a great, white-headed roller and flung it at him. It caught the cook across his chest, slapped him against the deck-house, hugged the breath out of him, pulled at his face with icy fingers and bellowed on.

It was a fight to reach the watchroom. The cook stood in its shelter to get his balance and tried to look seaward. He could see scarcely a boatlength, gray



black waves and black wet distance. Only the lamps, heedless of storm, blinked down from the mastsheads like half blind men through thick frosted spectacles. The ship's bell struck while he gasped for breath. Above in the watchroom it reverberated five, the one note of dignity in a wilderness of night. A new sound followed it, the rich, roaring thunder of steam in a whistle's throat. Casey, on duty, had started up the fog signals.

Rose shivered. Who was right, captain or mate? He wiped his hand across his face, and realized that he had come on deck with no more protection than his torn, dirty apron.

He plunged back to the engine room. Honus Mason and Julie Bjorson stood about the boiler, watching the engineer rub up the glass on the gauge. No one spoke. The fire door rattled open, a long bar poked into the depths of the coal, and the door whanged shut. Captain Thoreson sat on an overturned pail, awkwardly impotent, head in his hands. He still wore his rough weather slicker. Rose, stumbling in, shook the snow from his eyes and grunted.

"Might be helping Casey," he suggested.

Captain Thoreson moved one rubber boot. No one answered. The cook growled. He flung off his apron, ran forward through the galley to his bunk, and scrambled into a woolen blouse, oilskins and sou'wester. The group still huddled about the boiler when he raced back. He

looked at them furiously.

"I'll say you're yellow!" he cried. "How come you all can loaf and Casey needin' help?"

He turned on his commander. Captain Thoreson moaned. Fat Rose gave him one amazed look and made again for the companionway. Bjorson scowled after him and then swore, blasphemic grunts jolted out of his mouth by the roll of the ship. His marred face shone like a sweating gargoye in the light of the open fire door.

"Leave him go," he yelled. "What of it? We'll keep up steam, keep us warm. Fog bell won't save us. Not if we're going—"

He halted ominously. The ship lurched its answer, a wild careen to port, a list that held, trembling, threatening never to ease off.

Honus Mason crawled cautiously up to deck. In a minute he crawled back, winded.

"Ice piling up!" he blurted. "Leakin' a little, Casey says."

Captain Thoreson jerked up his head. His right hand shook. He remembered the weak planking on the port side amidships, where the vessel had been rammed two years before by a freighter wandering in fog. The memory prodded his fears.

"Filling up?" he muttered.

"Lots o' ice," Mason answered. "Casey says start the pumps."

Smashnose Johnson lumbered sideways and threw open a throttle. Steam hissed in the pump cylinder. The gale was on in earnest. The Black Betsy vessel lunged, snapped at her chain, jerked vindictively against her ten tons of mushroom anchor. The creak of straining timbers dulled at times the thunder of the fog signal overhead.

Captain Thoreson began to talk. One by one he catalogued disasters. No one listened; the storm was too great.

"And them schooners off Beaver Head," he mumbled, "just such a night." He babbled of the Shetland Islands, and of his father, who had white whiskers.

"Least we'll go down warm," Julie Bjorson cut in. "Least we'll go down warm, Smashnose. Fires up, good head of steam, pumps working."

"Go down warm!" the engineer echoed.

He clanked his scoop against the iron door, as if setting his words to music, breathless words to the cymbal tones of a boiler front. The pumps were doing their part, running with a peculiar, self-satisfied flutter, knowing that on them rested the safety of the vessel, simple little imple-

ments to be forgotten the first fair day. Very haughtily they chuff-chuffed, worked to their limit, spit out water. Warm and comfortable, four men listened.

Fat Rose ran back down at nine o'clock.

The engine room steamed with heat. Its hot, close air leaped at the cook's face as he staggered down the ladder. He dropped on the bottom step, overcome, and stared at the group in the engine room. Every one of them was sweating. He saw the wet cheeks of the engineer, crimson around the white scar that did for a nose, the captain's black, wilted beard, Bjorson's bald head and tight skin, that looked for all the world like the skin of a bloodless corpse, the scared eyes of Honus Mason. Rose looked them over and grunted.

"Casey says you're layin' down on steam," he reported after a minute. "Says you better hump to it, watch them pumps. We're settlin' a bit, listin' to port."

No one moved.

Rose swore, and climbed back to deck. He purposely left the companion propped open behind him as he went. A gust of icy air swept into the engine room. Smash-nose grumbled, wiped his face with the back of a sooty glove, lumbered up the steep stair, and fastened the door. He dived into the coal pile as soon as he returned, and slapped open the boiler front. Coal darkened the fire box, and a rich, acid smoke puffed out to replenish the lost heat.

At nine forty the cook jumped back.

Ice beaded his eyelashes. The group had stopped their talking; with warm, snug comfort they waited for death. Only thought of cold water and floating ice kept the fire going. They took turns, Captain Thoreson with them, stoking automatically, sweating, greedy for heat.

"Casey says she's listin' too much to port, wants to know if them pumps is right," Rose shouted. "Ice? Sure, there's ice. Thick." He warmed his hands. "Old ram's actin' up, any of you cares to know. Planks tore half off."

Captain Thoreson groaned, and raised his head to listen.

"Can't help it," he muttered.

"Can't?" Rose cried. "Mebbe you can't help ice! Pushin' us down fast."

The captain's shoulders slid together. He lifted his right hand feebly, as if in protest; dropped it, and once more oblivious to cook and crew, he gazed at the boiler front.

Rose went back. Up and down all night, between warmth and cold duty, he did laconic errands for Mr. Casey the mate.

At eleven o'clock he insisted again that the pumps must be clogged.

At midnight, with snow padding his sou'wester, he hustled down to report that ice stood rail high on the port side and that each wave broke clear across.



At twenty minutes after one, he demanded coffee, and seemed to have grown a foot taller.

"No coffee here," Julie Bjorson growled. "Casey says bring him coffee," the cook cried. "I ain't got time to make it. Honus Mason, you fill that pot!"

Mason lay asleep in the coal. Rose kicked the little boy seaman soundly in the ribs and he sat up, startled by the blow, to demand what hour they would sink. The captain cursed idly when he noticed the commotion; then stared back moodily at the boiler front. Fat Rose flung Mason toward the galley.

"I'll learn ye!" he cried. "Casey says coffee. Make a pot for all of us. There's ice to chop, soon as day!"

He returned at four o'clock, his right hand bleeding from a cut on jagged ice. The *Black Betsy* light vessel was rolling with a slower, slogging motion. A menace of thrashing waves sounded up from the hold. The pumps, still fussing, still muttering, were dropping behind. The old ram in the side of the vessel poured in water; ice climbed her broken back. It was three hours till daylight.

"Pulling us under, that ice is," Fat Rose reported. "Casey says you gotta bring axes."

No one stirred to obey. Come ice and heavier seas, fewer hours of waiting.

"Casey says axes!" repeated the cook.

Still no one moved. Rose spit upon the floor, pulled his cap tighter on his narrow skull, and sallied once more into the whooping dark.

Dawn came at seven bells, scurrying out of the north, gray as wool, rasping cold, lifeless as old bones. The lamps still burned smokily at the mast heads under cowlings of knotted ice. The vessel yanked sulkily at her iron chain, green water breaking man high across her. Her bow ducked petulantly into ancient, white-haired rollers. She rose lamely, with slow, painful gesture, each time seeming to shake

herself. Then suddenly losing heart, she burrowed deep, so deep that Fat Rose, beside Casey in the watchroom, felt with his toes for the crunch of her keel scraping the reef.

The mate was whistling. The cook heard him uneasily. Even to Rose it seemed a poor occupation for such time and situation. Casey broke off abruptly.

"It's come light," he said quietly. The words were jolted out of him by a tumble of the bow. "You can see her length now. Go get the skipper, Fat. Tell him I want 'im!"

That was all. Fat Rose gripped the rail, grown twice its proper dimensions. He tied a line about his arm before he sallied down to the deck. A treacherous, slippery terrain of ice ranges and sloshy, freezing lakes, that deck had become. A moment he clung to the glistening hummock that marked the winch. With frozen desperation he gripped the hand-hold near the galley door.

The fog signal rumbled just as he rolled into the engine room, thundered deep in its moist, warm throat. It gave a round, full-chested blast, like the trumpet note of a bearded herald guarding the sea gates to eternity.

"Casey says come get you, skipper." The cook carried his message with literal, laconic emphasis. "Says he wants you. Wants you now, up in the watchroom."

Captain Thoreson raised his head. His eyes looked annoyed, as if the cook were an unpleasant, recurring apparition.

"No use. Not this night," he muttered. Rose stood over him. His shadow made a starved silhouette on the wall. His lips were thin too, but it was the thinness of resolution and not emaciation. He leaned down disrespectfully and shook the captain's arms.

"It's morning, sir," he said patiently. "Morning?" asked the captain.

His voice whimpered like a child's. "Morning?" he faltered. "Morning? And we're still afloat?"

"Seven bells," growled Fat Rose. "Morning!" exclaimed the captain.

Smashnose Johnson had been snoring. He awoke with a grunt, stirred back to life by the word, and reached for his coal scoop. Honus Mason made a small, squealing noise, swallowed altogether by the racket of the storm. Bjorson went full of life at once.

"By Mackinaw, morning!" he shouted. His lashless eyes popped wide in his pale, bloodless face.

"Aye!" Fat Rose answered. "And Casey wants you, skipper. Says you gotta come!"

The master of the *Black Betsy* light vessel unbent his knees. He reached up one hand, made to rise, and then, as if he comprehended that the order came from his mate, he slumped back in a disheveled heap on the grating. Fat Rose again seized his arm and shook, this time vigorously.

"Lively, sir!" he ordered. "Get up on deck! Casey says you gotta come!"

He sang out the words as sharp as a master. Captain Thoreson crawled to his feet. He looked fearfully at the determination in Rose's frozen face. The cook scowled grimly and again jerked at his arm.

Captain Thoreson shook himself together, pawed at the door to the oil storage, bumped into a bulkhead, and clawed up to deck. His eyes were downcast as he left the engine room. Johnson and Mason and Bjorson, squatting upon their haunches, holding tight to projecting beams, watched him go with amazement. They made no move to follow. With mistrusting, orthodox eyes, they absorbed the sight of a dictating cook.

Rose did not wait for comment. Up the stairs he bounded, after the obedient captain. Snow and fog played together in the upper air. Across interminable ice ridges, through green water shoulder high and raging, the overheated skipper crawled, a lifetime journey, from the snug door to the spindly bridge. Ice sheeted the glass of the watchroom. One pane had been blown away and its hole made a dark patch upon a frozen, white facade. The air was thick with slowly dissipating night glooms. The storm seemed exhausted a little to the cook. High above deck, shaking the windy air with its own roar, only the fog signal kept on unwearily.

Rose watched the captain duck obediently into the wheel house, and shut the door behind him.



Then the cook raced back to the fire room.

"And now axes, you green livered herrings!" he roared. "Up on deck, every one o' you, to chop away ice!"

You're warm enough. Axes—Casey says so!"

He towered thin shouldered above them.

Julie Bjorson wiped the sweat uneasily from his face.

"Hear me?" the cook bellowed. "Axes!" No one moved.

"Casey says axes!"

"Me?" asked Johnson. "I ain't chop-pin'! I'm engineer!"

"Get started!" Fat Rose ordered.

Bjorson, saying nothing, pulled a blue knit cap over his scrawny bald head and jerked on thin cotton gloves. Mason sidled toward the deck after him, eyeing the cook. Only the engineer stood defiant.

Rose slid out of his oilskins. He clenched one fist and approached Johnson. "No more settin' in the shade for you!" he cried bitterly. "I'll eat steam awhile myself, Mr. Engineer. Get an ax!"

Johnson crawled upward.

The gale seemed inspirited by daylight, loosing such fury as it could not show in the dark. The anchored vessel wallowed painfully, bowed down by ice, her side ripped open in an ugly scar. The lamps still burned; who should climb the rigging and cut off the ice to lower them away? Why shouldn't they burn?

Casey, the mate, his face patched scarlet, leaned out of the watchroom, bullying, abusing, howling his commands.

Captain Thoreson chopped. Lashed to the foremast, where Casey himself had tied him, the terrified skipper lifted his ax head, slashed and chipped. The same line bound his men by their armpits. Green water leaped over the forecastle, marched like an avenging army, spilled the master to the length of his lashing, drenched him, kicked him aside, and ploughed on.

Johnson dallied at first. Then he sang out a savage tune of oaths and began heaving like a maniac. Bjorson sucked in his lips and swung into the ice on the rail. Honus Mason skidded, rolled, arose half-drowned, and plugged away.

Casey the mate shouted down orders from the watchroom.

"To port there, Thoreson, lay to it! Clear that pocket out—which are you, deaf or dead? You, Johnson! Get ten paces aft. That's it. Swing, you fairweather commodores. No more hanging back now."

Fat Rose listened; then, grinning, retired to the engine room to warm his blood. He returned to the deck at eight bells, in time to see a bursting roller carry away the fire buckets, eight of them in a rack from off the deck house. They floated bravely for a moment, eight red pimples on the black face of the lake, and then, gracefully, all except one of them sank.

That one remained, dancing atop the white manes of heavy rollers, deep in gullies between waves, a useless red water bucket, half full, running farther and farther from the vessel. Fat Rose watched it, fascinated at the senselessness of storm.

Chopped ice slid off the decks. Casey the mate, whistling, undisciplined Casey, his face redder, a pair of huge wooly gloves cupped about his mouth, howled down from the bridge.

"Chop!" he screamed. "No layin' down now, skipper."

Captain Thoreson looked up balefully, ready to answer. But the crest of a breaker caught him in the mouth and he went down to his knees, spilling the men on his line like a string of sausages. Water poured atop them, pummelled them breathless, froze fast upon their faces.

They chopped numbly after that. By ten o'clock there was a visible lift to the vessel. The wooden decking lay clear of the night ice. Honus Mason was attacking the winch, still deep in the embrace of an icy hummock. Casey cried down from the bridge.

"She's riding better, skipper!"

Captain Thoreson wiped his eyes on a frozen sleeve. The fog was blowing to shreds in the northeast, opaque and spongy by turns.

"You come up here, Thoreson," Casey the mate commanded. "The rest of you men duck in and get some heat."

His order was unmistakably clear. Every man on deck could understand. Captain Thoreson stared and for a moment stayed immobile. Then he slouched to the end of his line, cast it off, gripped the rail, and hugged his way to the bridge. The door of the watchroom slammed behind him.

Engineer, quartermaster, and seaman scuffled down the ladder toward heat. Their frozen oilskins split as they yanked them off. Fat Rose grinned, and got up leisurely from his seat by the stove.

"And who said you could come down?" he wanted to know.

Mason answered.

"Casey!"

"Good skipper, Casey," the cook commented. "Think so, you loafers?" He buttoned his jacket and made for the companion ladder. At the door he threw back another command. "It's your fire, Johnson. Might look over them pumps!"

He was aware of a lessening quality of wind, more tractable weather on deck. The air was not so thick. Snow had stopped,

except for lost, occasional flurries that hurried past hunting the storm. The cook braced his shoulder, ran a few steps, saw that tons of ice had been chopped away by the captain and three men, that the *Black Betsy* vessel rode higher. He plunged up the ladder to the bridge.

Captain Thoreson, his beard frozen to his red muffler, stood aimlessly in the center, staring first at the barometer, then at Casey.

"Glass looks all right now," the mate told him lightly. "Glass is right, everything's right. I knowed all along we'd weather it."

The cook banged the door, and Captain Thoreson whirled around. His face had lost its greenness. Weather or rage had colored it red; he saw Fat Rose angrily.

"You, cook," he cried, "run the crew up

here. Keep Johnson on the fire, the rest here."

His voice crackled. Not since the set in of winter had it bristled so with command. His neck unbent and his chest straightened out. Fat Rose grimaced.

Three minutes he was gone on his duty below. When he raced back, Mate Casey was whistling, whistling lazily, the same silly, inappropriate lullaby. The captain growled, and Casey broke off.

"Take your rotten old tub," the cook heard him say. "Nothing to bawl about

now. Clear weather's coming, if I know signs. We'll get orders to haul for port next week at latest." He lighted his pipe. "This your vessel, Mr. Thoreson? Take it. I saved it for you. And I hope you're through with this December third business."

Captain Thoreson found his old fair weather voice.

"Hold your tongue, Casey," he bellowed. "I'm commander of this crew. What do you know about what's meant to happen? We should of drowned."

"Should of?" derided the mate.

He puckered up his lips. Captain Thoreson, watching him, stamped his foot angrily. As he swung around, he saw the crew, shivering outside on the ladder. One second he waited indecisively. Casey grinned, and threw away his match.

"Your vessel," he repeated softly.

Captain Thoreson clenched his fists.

"Take watch, Bjorson," he commanded. "What you hanging out there for? Mason, you shin aloft that aft mast and chop the ice off that lamp. She ain't rolling bad now." He discovered Fat Rose. The frost on his eyebrows crackled. "You, cook?" he bellowed. "What are you doing up here? Go get your apron. What you mean, not having breakfast ready?"

He was muttering savagely as he turned on the mate. Seeing his grin, he stopped. "Go aloft too, mate!" he commanded. "Sure, it's your job! Who's telling me what's your job? Foremast—loosen up them lamps. Chop ice yourself a while. And Mr. Casey."

"Yes, sir."

"No more whistling."



MESCAL

MESCAL was a very important food product of the Indian tribes living on both sides of the Mexican border, wherever the agave grew, and it is still used to some extent. The fleshy leaf bases and the trunk of the plant were gathered and roasted in pits, six to twenty feet in diameter and two or three feet or more in depth, and lined with small stones. A fire was built in the pit, and when its walls and the stones were intensely hot, the embers and ashes were raked out and the plants put in and covered with fresh grass and earth. After a couple of days of thorough steaming, the succulent sweetish mescal was removed and was ready for consumption, usually in the form of bread or cakes.

The tribes which customarily gathered and prepared mescal, including the Apache, Mohave, and Yuma, developed a considerable trade with other Indians who were not favored with the plant. The Spaniards, and later our American frontiersmen, observing the importance of mescal to one of the Apache bands, called them "Mescaleros," a name which they retain to this day. A failure of the crops of the people of El Paso, Texas, in the middle of the last century, was so serious that had it not been for the mescal which they gathered and roasted, and subsisted on for six months, they probably would have starved. Mesal as a food has often been confounded with the Mexican drink bearing the same name, distilled from the sap of the *maguey*.—F. W. H.



SWEET HARMONY

By CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

TO GET SWEET HARMONY OUT OF A CATTLE FEUD REQUIRES INGENUITY—BUT THE MODERN YOUNG MAN OF THE CATTLE COUNTRY HAS THAT ALL RIGHT. AND WHEN THERE'S A GIRL BACKING HIM—WELL, RESULTS WILL BE GOT

CAVANAUGH sat opposite the blond giant who was his only offspring and stared at him with speculative eyes. Cavanaugh was sixty; the young giant was twenty-five. Though thirty-five years separated them and they were father and son, they got along uncommonly well together. The son, educated though he was, had retained an early liking for his father's business, the raising of cattle; and the father did not scorn certain manners and preferences which had come to the son because of his having gone to more various kinds of schools in one year than Cavanaugh had gone in his whole life. In fact old Cavanaugh was secretly proud of his son, and the son admired the father, especially for a certain rugged directness.

This directness marked Cavanaugh's question now.

"You got somethin' on your mind, Bill," he said. "I've knowed it for several months. I ain't asked you nothin', have I? But I expect it was that you wanted to speak to me about, wasn't it?"

Bill looked straight at his father with cool blue eyes.

"I am going to marry Millicent Ramsdell," he stated.

In spite of his hate of all things Ramsdellian, old Cavanaugh did not wince. He

had noticed that his son had not asked if there was parental objection to his marrying a Ramsdell. He had not said that he would like to marry Millicent. He had said he was going to marry her. Bill was a chip off the old block.

The situation between the two fathers, the father of Bill and the father of Millicent, was ancient enough, had been exploited enough. The two men had been enemies for twenty years. One had a son, the other had a daughter. Bill's pronouncement had shown that son and daughter had fallen in love with each other. It was all along historic lines.

However, old Cavanaugh was a man of sense. He disliked old Ramsdell intensely, but he knew that it did not necessarily follow that Ramsdell's daughter was not a fit mate for his son. He did not know the girl, though he had often seen her. She might be a fine girl for all he knew.

"What for girl is she, Bill?" he inquired.

"Best in the world," said Bill.

"What you wantin' me to do about it, Bill?" Cavanaugh asked, thus giving his consent to the admission of a Ramsdell into his household in the role of daughter-in-law.

"You have no objection then?" Bill asked. "I have been thinking that perhaps your dislike of Ramsdell—"

"Any time that old skunk wants anything out of me, he knows how to get it," Cavanaugh declared. "I ain't holdin' nothin' against the girl because she was unlucky in choosin' a father. She had a motier who was a good woman. Mebbe she gets more from her mother than from her father."

"You'll like her," Bill prophesied.

"For your sake, Bill, I'll make myself like her," Cavanaugh said. "How does old Ramsdell take it?"

"Oh, Millicent is his only child, you know. I suppose that makes a difference with him."

Old Cavanaugh leaned forward in his chair, an unholy joy shining in his eyes.

"Is it possible, Bill," he asked, "that that old rattlesnake thinks a Cavanaugh ain't good enough for his daughter?"

"That would be one way of putting it," Bill replied.

"Well," Cavanaugh declared, "if you want that girl, Bill, she is as good as yours. You go and get her and bring her over here and we will have the minister out and the knot tied before you know what has happened. We will show that old—"

"It's not so easy as that, father," Bill said. "If I make any move like that, Ramsdell will go on the warpath. He ordered me out of his house at the point of a gun last night."

Cavanaugh's jaw went slack. Slowly the red of anger flowed up into his face.

"You let him drive you away at the point of a gun, Bill?" he asked in a low voice.

"I had no gun, and he is the father of my girl," Bill said.

Cavanaugh folded his arms on his chest and looked at the floor.

"Will you be guided by me in this matter, Bill?" he asked at last.

"Why, yes," Bill promised.

"You leave me alone for half an hour," Cavanaugh directed. "Come back, then. I will have a plan, Bill. I got to be alone to do some tall thinkin'."

Bill rose and promptly made for the door. If Cavanaugh had not already begun to plan, he would have seen that his stalwart son was a little too ready. Bill had a stubborn streak in him, which did not show now. Bill liked to manage his own affairs, even as his father liked to manage his own.

At the door Bill stopped.

"I've never known what your fuss with Ramsdell was about," he said. "Why do you two men hate each other so?"

"It begun long ago, when you was a little

fella," Cavanaugh said. "I was drivin' some cattle to my shippin' point, and that old jack rabbit insisted on cuttin' my trail, to see what I had in my outfit. I was in a hurry. I just had time to finish the drive before sundown. He knowed there wasn't no cattle in that herd but what had my brand, but I had to let him go through with it. Custom of the range, you know. It made me sore, and it made me sorer when we was late gettin' to the shippin' point. Comin' back I met this ol' fella an' we had some hot words. We been fightin' each other ever since."

"Rather a small scrap to carry through twenty years," Bill opined.

"Aw, the ol' fella ain't no good. That's why I don't have no truck with him. You run along now, Bill, and lemme think by myself."

Bill did not run along. He opened the door slowly and stepped out into the starry night. On the step he paused to light a cigarette. While he held the flame in his cupped hands, he looked down at it, but as soon as he had shaken out the match, he gave a quick glance into the darkness. When he saw a man lounge about the corner of the house and start across the yard, Bill smiled to himself. He stepped down and followed the man, overtaking him as he reached the bunkhouse.

"Have a tailor-made cigarette, Anson?" he asked.

"Oh, that you, Mr. Cavanaugh?" the man said, turning about. "I wouldn't mind if I did."

Bill fished a package of cigarettes from his breast pocket and tendered them. While the man lighted one, Bill kept his steady eyes on the other's face. It was a thin face, brown, hard; and there was a cynical look in the man's eyes as he lifted them from the tiny flame which he cupped in his hands as Bill had just done.

"Well, how do you think you are going to like it here?" Bill asked. "We try to make it pleasant for the men. My father sometimes rides a little hard, but it is only his way."

"I think I'll like it fine," Anson replied.

"You didn't go to town with the other boys," Bill suggested.

"To tell the truth I didn't have no money," Anson said. "I been driftin' some lately."

"Any time you want a little advance let me know," Bill said. "If you want to ride to town after the boys now, I—"

"Oh, no," Anson said earnestly. "I like

to spend my own earned money when I spend any."

"A good system," Bill agreed. "But I thought since you are flat—" "I'm flat but I can wait till pay day," Anson said.

They sat down in front of the bunkhouse and smoked in silence. After a while Bill began to look at the house. Momentarily he expected a summons from his father.

Presently old Cavanaugh came to the door and called to him. Bill rose.

"Well, I reckon my father has a plan at last," Bill told Anson.

"Plan?" said Anson with poorly concealed eagerness. "Some plan about the work?"

"Something," said Bill with a light laugh, "far more important."

"Oh, yes," Anson said.

Bill went into the house. He looked at once at a window beyond his father's chair.

"Rather hot in here, isn't it, father?" he asked.

Cavanaugh was so full of his plan that he was temporarily unaware of temperature, so he agreed that it was rather hot. Bill walked to the window and opened it. He re-crossed the room and sat down so that he could watch the window.

"Got a plan, father?" he asked.

"I have," old Cavanaugh answered, "an' it is a bundinger. We will not on'y get you married to your girl all safe an' sound, but mebbe I will be able to take a few swipes at that ol' renegade Ramsdell. See how you think this would sound sifin' in over the radio:

"I will go over to see Ramsdell. I will go peaceable an' quiet, with a serious look on my face. I will say to him that him an' me have fought long enough. I will say

that of course it is a great comedown for a son of mine to be thinkin' of marryin' a Ramsdell, but for the sake of harmony an' the general well-bein' of the country, I will give my consent.

"Of course he will rear up on his hind laigs an' tell me to go and sizzle some place.

I will say to him that we are a coupla fools

to be carryin' our quarrel so far as to let it interfere with the happiness of my son an' his daughter. I will tell him that his daughter will outgrow early handicaps when she becomes a member of my fam'ly. By that time he will be so mad that he will be ready to shoot me.

"I will show surprise an' tell him I don't see what objection he can have to my plan. He will give his opinions of me an' my son, my ranch, my cattle, an' prob'ly my father an' my grandfather. That will make me mad. Oh, it'll make me mad all right. I won't have to ac' no part with the ol' sucker from then on. I will rear up on my own hind laigs an' tell him that you an' his girl is goin' to marry in spite of flood or famine in the land. He will invite me to let him see that happen.

"Then I will say to him that come next Thursday, the weddin' party will start from my place an' be joined on the road by your girl. Will she be game to go up against her father, Bill?"

"She isn't afraid of her father," Bill answered. "In fact she isn't afraid of anything much."

"That sounds promisin' for the immediate present an' the future that is hid behind the veil," Cavanaugh declared. "That girl has prob'ly inherited nine-tenths of herself from her mother an' the other one-tenth from that poor imbecile. If you an' me an' a couple of the boys was to ride from here next Tuesday, do you reckon she would meet us on the way an' go to town where we could get you married proper an' have some kind of a fittin' blow-out later?"

"Millicent and I have never had a difference of opinion," Bill said. "Any suggestion that one makes the other always agrees to."

"That is fine. But if I was you Bill, I would make most of the suggestions, especially after you are married.

"Now, I will tell ol' Ramsdell all this, an' of course he will tell me that he will be right out in the road with a coupla his men when we attempt to pass along. There will prob'ly be a tidy little scrap there, Bill, but it won't last long. You an' me an' two of our boys would be a match for the hull Ramsdell outfit, wouldn't we?"

"I should think so."

"That will be the racket, then. When I have got in them few swipes at that old bazoo-blower, we will proceed on our way an' I will see that no expense is spared for your weddin', Bill."

"When shall you see Ramsdell?" Bill asked.



"Now. It's on'y about eight o'clock. I can be over there in an hour. You tell that new fella Anson to buckle up my horse, Bill."

"Mightn't you and Ramsdell get into a scrap tonight?" Bill asked.

"I wish it might be so," Cavanaugh replied, "but I will have to control myself. I will be back here about eleven o'clock. You wait up for me, Bill."

"I'll wait up," Bill promised.

He rose, after a quick glance at the window, and walked to the door. He paused there for a moment to speak to his father about some routine matter; and then he opened the door and stepped outside.

Anson was sitting just as he had left him. Apparently he had not moved. Bill asked him to get Cavanaugh's horse. In ten minutes the old man was speeding away toward Ramsdell's.

Midnight was nearing when he returned. Bill perceived, before he dismounted, that his errand had been highly successful from his point of view. He was grinning.

Anson appeared from the bunkhouse to take his horse.

"That fellow seems to be anxious to cinch his job," Bill said.

"New broom sweeps clean," said Cavanaugh. "Never mind him. Come on into the house."

In the room in which he and his father had previously talked, Bill glanced at the still open window.

"He fell for it," Cavanaugh announced. "He raged and tore around and said his daughter would never marry a Cavanaugh an' all that. I thought he was goin' to throw a fit when I told him his daughter would prob'ly get over bein' a Ramsdell. He finally drove me off'n the place at the point of a gun. That was pretty hard to stand for, Bill, but I done it for your sake. He said he would be guardin' the road next Tuesday when we started for town."

"Father," Bill said, "I don't think much of some of the details of your plan."

"As to which?" Cavanaugh demanded.

"You are rather leaving Millicent out of your reckoning. Old Ramsdell might lose his head altogether and shoot you or try to, or you might shoot him. That wouldn't be a pretty thing for a young girl to witness, would it?"

"Now, I'll tell you what we had better do. We had better go to town by another road. Millicent and I will be married, and Ramsdell will be left waiting where he thinks we are going to show up. We will

ride back that way, and you will have the laugh on him."

"I don't wanta just have the laugh on him," Cavanaugh objected. "I want to have a scrap with him. The idea of his forbiddin' his daughter to marry you. He ought to be proud. His attitude has stirred up all the base feelin's I have always had toward that ol' fella."

"Yes, but imagine how he will feel when he finds he has been double-crossed and that the marriage has taken place. He will be wild. I think you will get all the fight you want then. The thing to do, it seems to me, is to make sure there will be a wedding. Then let whatever is to happen just go ahead and happen."

Cavanaugh considered that. At last he laughed.

"That's a better scheme'n ever, Bill," he said. "It will work out just as well for me, an', as you say, it will make sure about the weddin'. Well, what road shall we go to town by?"

"I'll be at Ramsdell's shortly after dark," Bill answered. "Millicent and I will leave at once. Ramsdell, thinking he knows where to be waiting for us, will probably have left the house. You meet us on the old road down through the valley, instead of on the highway, and we will go on to town. Then we will come back on the highway and run into Ramsdell."

"That'll be swell," Cavanaugh chuckled. "Why, that ol' coyote will be twice as mad as he would have been, Bill. You an' Millicent—your wife by then—can scoot for home, an' me an' the boys will stay an' take care of ol' Ramsdell's case. We will talk of this matter further between now an' next Tuesday, Bill."

"All right," Bill agreed.

He rose, yawned, and walked over and closed the window.

II

CAVANAUGH'S young blond giant was in a mood which Cavanaugh had never seen him in before. Tuesday, and his wedding day, had come and with it a cloud had come to Bill. At breakfast he was moody, silent, answering his father's questions with monosyllables.

After breakfast he went outside and appeared to be looking around a bit. He investigated the bunkhouse and the corral, and when he discovered no one in or near them, he returned to the house. Though the warming sun had risen some time ago, he did not suggest that the window be opened. He only went and stood by it for

a moment, looking out and down. Then he walked up close to his father's chair and leaned against the table. Old Cavanaugh looked up at him with a question in his eyes.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Bill severely, "it sort of goes against my grain to seem to be evading Ramsdell."

Cavanaugh got promptly to his feet, and his face reflected his joy and pride.

"Bill," he declared, "I had an idea you would come to it. I give in to you an' your scheme because it was an educated scheme. I have spent a lot of money on your education, Bill. Wouldn't it seem like I had wasted my money if you didn't hatch a scheme that'd be superior to any scheme of mine? H'ever, Bill, your scheme has seemed like a lily-white thing to me all along. It didn't have no red blood in it, an' if we are anything, Bill, we are a red-blooded fam'ly. If any fam'ly can claim to be he-men ours can, as far back as I can recollect. What have you got on your mind now, Bill? I hope it is somethin' entirely worthy of a Cavanaugh."

"Here it is, for what it's worth," said Bill. "Dad, I have the build of a fighting man, haven't I?"

"An' the spirit, though you have gen'ally been for peace, Bill."

"From now on," Bill declared, "I take over your row with Cavanaugh. Am I to

let my good old dad fight the battles of the family? Why, you have been fighting this fight for twenty years, dad. It's time I took it over."

"Huh?" said old Cavanaugh, and scratched the stubble on his chin. "Well, I dunno, Bill. Ain't there involvemunts and entanglemunts, like you might say? What will Millicent think of you fightin' her father? Ain't that goin' to be a bust-up between you two?"

"She will have to stand for it," Bill asserted, "What can she expect? Can she expect me to cringe to that old hyena? I should say not."

"What exactly was you plannin', Bill?" Cavanaugh asked, with a new meekness in his voice.

"We will go to town by the highway, after dark," Bill said. "I won't get Millicent first. I won't get her till I have disposed of old Ramsdell. Why, burn his hide, dad, every time I think of that old cougar lately, I begin to boil. I will have two guns on me and I will blaze away with them the first word he speaks that I don't like. I will settle with him, and then we will ride on and get Millicent and go to town. Let old Ramsdell rot where he lies for all of me."

"You are gettin' kinda cold-blooded, ain't you, Bill?" his father asked.

"That's the way to be," Bill rejoined savagely. "If you are in a fight, fight hard. That is to be my motto from now on."

"Well," said Cavanaugh slowly, "I will be backin' you up, Bill."

"You will not! Haven't I just told you that I have taken over your fight? You won't even wear a gun, dad."

"But, Bill—"

"If I can't have my way in this thing," Bill cried, "I will hop a horse this minute, ride over to Ramsdell's, and blow him apart. Now, what do you say to that?"

"I reckon I am givin' in to you," Cavanaugh answered.

Bill strode from the room. Cavanaugh tiptoed to the window and looked into the yard. Bill cer'nly had changed over night. The night before he had been all serene as usual. Now he was on the warpath.

Well, he was on the warpath. Gosh, he was givin' that fella Anson a ride. Why he was firin' him.

Bill's words floated into the room.

"You get your horse and ride," he was telling Anson, the new hand. "Here's ten dollars for you and it is about nine dollars and six bits more than you have earned on this man's ranch. What do you think this is, a rest home for the weary? You've been here for ten days now and you haven't done ten cents worth of work. Get your horse and hit the trail."

"You're talkin' kinda by an' large, ain't you?" Anson asked. "You didn't hire me. Your ol' man done that."

"Old man, eh? Mister Cavanaugh, if you please."

Cavanaugh, his face pressed to the pane, saw his son walk up to Anson, as Anson was about to speak again, take Anson by the shoulder, and hustle him off in the direction of the corral. A few minutes later Anson's horse sped out to the road, with Anson in the saddle.

"I swear I never see a man like that on

his weddin' day," Cavanaugh told himself. "Bill has sure woke up. By gosh, he may kill ol' Ramsdell tonight. That'd be a pity. That ol' fella is mean as dirt, but he ain't done nothin' to warrant Bill's killin' him. It ain't Bill's quarrel. Why, he has always kinda laughed at me when I was ragin' ag'in' Ramsdell. Now, lemme think. Lemme see if I can't cook up somethin'."

He proved to be a poor cook, for the day passed and night fell and he had no plan to match against Bill's. He was still thinking as he got into his store clothes and tucked his pants into his high-heeled boots, but no plan emerged from the whirl of his thoughts.

Doggone, this was tough business. A man about to be married was going up against another man, who was determined that the marriage should not take place. He was going up against that other man with two guns on him. Ramsdell would doubtless be similarly armed. Ramsdell had a hair-trigger temper and Bill was in a savage mood. Certainly the stage was set for deadly strife.

Cavanaugh stepped outside to find his horse awaiting him and Bill mounted on a big roan. Cavanaugh didn't like Bill's mount. The horse was spirited. It was no horse to be ridin' when gun play was imminent.

"Whyn't you take your own bronc, Bill?" Cavanaugh asked. "That roan will go up on his hind laigs the minute trouble begins."

"He will have no chance to go up on his hind legs," Bill said coldly. "The trouble will be over before he knows that it has begun."

Old Cavanaugh sighed and looked up at the star-spattered sky. It was a nice night, balmy, quiet, a nice night for a wedding, no night for a man to go forth lusting for the blood of another man. Cavanaugh's eyes traveled to the mountains which lay at the far edge of his big ranch. He could just make out the bulk of them, but he knew that snow still touched their peaks. Cool, remote, steady, they were. He had always lived on this ranch, in sight of those mountains. He had always thought he was somewhat like them, cool, steady, remote from pettiness. Well, he had always been thataway, except for this pesky scrap with that old rattlesnake Ramsdell. He got along with his other neighbors. Why, oh, why, had Ramsdell insisted on cutting his trail on that day so long gone?

"It'd be a nice night for a ride on the valley road," Cavanaugh suggested.

"It will be a nicer night on the highway," Bill said. "It will be a flaming, flaring, gunpopping night. Whee-o-o, I can hardly wait to face that old fool. Come on, dad. Hop your cayuse and let's get along. I told Millicent I wouldn't be later than half past eight."

"You got two guns, Bill. Couldn't I borrow one. I'll promise not to use it. You don't need two."

"This roan may take a notion to hop," Bill replied. "I don't know what hand I shall want to draw with."

"You ain't no two-gunman, Bill," Cavanaugh protested.

"Am I not? You don't know what practicing I have done when I have been up in the hills by myself. Either hand for me, dad. Either hand, or both."

Cavanaugh mounted his horse. Again he looked at his stalwart son.

"Don't we take a coupla the boys with us, Bill?" he inquired. "They's a light in the bunkhouse. Prob'ly a card game goin' on. Coupla the boys would be glad to ride



on a night like this, especially on an errand like this."

"We can handle this situation."

"Ramsdell will have a coupla his men with him," Cavanaugh made a final stand. "You will be outnumbered three to one, Bill."

"Let's ride," said Bill.

They rode beneath the stars, on the hard, winding road. They rode for two miles, for three, for ten. Then Bill drew rein.

"I don't understand this," he said.

Joy was in the face of old Cavanaugh. He chortled. He slapped his thigh, so that his horse scuttled sideways. Old Cavanaugh brought him up carelessly. He had a careless kind of a feeling now, a sort of a don't-give-a-damn, happy feeling.

"I understand it, Bill," he declared. "We have made that ol' coyote hunt his hole. By gosh, who would have thought it, after all his sputterin' an' fumin' an' threatenin' for the last twenty years? Who would have thought it after the way he talked when I went to see him? Why, I thought that fella would be out here in the

road with machine guns trained every which way. I thought he would have been poppin' at us before we had gone three miles. Why, he ain't got the nerve of a hole in the roof."

"I wouldn't show your relief too soon," Bill said.

"Relief? Me? I ain't relieved. I am sorry. I am sorry that ol' sheep bedder wasn't here to take his medicine. That is what I am talkin' about."

"You are previous," Bill asserted. "If he isn't here, he is some place else, and that some place else may be his own home. Remember that I have got to go there and get Millicent."

"He may ambush us, Bill," Cavanaugh suggested.

"We will ride," said Bill.

They rode for only two miles more and then again Bill drew rein.

"Dad," he said, "you have got to wait here."

"Wait here? Wait here!" Cavanaugh protested. "Wait here? Wait here while you ride on to your death? Is that like me, Bill?"

"We are up against a new angle," Bill said. "We have got to consider Millicent. I may get by with old Ramsdell. He has permitted me to call on Millicent, you know. He hasn't carried his quarrel with you so far as to bar me till the other night. Marriage has been the stumbling block. He balked at marriage."

"Many a man ought to," Cavanaugh said. "I mean, you can't ride up there alone, Bill."

"I must," Bill declared. "If I go alone, I may be able to sneak Millicent out of the house. If you go, the war will be on without any formal declaration. You remain right here, dad."

Cavanaugh started to protest anew, but before he could frame his sentence the big roan was springing on his way toward the Ramsdell ranch. Cavanaugh was tempted to follow. What restrained him was the hope that Bill might be able to sneak the girl out of the house. Cavanaugh's mood had so far changed that he now wished only to get the wedding over with. What could old Ramsdell do after that? Notain', gents, nothin'.

Cavanaugh waited for what seemed to him a long time. Then the clup-clup of horses' hoofs came to him.

Old Cavanaugh bent an attentive ear to the sound. Yep, two horses, close together. This was not a flight. The horses were coming on at a leisurely pace. Pres-

ently they came into view. One was the roan and the other was a neat black. Atop the neat black was a lady.

She was the bride-to-be, and she looked the part. Cavanaugh knew her for a vivacious, smiling young lady, and she was smiling as she halted near Cavanaugh. Cavanaugh was suspicious of her smile, as he had always been suspicious of it. Sometimes—well, most times—he had a kind of a sneak' idea that she was kiddin' him, though they were known to each other only by sight. Cavanaugh had often had a notion that she regarded the quarrel between him and her father as a joke.

Well, she was pretty. She had pretty, dark eyes, and pretty, black, bobbed hair. She had doubtless been much sought after to play the role which she was now about to play. Yeah, she was a fine match for Bill, her bein' a dark lady an' Bill bein' fair. They would be a nice-lookin' couple as they stood up before the minister.

However, a weddin' was a weddin', and a fight was somethin' else again. The girl was smilin' too dang hard.

"Where's that ol' ruffian of a father of yours, ma'am?" Cavanaugh asked.

"Why, he started out to look for you," Millicent answered.

Started out to look for him, huh? Old bluffer!

"Just where did he go, ma'am?" Cavanaugh asked.

"Why, out along the valley road," the girl replied. "He must be a dozen miles from here now, he and two of his men."

"Ho, ho!" said old Cavanaugh. "I told him we would be on this here road an' he takes the valley road. Fox, ain't he, ma'am?"

"He said you were coming by the valley road and he was going to stop you."

"Why, valley road," said old Cavanaugh. "Valley road, now. Why, Bill, how come he would get that idea? Your scheme was to go the valley road. Did you tell him about that, Bill?"

"I did not," Bill answered. "Not a word. Did I, Millicent?"

"Not a word," Millicent supported him. "It is most peculiar," said Cavanaugh, rubbing his clean-shaven chin.

"We are going back to Millicent's home, dad," Bill broke in. "The minister happens to be there. We can have the weddin' all safely over before Mr. Ramsdell gets back. That will be a joke on him, eh?"

"How come the minister is there?" Cavanaugh asked suspiciously.

"Don't ask me to explain the goings and

the comings of ministers," Bill said. "Come, Millicent. Let's get back there. Trail us, father. Trail us, close!"

Cavanaugh trailed as close as he could, but the big roan and the neat little black were fleet of foot, and by the time Cavanaugh rode up to the Ramsdell house, the two horses were standing riderless by the door, reins over their heads.

Cavanaugh stood not upon ceremony. Events were coming to a head speedily. He had a well-defined notion that seconds, let alone minutes, were valuable. He opened the front door and strode into the Ramsdell sitting-room, a room which he had not entered in twenty years.

Speed, indeed! Already Bill and Millicent were standing in the center of the room,



hand touching hand. Before them stood a smiling young man in riding clothes; he was just the kind of minister, Cavanaugh dimly felt, to officiate at this wedding.

Cavanaugh stood by the door while the knot was tied. He did not seem to be needed. The young minister went through the ceremony swiftly, though without any appearance of unseemly haste. He shook hands with Bill and Millicent, bowed to Cavanaugh, accepted an envelope from Bill, and was gone.

"Kin I congratulate you?" Cavanaugh asked huskily, for Bill was his only child, the only person in the world, in fact, to whom he was bound by affection and blood.

"Why, yes, father," said Bill gravely.

They shook hands with him, bride and bridegroom, and Bill's face was very serious, and Millicent's eyes were a little misty, and she did not smile at Cavanaugh now.

And then, outside, there was the sound of horses being ridden at top speed into the yard. There were commands to halt, you cussed broncs, and the sound of some one approaching the front door on swift feet. The door was thrown open and Ramsdell stood on the threshold.

"What's this?" he demanded. "What's all this?"

"A wedding," Bill answered, with sudden cheerfulness.

"I have been married to Bill, father," said Millicent sweetly. "Married to Bill

right in my own home, as a girl should be."

Ramsdell turned to Cavanaugh.

"You four-floushin', double-crossin', white-faced, ol' maverick," he distinctly stated.

Bill came down to the center of the stage with the slow, easy grace which was characteristic of him.

"Some four-flushing, some double-crossing has undoubtedly been done here," he said, "but it was not done by my father."

"Oh!" Ramsdell cried, and the exclamation held a good deal. "You are the one, hay? I might have knowed it. I might have knowed that this here sneak Cavanaugh didn't have the brains to pull off no stunt. All he knows is to sift around, sayin' things. There ain' no action in him. So you done it all, hay? You sent that ol' slabsided, locoed-er-houn' dawg here to tell me you would be travelin' on the highway, an' then you switched to the valley road, an' then you switched back to the highway when you knowed I would be on the valley road. You," he illogically finished, "are cern'ly a chip off the old block."

"You are not sufficiently outspoken," said Bill. "I don't gather exactly what you mean. Can't you put your opinion of the person who did this thing into simple words?"

"Simple words?" Ramsdell repeated with a stare. "Do I beat about the bush? Simple words? Here they are: Whoever done this thing is the lowest human that ever was permitted to live an' breathe an' have his bein'."

That seemed to be a cue for Millicent. She came up to the side of her husband.

"It was I who did it, father," she said pleasantly.

Ramsdell suffered a sort of collapse. He faced her with slack jaw, open mouth, and fluttering lips.

"And bear in mind that whatever you say to her you are saying to my wife," said Bill severely.

"What I say," Ramsdell declared, at length, "is that she has been misled by a pair of the worst scoundrels that ever was permitted to—"

"When you speak of William you speak of my husband," Millicent softly interposed, "and when you speak of Mr. Cavanaugh you speak of my father-in-law."

"Hell an' damnation," said old Ramsdell.

"Which is low language," Millicent declared.

"I could go lower an' will when I get by myself," her father retorted. "I wish I was an inventor of talk. I could express myself then. Am I to understand that you have quit me after all I have done for you? Have you quit me and gone over to my worst enemies?"

"William is not your enemy and I don't think Mr. Cavanaugh is. You have harbored spite so long that you don't know why you hate Mr. Cavanaugh so."

"He spread a lie about me," said Ramsdell. "He said, in the barber shop once, fifteen years ago, that I used to be a hoss thief."

Old Cavanaugh stared. Why, that fool! He had never called him a horsethief, so far as he could remember. He opened his lips to speak, but his son was ahead of him.

"You say you were double-crossed, Mr. Ramsdell," Bill said. "How do you figure that, exactly? How did you know that we were going by the valley road, or had talked about going by the valley road?"

Ramsdell flushed. He took off his hat and rubbed his scanty hair.

"You speak of double-crossing," Bill said. "Is double-crossing any worse than sending a low-down rascal to spy on a couple of other men?"

"You imputin'—?" Ramsdell began.

"Imputing?" Bill sneered. "I don't impute. I state, I declare, I assert. I hope I can make it plain to you. You sent that drifter Anson over to our place to see what he could discover about my relations to Millicent and about what we were planning. Oh, you've been watching us lately. Millicent discovered that. I wasn't alert enough. That fellow Anson came over there and he spent his time sneaking about under our windows. I knew he was doing it from the first. You were afraid Millicent and I were going to elope and you wanted to find out when. Father told you we would travel by the highway. Then when Anson was under the window I said we would go by the valley road. Later I switched back to the highway. If any double-crossing was done to you, you did it to yourself.

"Hush up! You thought Millicent and I were going to elope. I'll say this to you: If I had had my way, we would have eloped. I urged her to a hundred times, till I found out she was set on being married in her own home. I would have taken her away from this country and I would never have brought her back. You two old men are the laughing stock of the coun-

tryside. You don't know how funny you are. Whenever you meet you glare at each other and ruffle yourselves up, and there isn't a good fight in either one of you."

"There ain't, hay?" Ramsdell yelled. "If you will step outside with me, I'll show you whether I got a fight left in me. You young upstart."

"No," replied Bill, "you wait till I get through laying down the law."

"There he goes already, young lady," old Ramsdell roared. "It's the Cavanaugh way. Overbearin', lordly. They always



try to tell decent folks where they get off. Oh, he is beginning soon enough."

"Millicent is a Cavanaugh now, too," Bill went on inexorably, "and we're in this together. You two old men will have ten minutes during which you may patch up your differences,

or you may not. If you do, all right. Millicent and I will go on a trip we have been planning for some time. Our baggage is at the station. Our horses are outside. Patch up your differences and we'll return soon. Fail to patch up your differences and a Cavanaugh loses a son and a daughter-in-law and a Ramsdell a daughter and a son-in-law. Come on, Millicent, let's ride."

He held the door open for his wife, she passed through it, and he followed her. Ramsdell started for the door.

"I will blow him apart," he asserted.

"You poor idjut," said old Cavanaugh, "come back here." And he evidently had something on his mind. This something stirred his curiosity, and it so filled him that anger could not even seep up through it.

"What was all that you was sayin' about me callin' you a hoss thief?" he demanded.

"You done it," Ramsdell asserted. "You went into the barber shop to get a shave, though I don't know how any self-respectin' barber could bring hisself to shave a face like yours, an' I went by an' you tol' the barber I was a hoss thief."

"I don't recollect a word about it," Cavanaugh said.

"You don't?"

"No, I don't. I never heard about you stealin' no hosses. I ain't sayin' nothin' I can't back up."

It was by way of an apology, as Ramsdell could see, and he could also see why Cavanaugh was making it. Cavanaugh's head was inclined toward the door. The bride and the bridegroom would be returning in a few minutes, for their answer. They would be prompt. They had little time to waste on others just then.

Ramsdell sank into a chair.

"To think that daughter of mine would have married a Cavanaugh," he mourned. "She could have had the pick of the best of them."

"She picked the best when she picked my boy," Cavanaugh retorted. "If I was you, I wouldn't go to criticizin' my own daughter."

"I ain't criticizin' her."

"The hell you ain't. You are sayin' she was such a little fool that she picked a dub for a husband."

"The best of them make mistakes."

"Well, we got to do somethin'," Ramsdell said. "I don't want to be separated from my girl in my approachin' old age."

"Approachin'!" Cavanaugh jeered. "I'll tell you this: If that boy of mine goes away an' don't come back, I will blow somebody apart, an' that somebody ain't no ten thousand miles from here."

"Well, let's do somethin'," Ramsdell said. "Them ten minutes is about gone. If they come back an' find us bickerin', that will be the end of it. Ain't you got nothin' to suggest, you poor dumbbell?"

"I knowed I would have to figger the thing out," Cavanaugh retorted proudly. "You ain't got no sense in a jam. Here's what you do. Run to the door. Call to them. Run back here an' grab my hand. I would as soon pet a rattlesnake's head. As soon as they come to the door an' see us, you drop that hand or I will pull your arm out of the socket."

"I would as soon touch a toad," said Ramsdell.

Nevertheless he hastened to the door, threw it open, and called loudly. He sped back to Cavanaugh and their hands met.

"Quit sneerin'," Ramsdell warned.

"Smile, you son of a cattle rustler," said Cavanaugh. "Smile!"

Their lips were at least pulled back from their teeth as they stood there, though they signally failed to register merriment.

But none came to witness that mock

reconciliation. The door remained open, but the stalwart Bill or the pretty Millicent came not to it.

Ramsdell waited for a few minutes and then he stole a look. Cavanaugh slightly turned his head to follow Ramsdell's example. Each man flung the other's hand from him.

"Double-crossed again," said Ramsdell. "They have done gone."

"Yes, but they left a warnin' with us," Cavanaugh revealed wisely. "You an' me has got to keep this thing up against their unexpected return. If they come back and find us at loggerheads, they will vamoose again, for keeps. My son is stubborn, an' I am figgerin' my daughter-in-law on the same basis."

"Your daughter-in-law!" Ramsdell snapped. "My daughter, you mean. I guess we are roped, thrown, an' hogtied. That son of yours is the trickiest thing I ever saw."

"Tricky as your daughter. She had you waitin' over in the valley while she was gettin' married. At that I'd call her smart. Smart young couple, I'd say they was."

"She is a smart girl."

"No smarter'n my boy."

Cavanaugh moved to the door.

"We might as well begin practicin' now," he said. "Good night, Mr. Ramsdell. Come an' see me soon."

"Good night, you ol'—Good night, Mr. Cavanaugh."

Cavanaugh started through the door.

"Say," old Ramsdell stopped him, "you declare you didn't call me a hoss thief?"

"I didn't think of that. One of the bets I overlooked. I would of been glad to call it to you to your face."

"That was the thing I was fightin' about most," Ramsdell said, out of his own overwhelming curiosity. "If it hadn't been for that—your callin' me a low thing like that—Say, what was your special grouch against me caused by?"

"Why, you poor idjut, it was because you cut my trail that time I was drivin' my cattle to my shippin' point."

"That wasn't recent, was it?"

Cavanaugh stared.

"Recent? It was twenty years ago. It was the beginnin' of all this fuss between you an' me."

Ramsdell stood looking at his enemy for a space, his brows puckered.

At last he said, "I'd plumb forgot about that."

GEORGE, TETE-BECHE

By

H. Bedford-Jones

Author of "Outside the Law," "Malay Gold," etc.

WHEN INTERNATIONAL JEWEL THIEVES AND FORGERS DABBLE IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS, THAT'S ALL RIGHT. BUT WHEN THEY IMPLICATED AN AMERICAN GIRL IN PARIS, AND A YOUNG AMERICAN NEWSPAPER MAN GETS MIXED UP IN THE AFFAIR—WELL, THAT'S DIFFERENT

I

GEORGE HANSON was threading his precarious way across the Place Vendome, half an hour after being fired, when he sighted an erect, sturdy figure coming toward him from the Rue de la Paix. He changed his course instantly.

"Hey, there! Mac!"

Mac, otherwise Steve MacAllister, captain of detectives, turned and allowed a hearty grin to spread across his brown, hard-jawed face. He gripped Hanson's fist in a huge squeeze.

"George Hanson, you condemned young reprobate! Was just up to your newspaper office to hunt you up, and heard you'd quit."

"Nope, fired," said Hanson cheerfully. The detective stared at him.

"Fired? You? One of the crack newspaper men in France? What you giving me?"

"Give you a drink, if you'll come around the corner to a hole-in-the-wall where they don't charge tourist prices. I suppose you're over here to take somebody home?"

Mac grunted. "I am but I ain't. He slipped out on the prefecture folks and blew to Italy. I'm taking a two week furlough for my health and to see Paris.

I guess they can get along without me in New York for a while longer. Come on, let's find your booze joint!"

Concealed pleasantry here. Hanson, himself a dean at his own work, knew and respected MacAllister very well indeed. Intelligence in France during the war; and after it, all sorts of errands dealing with international crooks. Such was Mac, no ordinary criminal-chaser, but a genius in his own way. Silent, unobtrusive, he could be anything on occasion.

Gaining a side street, they came into one of the aluminum-like bars where tourists never intruded and honest prices were charged, and ordered aperitifs. Hanson grinned.

"I see you haven't forgotten your French. Wish I could talk Parisian like you do!"

"You get around," said Mac, with a keen look. "How come you're fired, George?"

"Well, the game here isn't like it is at home, you know. I got a rattling good story about a dame—a Bourbon princess, to be exact—and slipped it over. It was true as gospel, but it wasn't flattering. The lady pulled wires, and I'm here to say she could pull some! I was the sacrifice."

"Gosh!" said Mac disgustedly. "I bet it broke their hearts to fire you."

"It did, but they had to do it to stand in on the political stuff, savvy? It's all right

with me; I'll land in the first vacancy down the line, and I've got enough correspondence to do to keep me busy anyhow. How's the family?"

"All fine. Let's have another."

Another was duly ordered and set forth. Mac lighted a cigarette, then glanced suddenly at his companion.

"By the way, I saw something today might interest you. That is, if you still are foolish as ever."

Hanson met the shrewd, laughing eyes, and broke into a sheepish grin.

"Well, it's six for me and half a dozen for you, Mac. Eh?"

Mac rubbed his square chin and glanced around.

"I guess so. If any of those birds on the force back home ever learned that a hard-boiled jasper like me spent his spare time and some cash collecting stamps, where'd I get off, huh? You still at it?"

"Bad as ever," said Hanson, his cheerful blue eyes twinkling. "I've got a pretty good lot to take back home with me, whenever I go—picked them up here and there. I stick to English and colonials, you know. Not much pickings left in Paris these days, though. Tourists come over and spoil things, as a result of the Ferrari sales waking folks up. Funny how Jim Jones, back in Menominee, won't let a soul know—won't dare!—that he collects stamps like a kid. When he gets over here, he cuts loose; but excuse me, Mac. What have you dropped on to? Been nosing around the back districts as usual?"

Mac nodded and sipped his drink, taking his time about answering, his eyes exploring the men around. Most of these were chauffeurs or clerks, and none were listening to the words in English.

As the detective had said, if his co-workers at home knew he was a stamp-collector, he would get the merry laugh. Too often the pursuit of these scraps of paper is regarded as a boyish pastime incompatible with age and dignity. In France, it is the opposite. There it may be both a hobby and a profession, most fit for the student, the gray-beard, the man of education and intelligence. Given shrewdness and foresight, too, the rewards are often large. France is a nation of stamp-collectors, and Paris is the Mecca of the philatelic world.

"I've been wandering a little," said Mac slowly. "Haven't had time to see the exposition yet—"

"But you've been looking up stamps, eh?" Hanson laughed as he spoke. "You

won't find many U. S. A. stamps here—the market's been about cleaned out."

"Never you mind," retorted Mac. "I've picked me up a few things, George, a few nice things, too! They don't all know the fine points of our stamps over here, just as over home we don't know the fine points of theirs. I'll clean up a couple of hundred on what I bought yesterday and this morning, but that's not what I started to say. I saw something that'd interest you, maybe. It would me, if I went in for English."

"Yes?" inquired Hanson. Despite his own knowledge of Paris, and of its stamp dealers, he knew the man before him had an uncanny way of prying out queer information.

"I know where there are two pairs of King George three half-pence," said Mac.

Hanson frowned, a trifle puzzled.

"There are probably two thousand whole sheets of them in Paris," he observed slowly. "What's the catch?"

Mac finished his drink. "Well, I don't pretend to be up on the English current issues, and particularly the Georges," he answered. "The color varieties make me dizzy. But these two pairs are different. Bet you the price of a drink you haven't got 'em."

"Done," said Hanson. "I've the Georges and Edwards complete—found most of the varieties right here in Paris, at ridiculous prices. I can double my money today, and treble it a couple of years from now. What about these pairs?"

"Tete-beche," said the detective curtly. "Unused. Mint condition. New."

Hanson whistled reflectively. The term "tete-beche" is applied to a pair of stamps adhering to each other, yet upside down in respect to each other. Sometimes one stamp is inverted in a sheet, sometimes every other stamp in the sheet is so inverted; as the exact conditions are fully known in stamp markets, the measure of rarity can be easily affixed.

"You're mistaken," said Hanson slowly. "There are some queer things in Paris, but you'll find no tete-beche Georges here. None were issued. None are known."

"Is that so?" demanded Mac. "And you a specialist in English stamps, too! But I can't blame you, George. As a matter of fact, mighty few people know about it."

"What?" snapped Hanson, suddenly all attention. The other grinned, enjoying his change of front.

"Well, tell you about it later—after

you've seen 'em. Want to go now?"

"We've time before lunch. Where did you see them?"

"Up Montmartre way, in one of these arcades they call passages over here."

"Which?" Hanson, knowing most of the dealers in the city, frowned. "The Passage Gouffroy, by the Mazarin Café? Oh, I know that bird; he's a fine chap, but you want to keep your eye peeled."

"You know too blamed much," grunted Mac. "Nope, it's across the street from there."

"No dealers in that passage."

"Well, you have something to learn about Paris," said Mac. "Some side passages in the back end of it, look like the royal road to ruin, and there's a dealer in 'em. Some sort of a Slovack, I think. Named Kurtzel. Know him?"

"Never heard of him."

"Let's take us a taxi, bo, and go see."

Paying for their drinks, the two men stopped a passing taxicab and climbed in.

George Hanson had more than a suspicion that he was not on the trail of stamps alone. He had known MacAllister in his New York days, and was well aware of the piercing, astute brain behind those quiet gray eyes. What was more to the point, he knew into what a mixed company the pursuit of stamps might lead.

In America, an Armenian refugee turns naturally to rugs; in Paris, he turns to stamps. So with Russians and all the other backwash of the war. The game demands keen wits, shrewdness, attention to detail. Further, Paris is flooded with stamp forgeries. To make or trade in any forgery of French stamps brings the instant attention of the police, but so large are the profits that this apparently petty criminality can go to far lengths, and may command the interest of a king of crooks.

"Have you been to the Bourse?" asked Hanson, as they halted in a traffic jam at the turn before the Opera, before gaining the boulevard.

"Not yet," said Mac, knowing he referred not to the bourse of commerce, but to the open air stamp bourse in the Champs Elysees. "Tomorrow's Thursday, eh? Go then. Still going strong, is it?"

"Been going strong since 1860, and isn't weakening yet. I know a good many people there—we may pick up some valuable information if you're on the trail of something."

MacAllister nodded without other response, and the reporter felt convinced he was on the trail of something stronger than

postage stamps. The taxi came free, turned into the boulevard, and chugged on toward Montmartre. Mac did not speak until they neared the Rue Drouot, close to



their destination, and then asked a seemingly casual question.

"Ever hear of a girl named Lasalle, George? Jeanne Lasalle? Her dad was a French professor

back home in an upstate college. He died last year. She went into department store work and got to be assistant buyer. Came over here. Pretty widely known."

"Never heard of her. Crook?"

"Well," and Mac hesitated, "that remains to be seen. Ever hear of Mrs. Goober's pearl necklace?"

"I should say so! You don't mean the girl was mixed up in that?"

"I dunno." Mac heaved himself up to look at the meter. "Here we are—pile out. I've got some brass to pay; glad to get rid of it. All aboard for your tete-beche Georges, now—"

The two crossed the sidewalk and entered the arcade before them, with its rows of tiny shops on either hand.

II

AS HANSON accompanied his friend along the long reaches of the arcade, which had more than one odd turning and cross-passage, he was thinking less of the philately than of pearls.

It was only a few months previously that the Goober case had broken into the news—one of the countless affairs going to make wealthy Americans a byword in careful Europe. Mrs. Goober, widow of a motor manufacturer, had lost in a taxicab a string of pearls worth thirty thousand dollars—or so she reported to the police, tearfully. How it was lost, she could not say. It remained lost, and Mrs. Goober went home again, a sadder and wiser lady.

George Hanson, in common with every other newspaper man in Paris, knew the "inside" of the story, which powerful and wealthy friends of the lady had suppressed with golden hands. Such suppression is nothing new to Paris, where newspapers exist for political and financial reasons, not for news. There might have been an Argentine dancer in the taxicab, or a military gentleman might have been involved in the

affair; the pearls, even, might have been quietly recovered. Mrs. Goober had stirred up a hornet's nest which buzzed far from her ken, poor woman! However, it was all over with and forgotten now—except for MacAllister, who never forgot or overlooked anything.

"You interested in the Goober case?" asked Hanson suddenly.

"Nope," came the light-hearted response. "Only I know where the pearls are."

"Where?"

"Jeanne's wearing them—maybe thinks they're fake." Mac chuckled softly. "They were let go, you know, to hush the thing up. How they dropped into her pretty hands, is what I'd like to know. Just for curiosity! Might lead to something, too—you can't tell."

"Oh! They were let go, eh?"

Mac nodded. "Yep, the affair raised so much hell it scared all hands. Well, there we are ahead. Turn left."

Hanson turned into a dark little passage leading to a side street, and occupied by dark shops where furniture was manufactured for antique sales to tourists. Then, suddenly, he found a stamp emporium ahead—a tiny place, barely large enough to hold a pair of tables, with only the sheets of stamps in the windows to announce its wares. Mac opened the door and spoke.

"Morning, miss! I told you I'd bring a friend of mine along. Here he is."

After the open street, the place was gloomy, and Hanson well knew the value of this gloom, and the greater value of the electric lights—if this dealer were dishonest.

"Mr. Hanson's a friend of mine, Miss Lasalle, can't talk much French, and will be tickled to death to hear real language again."

Too pretty for such surroundings, thought Hanson, as he shook hands with the girl. Alive with an intense vivacity, and her absence of all artificiality was so rare in Paris as to be noticed instantly.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Hanson, especially if it means business ahead," she exclaimed. Just as Hanson had not missed his cue from Mac, he now did not miss the slight hint perhaps meant to discourage any personalities.

"To hear real home talk is some treat," he said. "Mac was telling me you had some *tete-beche* Georges here, so I came along."

"You're interested in English, then?" she inquired.

Hanson nodded. "Yes, and any such a pair is news to me, Miss Lasalle."

She smiled and turned to a large safe in one corner, whose door stood open. With a movement she switched on electric lights. The safe was revealed as filled with red-backed stamp albums, and from a small compartment she brought out a *classseur* or small pocket-book.

This she brought to one of the tables. Hanson seated himself, while Mac remained on his feet, sharp eyes intent on what passed. Taking the opened *classseur* handed him by the young woman, Hanson took from the table a pair of tweezers and removed from the files of the little book a pair of ordinary three-halfpenny stamps—ordinary in themselves, yet set in reverse to each other.

"Have you a glass?" he asked.

Silently, she handed him a magnifying glass. He held up the stamps to the light, laid them on his sleeve and regarded them, then gave them a careful examination with the glass.

"This year's watermark," he observed. Mac came up behind him and chuckled.

"Tell him the story," he said to the girl. Then, to Hanson, "We got pretty well acquainted over those stamps, George. She knows all about 'em, and it's gospel."

"There is a history, yes," said Jeanne Lasalle. "You see, they are careful about this sort of thing in England. When the reversal was discovered, all the sheets printed from the block were ordered destroyed—to preserve any of them amounted to a criminal offence. One of the engravers saved a sheet—to be exact, he stole it. There were, I believe, about forty such pairs in the sheet. There'll never be any more, for the theft was discovered."

"And he's in jail?" asked Hanson.

She shook her head, and Hanson looked at the glints of gold in her brown hair.

"No, he's in France—a very clever engraver. He can't go back to England now."

"I suppose not," said Hanson dryly. "But this is news to me, Miss Lasalle! And I thought I was pretty well up on the English issues. How long ago did all this happen?"

"Not very long ago. Of course, the pairs are not yet catalogued. They'll be listed next year, however, for most of them have been disposed of, and they are absolutely authentic. In five years they'll be held at enormous prices."

Hanson could readily understand this.

He saw that by good fortune he was in the presence of one of those rare chances which come to few collectors, of which all collectors dream. And when Mac had vouched for the girl's story, he knew it could be accepted as true. Within a few years such a pair of stamps as this would be worth anywhere from a hundred to five hundred dollars, perhaps double such a sum.

He determined instantly to buy at whatever price was asked.

"They're for sale?"

She nodded, and Mac chuckled again.

"If you saw Gurtzel, George, you wouldn't have asked. He'd sell his grandmother if she had the right perforation and water-

mark. He's interested in more than stamps, too."

The girl glanced up, half in annoyance, half in challenging inquiry. "Indeed?"

"Sure," explained the detective. "In pearls, you know. He has an interest in that business, hasn't he? Pearls like yours."

"Oh! Yes, I think he is connected with some artificial pearl business, but I really know little of his private affairs," said the girl coldly.

Her fingers toyed with the necklace she was wearing, and Hanson glanced at it. Scarce a woman in Paris but had just such a necklace—at first sight.

"Well, about these stamps," said Hanson. "You have another pair here, I see. The price?"

"A thousand francs each."

Hanson whistled. "I'll take one pair now," he said. "Will you hold the other for me until tomorrow, late in the afternoon."

The girl hesitated. "Why—I'd have to ask—Oh, there's Mr. Kurtzel now! I'll ask him. He speaks a little English."

The door opened, to admit a rather small, middle-aged, bearded man.

"*Bonchour, bonchour,*" he exclaimed, and passed to one corner to hang up hat and coat. The accent apprised Hanson instantly that he was dealing with a man who might be a Slav, but was more probably a Teuton. Kurtzel came to the table, and

peered down as Miss Lasalle proffered Hanson's request. Then he looked at Mac, and nodded, holding out his hand in the cheerful French fashion.

"Tomorrow's Thursday," put in Mac significantly. "Perhaps M. Kurtzel will be gone to the bourse."

"Yes," said Kurtzel in hesitating English. "I sometimes go."

"It's like this," said Hanson, playing the rôle Mac had tacitly assigned him. "These pairs are rare, and I'll take three if you can get me another. But I'll not have enough money until tomorrow. I have a friend who'd like this other one, I know—"

"Sure, sure," said Kurtzel, rubbing his hands. "Maybe I find one at ze bourse—if, what you call—"

"Speak French," said Hanson. "I understand it if I don't speak it well."

"Good," said Kurtzel, looking down. His face was stubby, ugly, his eyes gleaming with lights Hanson did not care for. "I will see a friend tomorrow, and think I can get another pair. Shall we meet there?"

"Yes," and Hanson nodded. "I'll be around there about three. If I get the money I expect, I'll take the other pair from you, then come back here and pick up this second one—but the shop will be closed!"

"No," spoke up the girl. "I'll be here. Mr. Hanson."

As she spoke, she looked down at the table and then up again. Hanson fancied a certain implication, a thing not to be put in words; he determined to return here on the morrow.

"Very well," he said, and produced a thousand franc note. "I'll pay for this pair now, and leave it here until tomorrow, if I may—get them all at one crack."

He rose and handed the note to Kurtzel, then, smiling, spoke in French which he purposely made halting.

"I hear you are interested in artificial pearls."

The man started visibly. The hand holding the note remained aloft, transfixed. The cunning eyes lifted and widened on the gaze of Hanson, almost wonderingly. On the instant, Hanson knew that with these idle words he had all unawares plumbed some far depths.

"What you mean?" demanded Kurtzel.

"Why, nothing!" The American laughed. "I have one or two friends in the pearl business myself over here—Murphy, Barnett and others."

Kurtzel nodded, his face cleared, and his smile was unmistakably one of relief.

"Oh! Yes, I am in ze business a leetle, a leetle," he said.

"Well, come along," exclaimed Mac with an impatient air. "We'll see you tomorrow, Mr. Kurtzel—good day!"

When the usual adieux were said, and Hanson had met with a business-like smile from Miss Lasalle, the two left the shop. When they were a little way down the passage, Hanson spoke.

"I hear you're interested in artificial pearls."

Mac grunted. "You sure hit something there—I'm not sure what! And what sort of a game are you playing by leaving the stamps there? That rascal sells nothing but counterfeit stamps and false surcharges!"

"He can't switch pairs on me—and the girl won't. I'll buy all those pairs I can get, to the bottom of my pile! They're not counterfeit."

"No," said Mac. "Did you notice the pearls?"

"Not particularly. They all look alike to me. But did I play your game right?"

"Right enough," said Mac, rubbing his chin. "Hm! You struck something in that phrase you used—don't forget it!"

"Are you after the girl?" demanded Hanson blunty. "Come across!"

"No, I'm not," declared the detective.

"You couldn't imagine a safer place for the Goober necklace than around her neck, and her thinking it artificial, until it's safe to break it up and get rid of it. But it's not my funeral, unless I can stumble on to something good. Only the insurance people are interested in those pearls. I'm hoping I may get led on to something."

"All right, I'll lead you on to a drink right now," said Hanson, chuckling.

He was not sure why he was so relieved at Mac's declaration.

III

IT'S a great show," said MacAllister, interested. "And always new. How long has it been going on?"

"For the past sixty years," returned Hanson. "Outside of the curb jewel market, here's the finest collection of honest men, rascals, freaks and petty thieves in Paris. A lot of Russian and Armenian refugees, too; the Armenians all turn to stamps here, instead of rugs. I have some pretty decent friends here, too."

Under the spreading trees of the Rond Point des Champs Elysees, beside the puppet-shows and the Theater Marigny, now in course of rebuilding, lay the famous

open air bourse of stamps—here met the collectors every holiday in the year, rain or shine, hot or cold. Out of chairs and planks were made tiny tables and stands, and around these regular merchants eddied the crowd in hundreds. As Hanson said, it was the queerest crowd to be found in Paris, and numbered few or no tourists.

Many irregular merchants, who desired to pay no tax for a regular stand, circulated in the crowd, proffering wares with furtive air. Little knots collected wherever a buyer found something of interest, there was no privacy, everyone was curious with the cheerfully amiable air of your Parisian.

and good-humor was prevalent. A diplomat, his button-hole threaded with ribbons of decorations, might be seen cheek by jowl with some nondescript gutter-rat. Many Levantines were in evidence, and Russians and Slavs.

The two friends came to a pause before the stand of a yellow-whiskered gentleman whose eyes held a curious glint. Among his displayed wares, Hanson spotted a set of English stamps, one of which was a rare variety. He picked it out and demanded the price.

The yellow-whiskered one objected violently. Monsieur could have the whole set, at a price three times its value, but not that one stamp alone. When Hanson argued the matter, the merchant calmly pocketed the whole lot and began to talk politics with a bland air. Indignant, Hanson drew the grinning Mac away.

"Something queer," Hanson said. "I'll ask Aramian about it—he's an Armenian lawyer from Constantinople. There he is, to the left."

The Armenian in question, a man of no little culture and education, removed his hat and shook hands, courteously acknowledging the introduction to Mac. He had observed their encounter with the yellow whiskers, and chuckled over it.

"Yes, I know him," he told Hanson. "He is a famous surgeon, m'sieu; during the war he was many times decorated, but he was shell-shocked and now is a trifle mad. He is not to be taken seriously, m'sieu."

"So I perceive," said Hanson dryly. "Au revoir, m'sieu."



They sauntered on amid the crowd, refusing all proffered bargains, Hanson giving his companion bits of gossip or information about this or that dealer, and after a time Hanson caught a glimpse of Kurtzel.

"There's my bird, Mac," he exclaimed. "I'm going to nail the odd pair, if he has them, then go keep an appointment. Later on I'll get around to his shop and pick up the other two pairs."

Mac nodded. "I'll stick around here for a while, I think. May pick up a stamp or two—or other things. No telling."

Kurtzel was approaching, worming his way through the crowd, but did not perceive them until Hanson tapped him on the shoulder. He whirled swiftly, then nodded in recognition.

"Ah! I have them, yes; and two other pairs, which I am holding for another customer."

Hanson noted that the dealer's English had improved since the previous day, but he did not comment on the fact. Kurtzel produced a small pocket *classeur* and opened it to disclose three pairs of the English stamp, all of the rare variety. He indicated one of the three and handed the *classeur* to Hanson, who noted the one indicated had a damaged perforation.

Holding up the little book before him as though examining the stamp against the light for thinning, Hanson unobtrusively and swiftly, with deft thumb, removed another of the pairs and shoved the one indicated into its place. Then, taking out the pair he had removed, he pocketed it and returned the *classeur* to Kurtzel, who did not observe the substitution. With it Hanson passed over a thousand-franc note, which he had previously made ready.

"*Merci, m'sieu,*" he said casually, and turned away. Kurtzel pocketed the little book and the note, lifted his hat, and passed on. Mac smiled grimly at Hanson.

"You worked it like a charm, George! Was he passing off a damaged one on you?"

"Yes. And I think I'll hop right back to the shop and get my other two pairs before he finds out I did not fall for his crooked work. Hello! This is signed, too."

He had taken out the pair to place it in an envelope. On the back, he noticed the tiny, violet-inked impression or seal which constitutes a Parisian dealer's guarantee of his wares, always affixed to any stamp of price. It was too small for deciphering

without a glass, and at the moment Hanson paid no attention to it, beyond a mental ironic query as to the value of any guarantee from Kurtzel.

"Well, I'm off," he said. "Where'll we meet, Mac?"

"At the Bodega on the Rue de Rivoli, if you can stand the tourist quarter," responded Mac. "Any time you say. The Madeira there is first-rate."

"Four-thirty, then."

"Good enough. Give the young lady my love if you see her!"

Mac watched Hanson stride off, then turned his phlegmatic attention to matters closer at hand. Walking up the Avenue Gabriel side of the bourse until he was past the thickest of the crowd, he found a place vacant on one of the benches from the sidewalk, and pre-empted it. From this vantage point he could watch comfortably and smoke, and enjoy life.

Mac was composed in large portion of cold-rolled steel. He liked George Hanson very much, and was entirely willing to work with him or for him; but if Hanson were blunderer enough to get in the way, Mac would ruthlessly sideswipe him.

Just now, the detective was working to no definite end. He was following a hunch, a sixth sense warning him he was sniffing at the edge of something big. This hunch had brought him to Kurtzel's shop more than once, yet until the previous day he had really chanced on nothing to back it up. To Mac, all the world was divided into two parts—crooks and non-crooks. If Jeanne Lasalle was a crook, she would find no mercy in him, but Mac had not yet made up his mind about the girl.

Now he caught sight of Kurtzel, moving apart from the crowd and talking earnestly with a tall, dark man wearing a wide-brimmed black hat, a man as distinctly not a Parisian as Mac himself. Both men were gesturing, and to Mac these gestures conveyed a good deal. He gathered that Kurtzel was about to depart, and wished the other man to remain here; at length Kurtzel glanced at his watch, shook hands hurriedly with the dark man, and slipped away. At the corner, Mac saw him hail a prowling taxi.

The detective rose and followed the dark man, who had plunged into the crowd. He found himself interested in this saturnine, almost sinister, individual.

This open air stamp bourse had its own peculiarities. Three out of every four people, whether buyer or seller, were known by name or sight to each other; if a client

came here three times, he found himself recognized and greeted, remembered. The same faces were seen here week after week, yet everyone was here with a definite purpose, from the small boy who came to seek certain two-sou stamps he might lack, to the gray-haired financier willing to pay his thousands for rare specimens. There were also plenty of hawks seeking to victimize both small boy and gray-haired specialist.

Knowing these things, Mac found that the dark man did not quite fit in. He appeared to seek, yet no one exchanged greetings with him. He was not here for stamps, since he brushed aside with obvious impatience all offered books, yet he constantly kept in the thick of the throng,



kept peering into faces. He was expecting someone or something.

Mac drew closer to him, lighted a cigar, and bided his time. At length, in a twist of the ed-dying throng, he came face to face with the dark man. Their eyes met.

"I hear you're interested in artificial pearls," said Mac, not trying to speak French.

Instantly the dark eyes lighted up, the hand of the saturnine man came to Mac's arm.

"What's that?" he responded in English. "Hamburg?"

Mac nodded silently, and flashed a look around as though to warn of caution. The game was a blind one, but Mac was a perfect player. The grip of the long fingers tightened upon his arm.

"You know the Café Mazarin on the grand boulevard?"

Mac nodded, his eyes steadily meeting those darkly blazing eyes of the other man.

"Very well. Eight tonight at the Mazarin? Left hand side as you enter—a corner table outside near the windshield?"

"Right," said Mac, shifting his cigar. "I'll be there."

The other nodded and slipped away. Mac watched him worm out of the crowd and then head at a rapid pace past the puppet-shows toward the Champs Elysees. Mac took the cigar from his mouth, exhaled slowly, and smiled a little.

"Hm! Looks like I'm getting hep at last," he observed to himself. "I'll nab Nick Ignatieff anyway!"

IV

GEORGE HANSON paid off his taxi at the corner of the Rue Caumartin and walked up that narrow thoroughfare at a rapid pace. Presently he turned in at a narrow entrance, went through to a large courtyard, entered a door on the right, and found himself in the shop of an exporter of artificial pearls—an American whom he knew well.

"Hello, Bill," he said. "I'm in a devil of a rush, and hope you can help me out. I want a necklace of graduated pearls—about the size of the famous Goobner necklace, if you recall it. I want a good one, though."

The exporter laughed. "The best one in the world will only set you back twenty-five bucks, George. That is, unless you want to play tourist and think the quality depends on the price! Or, again, a diamond clasp—"

"Nix on the shiners," said Hanson. "Give me the best quality—ah! That's the ticket!"

He gazed at the necklace handed him. "Just about a double for the Goobner," said the dealer. "In fact, I made it up at the time of that sensation for one of your fraternity who wanted a photo of the Goobner necklace. It's not a replica, of course—"

"Trust me for the money, will you?"

"Sure thing."

"All right. Thanks."

Hanson hurried out, regained the boulevard, hailed a taxicab, and in half a minute was being whirled toward the shop of Kurtzel. He took the necklace from its tissue-paper wrapping and stuffed it loosely into his pocket, and relaxed over a cigarette.

"If I get the chance, I'll do it," he reflected, as he stared out at the passing scene, oblivious. "There's still a five-thousand dollar reward posted for that necklace."

Leaving his taxi at the Rue Drouot, he cut down to the "passage," threaded its mazes, and in no long time was shaking hands with Jeanne Lasalle. It being Thursday and therefore a holiday, two school-boys were investing in stamps, and Hanson waited at the other table, his eyes on the girl. At the enthusiastic chatter of the two boys, she lifted a smiling glance to him—a whimsical, sympathetic glance of amusement. Then, a moment later, the boys settled up and departed with an inclusive "*Bonjour, m'sieu et 'dame!*"

"You've come for the two tete-beche

pairs, Mr. Hanson?" she inquired.

"Yes," said Hanson. "May I ask whether you've been here long, Miss Lalsalle?"

She had turned to the open safe and now paused, looking around.

"No. A few weeks—why?"

"To be frank, it's rather surprising to find anyone like you in the employ of such a man as Kurtzel."

She shrugged slightly. "I'm earning my living," she said. "My father was a collector, quite a famous one, and I know stamps pretty well. There are no personalities in business."

"I differ with you there," said Hanson quietly. She came back to the table with the *classeur* and set it before him, with the two pairs of stamps. "I met Kurtzel on the bourse, a little while ago, and got another pair from him. Not the one he wanted me to have, only he didn't know it. He tried to foist a damaged pair on me."

"Yes," she said with calm acceptance. "But what would you? The bourse is the bourse—it is a game of wits there, you know. When I first came here, we had a clear understanding, and I earn my money honestly."

Hanson did not miss the implication in her words. He added the two pairs to the one already in his pocket, and then asked to see some colonials. As he had expected, most of the French Colonials offered him were patent forgeries. He did come upon a number of the rare four-penny Jamaicas, and promptly bought the lot at five francs each.

"I'm surprised those slipped past you," he said, laughingly, when he had paid for them. "A sheet of them got loose in Paris—none of the dealers here distinguish between the brown and the brown-orange. I'll get two pounds apiece for these in London."

She smiled. "I knew about them, but I didn't care to cheat the man I'm working for," she said quietly. "Is there anything else I can show you?"

"Nothing," said Hanson. "If the police drop on to those French Colonials and pay a call, what will happen to you?"

She met his eyes squarely. "Is that impertinent—or curiosity?"

Like most red-headed and normally cheerful young men, George Hanson was impulsive.

"Curiosity," he said promptly. "I feel you're out of place here—why shouldn't I? I'm no tourist looking for diversion.

I'm working in Paris, and so are you. I'm an American, and so are you, or I miss my guess. To show you how curious I am, will you let me look at those pearls you're wearing?"

For a long moment she studied him, her violet eyes appraising, steady, direct. Then, as Hanson smiled again, she gave him a quick nod and a laugh.

"No, I don't think you mean to be im-



pertinent," she observed, and her fingers went to the pearls at her throat.

"When I first came here, Mr. Kurtzel gave me these. They're very good imitation pearls, aren't they? Rather he loaned them to

me. He's a queer man in some ways, you know. He thinks a good deal depends on looks, and ordered me to wear these because I had no other jewelry—"

The necklace coiled into her hand and she passed it to Hanson. He held it up.

"Wonderfully like the real thing!" he declared. "Of course I'm no expert, but—"

Rising, he took the necklace to the door as though to examine it in more true light. For an instant his back was turned to her, then he came back to the table.

"Pretty baubles," he said, and let the string of beads curl down into her hand. "Thank you. Do you know that the very finest imitation pearls are worth something like nine francs the inch? Then figure out what profit is made off tourists!"

"The tourists get what they're looking for, usually," she answered, re-fastening the string about her throat. Hanson leaned forward.

"Do you know what I'm looking for, young lady? Not a flirtation, by a good deal. But I look for this joint to be investigated one of these days. Now, you probably know that over here a newspaper man has about a hundred thousand times as much pull as he has at home—real honest-to-gosh pull! If anything happens here and you need a friend, will you let me—"

The door opened and Kurtzel entered, breathing hard.

He stared at the two faces turned toward him, then recognized Hanson and flung up

his hands in a swift gesture.

"Ah! I hoped to find you!" he exclaimed hurriedly. "There has been a terrible mistake—look, I show you—"

Hanson rose. Kurtzel fumbled in his pocket for his *classeur*. Then, abruptly, he seemed to freeze, become petrified. His eyes were fastened upon the girl's throat. Hanson smiled.

"I hear you're interested in artificial pearls," he said, with a chuckle.

He was totally unprepared for what happened. He had thought to face down the dealer, bluff him if necessary, protect Jeanne Lasalle from his anger, perhaps get her out of the place here and now. Instead—

Like an uncoiled spring, Kurtzel lost his immobility. His outstretched arm thrust the rising girl back into her chair. He darted forward to the safe. Then he whirled, with a cry of wild rage, a pistol in his hand.

As he lifted the weapon, Hanson wakened from his amazed stupor and rushed. His hand knocked up the weapon, and the bursting report sent a bullet into the ceiling. Grappling with the cursing, raging Kurtzel, he frantically bent back the man's wrist, trying to force away his grip on the pistol; the blazing eyes before him were those of a madman.

Despite his small size, Kurtzel was no weakling. He fought in raging fury, hot oaths on his lips. There came a second report, and Hanson knew the bullet had burned his coat. The two men swayed, each putting forth every energy, and Kurtzel, getting one foot against the wall, thrust forward. Hanson twisted more powerfully on the captive wrist, and lashed out a jabbing blow to the mouth with his right.

A third explosion, this time muffled. Kurtzel staggered backward, then his knees gave way and he dropped in a huddled mass, still gripping the pistol.

For a long moment Hanson stood looking down, panting, unable to realize the truth. Then he bent over and touched Kurtzel's breast. It was still, motionless, red-smeared. Hanson rose and looked at the staring girl.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "He forced it on me, of course. He's dead—"

Five seconds of silence, then the girl wakened.

"Quick—go!" she exclaimed. "No one heard—it's empty overhead."

"Run, and leave you?" Hanson laughed shortly. "That would be nice, wouldn't it!"

"You must! I can take care of myself," she said swiftly. "You know what it means if you get involved with the police here. Your pull would do you small good—"

Hanson started, as he remembered the pearls in his pocket. For a moment he went cold. No, true enough; nothing could save him! He drew a long breath.

"You're right, Miss Lasalle," he said. "I'd better locate my friend Mac at once, and send him here. They know him at the prefecture. I'll tell him just what's happened, and if you are at all suspected, he'll clear you. Give me ten minutes, in order to explain and get him here as soon as possible—"

"I'll be all right," she returned, wide-eyed. "I mean it! Go quickly. I'll bring a gendarme from the boulevard—there'll be an hour or so of preliminary inquiry."

His hand met hers—a swift grip in which he found his pressure returned with a frightened little smile. In the passage outside, he straightened his collar and tie, looked at the burn in his coat, shrugged, and felt the necklace in his pocket. Slowly the crimson died out of his face.

"Seems like a cursed cheap and cowardly thing to do, to run and let her face the music," he thought, "but it's got to be done. And Mac can step in if she needs help. There's five thousand cool cash in my pocket, and half of it goes to her. She's a brick! Mac will be content to split the other half with me. Besides, if needs must, I can get rid of the pearls and then give up to the police—if she's held for the killing."

Emerging on the boulevard, he hastened to the taxi-stand and in half a minute was on the way to his appointment with Mac.

Behind him, at the boulevard entrance of the passage, stood two gendarmes, chatting amiably. To them came running Jeanne Lasalle, panting out an incoherent, frightened story. They hastened back with her to the little dark shop in the side passage.

For doing their work in their own way, the gendarmes of Paris have no equal. In another ten minutes Jeanne was telling her story to a very courteous, insistent, probing officer. No, she could not say who the man was—a new client. He had come in and had bought a few stamps, and had made some strange remarks about some of the stamps. Would ma'mselle indicate which stamps had drawn these remarks? But certainly. The officer looked at them, nodded, and impounded the volume of forgeries. If ma'mselle would have the

great kindness to continue—

Kurtzel had entered suddenly. He seemed to know the visitor, appeared very angry, darted to the safe and produced the pistol. The stranger grappled with him. Three bullets had been fired. The third had killed Kurtzel. The murderer had bolted at once.

The investigation was immediate and efficient. Three shots had been fired from the pistol still in Kurtzel's hand, the two missing bullets were found in ceiling and wall. The stamps in the album were patent forgeries—of French stamps. A police affair. At this point, one of the two gendarmes addressed the officer.

The two had been chatting when a man passed them, coming from the passage. A young man. An Englishman, by his appearance, or an American. One side of his coat had been blackened or burned. Perhaps ma'mselle could indicate whether the murderer were a foreigner?

Jeanne nodded assent. Yes, English or American by his accent. She heard the two gendarmes give an amazingly complete description of George Hanson, almost to the smallest item. Another official arrived with a surgeon. There were bows, polite inquiries, liftings of hats and salutes galore.

The investigation was under way.

V

"—so you'll have to get back there in a hurry and clear her," finished Hanson, after a hurried outburst.

"Take it easy," said Mac. "They'll be pottering around for an hour or two. She's in no danger, anyhow. Believe me, George, these Paris cops make darned few mistakes! Now let's go over it. Shot Kurtzel, huh? Or made him shoot himself—all the same."

Hanson glanced around. Two stolid waiters were in sight, otherwise the Bodega was empty.

"Yes. He dived for his gun the minute he saw Miss Lasse was not wearing the pearls any more—"

"Hold on," interrupted Mac, a sudden glint in his eye. "Why wasn't she?"

"Because they were in my pocket—are yet. That's why I skipped out. I got her to let me look at the necklace, and substituted another for it. Kurtzel saw the

change at once. Never even stopped to talk, but dived for his gun—"

"And what in hell do you want to fool with that necklace for?" demanded Mac angrily.

"Five thousand reward. Half to the girl would only be fair. We split the balance—"

Mac smashed his heavy fist down on the table until the siphon danced.

"You fool! You child in arms—that necklace was worth five million where it was, with Kurtzel as a decoy! Why, we've all but got our hands on—"

He checked himself abruptly, glaring at Hanson.

"But," argued the latter, "suppose she had been wearing it now? Then—"

"Arr, shut up with your supposings!" snarled the detective. "See any cops on your way out of that passage?"

"I went by two, yes."

"Then you're done for," said Mac with an air of finality. "I know these birds! You'll be pinched for killing Kurtzel, and so cursed much will be blown out in the newspapers that my game's snuffed. Well, be arrested, then! I'm not stopping you! And the girl's in no danger."

"I won't be suspected," said Hanson angrily. "I'm not worried about myself—"

"Well, you'd better be!" shot back Mac. "I'll bet you the drinks that inside another twenty-four hours you'll be under cover and out of the rain."

"If you're so sure of it, get busy and lend me a helping hand, then," demanded Hanson. "I'd win out in the end, with her evidence. And you know enough about these frog courts to know that when no politics are involved they're square shooters. But I don't want to be dragged into the thing at all, naturally, if she can be kept out of it—"

"You do your own keeping, then," retorted Mac. Behind the anger in his eyes was a cold resolution. "You've queered my game, and I'll see you a long way before I shield you! Besides, I can't risk it, in a murder case. There's got to be the usual routine action. I'll pull the girl out of any mess she's in, because I believe she's straight—but you cut your own path. Your grab for a reward has busted my biggest scoop, and you can damn' well take care of yourself."

"That's on the level?" inquired Hanson.

"Yes. I couldn't help you if I would. I'm not the chief of police here. I'll bet a description is already out for you this minute."



"Then I'll go make a change of clothes," said Hanson. "I'm sorry I've spoiled your game, Mac. I didn't know you had one in mind——"

"Well, I didn't then but I have now," grumbled the detective. "If I were you, I'd stand up and see it through. You'll spend a couple of weeks in the cooler, and then get out. Anyhow, it's ten to one the prefecture knew Kurtzel had that necklace."

Hanson went cold at this suggestion. Two men came in and glanced around. One of them nodded to Mac. At this, Hanson rose.

"Then I'm off. If you won't help me, Mac, at least do your best for her. Will you?"

Mac growled an assent.

Going out into the street, Hanson walked down to the Rue Royale, with that final suggestion burning into him most unhappily. There was a lot behind the Goober necklace story that was never made public—a lot that he and other newspaper men, even, did not know. The thing had ended in the air, hushed up, choked off. Perhaps the Paris police did know of the necklace being in Kurtzel's possession. Perhaps they had left it there deliberately, waiting——

Hanson whistled softly. "If that's so," he reflected, "then I know somebody who's going to be in a devil of a fix—and it's me! Mac is sore, for the moment, and I don't blame him in a way, but he'll get over it. My job is to get connected with a newspaper right away in case I need the pull, too."

He felt for a cigarette, and his fingers touched the pearls in his pocket. Mac's attitude had prevented his giving the pearls to the detective, as he had first intended. He was up a stump, and had no idea just what to do first.

Turning up the Rue Cambon, he made his way to the Madeleine, less afraid than sorely puzzled. He stopped on the way at a hole-in-the-wall and revolved the situation over an apéritif, but without result. Paying for his drink, he strolled on and came out on the boulevard near the metro entrance.

Not for a moment did he doubt Mac's estimate of his position. If the police really had his description and were looking for him, he could not very well go home, for they would not be long in identifying him. He might better take Mac's advice after all, go through all the weary delays, the questionings, the inaction, the suspi-

cion—and yet his possession of the necklace complicated everything! It would be thought he had killed Kurtzel in order to steal the necklace, of course.

"This way, Mr. Hanson. They have your description. Follow me."

The words struck him softly, clearly, distinct above the hoots of taxis and the whirring thrum of busses. He glanced around, and saw Jeanne Lasalle brushing past as though ignoring his existence.

Startled anew, by those words so closely chiming with his own fears, Hanson followed her across the street as traffic was held up. She turned into the Rue Vignon almost at once, and Hanson followed her at a dozen feet's distance. At the Rue de Seze traffic brought them together, waiting, and she spoke again, without looking at him.

"If I'm not followed—wait and see. They are looking everywhere for you."

"Did my friend show up to help you?" asked Hanson.

"No. They let me go at once——"

She was darting across the street, following the Rue Vignon. Hanson followed, more leisurely, wondering. She must have left the shop, then, before Mac arrived to help her. Why had she been released from the inquiry so swiftly? Either her innocence was undoubted, or else— Ah, these devils of Paris police! The old trick of following her!

The click of rapid, decisive footsteps behind Hanson arrested his thoughts. He did not dare to turn around, expecting to feel a hand on his shoulder at each instant. He slowed, and the other man came abreast of him, passed him without a glance, eyes fastened on the girl ahead. Not a gendarme, but a bearded, sturdy man of official type. He caught up with Jeanne Lasalle, touched her on the arm. She halted. Some distance ahead was a gendarme, as though to cut her off.

"Will you accompany me without disturbance, mademoiselle?"

Without looking at Hanson, she made a slight gesture of the hand—forbidding any interference. He stopped, lighting a cigarette, to overhear what came next.

"Certainly, monsieur," returned the girl quietly.

A file of taxis were crawling along the street. The sturdy man held up his hand to the first. As he did so, Hanson, at the curb, signaled the second and leaned over to the driver.

"The taxicab ahead, follow it, m'sieu, and let us see where it goes," he said with a

smile. The chauffeur nodded—this adept touch was the right one, this taking the man into his confidence. Any other course, with a Frenchman, would have brought questions and shrugs.

Hanson was in and his taxi moving, instantly. Knowing the Parisian chauffeur, he had no fear that his quarry would be lost.

When he found himself circling into the Place de l'Opéra and turning to the left, he took for granted Jeanne Lasalle was being taken back to the scene of Kurtzel's death, perhaps for further questioning. He resolved to make sure of this at any cost, and, if Mac were not on hand, to give himself up and deliver a full and frank statement of the circumstances.

To his astonishment, however, he passed the Rue Drouot without pause, passed the arcade beyond, and headed straight on for Montmartre. This looked queer, unless they were headed for the prefecture of police on the Ile du Cité; when the cab swung to the right in the Boulevard de Sebastopol, this hypothesis gained alarming strength.

Then, abruptly, Hanson's taxi swerved from the boulevard into a narrow street.



Peering ahead, Hanson saw the other taxi halted at the curb before an old building, whose doorway gave directly upon a flight of stairs. No bureau of police, nothing!

The sturdy, bearded man paid his chauffeur as Hanson's astute driver crawled past, and entered the building with Jeanne Lasalle at his side.

Hanson was out instantly, thrusting a fifty franc note at his driver.

"*M'attendez!*"

The driver nodded comprehension and Hanson went back to the doorway. Without hesitation, he entered. Why had the girl been decoyed to such a place? He passed the door of the concierge swiftly, to evade questioning, and went up the stairs silently on his rubber-soled shoes. He thanked heaven for those soles of crêpe rubber, as yet a novelty in Paris.

The dusty flight of bare board stairs curled to the left into gloom. Footsteps came from above at the second landing, and Hanson was quick in his ascent. At the landing he paused and reconnoitered. Here was a long, dark corridor, with one

door open to emit a glimmering of electric light. He approached it, and a deep, sonorous voice came to him in English.

"Nonsense! Worth a couple of hundred francs. Where is the other one?"

The voice of Jeanne thrilled him in response.

"But this is the one! This is the only one I've had!"

A moment of silence. Then another voice in French, obviously that of the bearded man.

"Mademoiselle, it is necessary that you tell us everything. The man who killed our poor Kurtzel was, perhaps, your accomplice?"

Silence again, and Hanson could imagine the girl shrinking, wondering, frightened. Then the sonorous voice leaped out.

"Here, give me those pairs of stamps! Miss Lasalle, you have five minutes in which to produce the pearls or else tell us the whole thing. The stamps, Hartman!"

"Here," said the other voice. Almost at once, came a sonorous oath.

"These are not the ones—neither pair has the print, the address of Sweeney!"

"No. Kurtzel sold the other pair on the Bourse this afternoon, by mistake," came the reply. "He was to have given Ignatieff the address, and when he came to do it he found the mistake."

"The devil! Then we can't get in touch with Sweeney!"

"Not unless he gets in touch with us."

A thud, as of a fist crashing on a table. "But I'm due to sail on Thursday!" came the sonorous voice. "I have to make that boat—we can never work the game without the help arranged! If I miss her, I must wait until she returns, unless I can reach Sweeney at once. Here, grab her—"

A short, frightened cry from Jeanne. Hanson put his foot against the door and shoved it violently open. He uttered a quick call in French.

"*Voilà!* We have them. Come swiftly!"

The old wheeze worked. The bearded one went in a headlong dive through a doorway on the far side of the room. The other, a tall, scrawny individual, had been holding Jeanne by the arm. He released her and went staggering, as Hanson's fist impacted under his chin. He tripped across a chair and plunged headlong at the wall. To the fall, he lay senseless.

Hanson looked at the astonished girl and laughed.

"My turn!" he exclaimed cheerfully. "Looks like I've evened up what I owe you, young lady!"

"We must leave, quickly," she cried. "Did you—did you hear what they said?"

"Most of it."

"Then—the pair you bought from Kurtzel! I see it all now—he thought you had discovered——"

Loud voices from the adjoining room wakened Hanson to action.

"Quick!" He seized her arm and propelled her gently from the room. The key was in the door and he seized it. "Go on down—I have a taxi waiting——"

She did not hesitate but started on. Hanson, key in hand, closed the door, inserted the key on the outside, and turned it. Then he darted after the girl.

He caught up with her before she was at the bottom of the stairs. Outside, his taxi was waiting, and he handed her into it swiftly.

"Place de l'Opéra!" he instructed the driver, then climbed in and slammed the door.

The vehicle churned away down the narrow street. Looking back, Hanson saw two or three figures erupt from the doorway and stand staring, then start after the taxi at a run. Next instant they turned a corner, then turned another corner and were in traffic, well lost.

"So that's that!" observed Hanson, and threw himself back on the cushions. To his quick laugh, the girl smiled tremulously. "Good driver I picked up—he'll earn his tip. Now, then, what's all this about the tete-beche pairs?"

VI

"I'M NOT altogether sure," said the girl. "For one thing, there was a forged pair——"

"A what?" interjected Hanson incredulously. "A forged pair? It's impossible! It could not be done beyond detection by a glass."

"This was an experiment. Somebody in Italy, where most of the forging is done, had been making pairs of tete-beche French stamps, which are highly valuable; I think it was done by some process of hydraulic pressure. Well, this one pair—the first pair—of English ones was made up several months ago at least, before any were known to really exist. When real ones turned up, Kurtzel was terribly disconcerted."

Hanson frowned, puzzled.

"I can't make head or tail of it," he said. "Why should he be disconcerted?"

"There again I'm not certain," replied

the girl frankly. "He kept the first pair always either in the safe or in his pocket. Sometimes he lent them to someone, perhaps to examine. That's how I got the impression they were false, by scraps of talk. I know this one forged pair was marked to differentiate it from the real ones—it had some sort of violet stamp on the back, which the others did not have."

Hanson groaned. "And that's the pair I slipped from Kurtzel's pocketbook in place of the damaged pair he was trying to foist on me!" he exclaimed. "Talk about poetic justice. I handed myself the forged pair! But those chaps mentioned an address on the back——"

"Perhaps the violet signature was really an address of some kind," said the girl. "I don't know—Oh! Look—your friend!"

Hanson looked, and as swiftly sat back in the cab. A block in traffic had halted them half a block from the Place de l'Opera. Going in the opposite direction was an open taxi, its top back, and sitting in it were MacAllister and an officer of gendarmes.

"He's heading back to Montmartre, eh? Well, let him go," said Hanson. "I'm not hunting him at present."

"But other people are probably hunting you. What are you going to do?"

"Have dinner first, with you, and discuss plans. Say yes?"

She looked at him, met his eyes with a smile, and nodded. A moment later, the taxi wheeled in before the Café de la Paix, since Hanson had given no definite address. He turned to her.

"Here as well as anywhere, I suppose, though I hate tourist traps. Eh?"

"If you like."

The evening had become cloudy and threatened rain, yet it would not be dark until nine or so. Jeanne took his hand and descended from the taxi, and Hanson was feeling for money when he caught a sudden pressure of her fingers on his arm.

"Look—quick!"

He turned, feeling her shrink against him. "What?"

"That man, the same one! He has followed us after all—perhaps by luck—but I saw him look at us—getting out of the taxi——"

Behind them, at the corner, another taxi had stopped. The fare was paying off his driver, and the fare was the sturdy bearded man who had accosted Jeanne in the Rue Vignon. Hanson made a signal to his driver.

"Let him pay off his taxi—now! Tell our man some place to dine, and tell him you're being followed—your French is quicker than mine."

The girl turned.

"Swiftly!" she said to the chauffeur. "A man is following us. You must throw him off—if possible. You know the boulevard restaurant at the corner of the Rue Drouot? End up there."



"Entendu, madame," returned the driver, as she reentered the car. He flung a knowing wink at Hanson. "These husbands—they are the very devil, eh? Come! We go."

Jeanne looked at him with flushed cheeks, having caught this observation. Hanson grinned, and slammed the door as the taxi moved off. He peered through the tiny rear aperture and saw the bearded man frantically signaling a taxi.

"We may and we may not," he said. "Anyhow, let's hope for the best. See here, won't it be dangerous for you to stick with me, though? If for any reason the police pinch either of us, and recognize me as the man wanted for Kurtzel's killing, they'd naturally think we were some sort of accomplices."

"No," she returned quietly. "Don't borrow trouble until you come to it! I'd much sooner you remained with me until we get rid of this man, please—then you can take me home, or do as we may decide."

He nodded and relaxed on the cushions.

In two minutes their driver dived into the Rue Edouard VII, went roaring through the archway and came out into the street beyond on two wheels, circling back to the Opéra. Like any Frenchman, he took a sympathetic interest in flinging the supposed husband off the trail of two lovers, and cutting around the front of the Opéra, chugged on to lose himself in the intricate and narrow streets around the Chaussée d'Antin. It seemed rankly impossible that any other taxi could have followed them, although the vehicle was a Yellow and therefore noteworthy among the more common Renaults.

In ten minutes they came down the Rue Drouot, to pause at the side of the restaurant indicated by Jeanne. The driver opened the door and grinned triumphantly.

"Come, we've made some dust for him!" he exclaimed. "That's worth a good pair of cymbals, eh?"

"Yes, but there are no more cymbals—only crackling paper," said Jeanne laughingly, and translated the argot for Hanson's benefit. "Two ten-franc notes, he says."

"And another for good measure," said Hanson. "My pile's getting low, but fortunately I cashed my pay-check this morning."

They entered the restaurant, and in two minutes were snugly ensconced at a front corner table, beside an open window giving on the boulevard. The wax-like leaves of magnolias, planted in the window-box, shielded them from sight of the outside tables below yet gave them opportunity to see all and hear all. It was still early for Parisian diners, and the place was nearly empty.

When they had ordered, Hanson leaned back in his chair with a sigh of relief.

"It's good to feel free again—this is the first minute of relaxation I've had for some hours. We've become pretty well acquainted today, haven't we?"

"I'm afraid we have," responded the girl, with a slight smile.

"Why afraid? Well, come to think of it, I'm to blame all around as far as you're concerned," said Hanson. He resolved swiftly to make a clean breast of the whole thing to her. "That pair of tete-beche Georges has obtained some swift action! Now, about Mac——"

He told her of himself and just who his friend MacAllister was, while her steady violet eyes regarded him and an occasional nod bespoke her interest. For the moment he omitted all mention of the pearls, however; he had to make plain Mac's position, and did so.

Their meal arrived by sections, and as it progressed, Hanson still lacked courage to make the plunge of confession. The steak arrived, done in the usual French fashion, and Hanson promptly sent it back for further cooking. Just as the waiter departed, he saw the face of the girl change, lose all its smiling happiness, suddenly become frightened and wary.

"What is it?" he asked, seeing her eyes directed past him. "Who?"

"The same man," she said quietly, and met his gaze. "He has just come in. He looked at us. Now he's taken a table near the door, behind you."

"But we came in the side door," said Hanson calmly, stifling a natural impulse to curse this ubiquitous trailer. He caught the eye of the head waiter and beckoned, then felt for a fifty franc note and handed

it to the girl, with a rueful reflection on his vanishing funds.

"Tell him to hail a taxi now, and have it standing by the side entrance. Have the driver come in and take a look at you. Quick."

The head waiter bowed. Jeanne handed him the note and instructed him, and with a murmured assent he departed. The girl looked inquiringly at Hanson.

"If that taxi is standing for half an hour or so, it only costs us four francs," he explained. "We'll have it ready for a quick getaway. Our friend won't find another very quickly on the Rue Drouot side."

"But it seems impossible to throw him off!" she said, with a hopeless gesture.

"We'll do it, never fear," he encouraged her. "Meantime, we'll take plenty of time to our meal; the longer the taxi waits, the better, and the same is true of our friend yonder. If we can sit him out, we will, though I haven't much hopes of sitting out any Frenchman in a restaurant!"

"But all this is costing you a terrible lot of money," expostulated the girl frankly. "And you're doing it for my sake! You'll have to let me stand my share of the expense, please. I insist!"

"Nonsense!" Hanson laughed. "We'll get it all back and good interest besides, if the police don't jump on me before ten tomorrow morning. If we don't leave here before eight-thirty, I'll only have thirteen and a half hours to put in—somehow. You had no trouble over Kurtzel?"

"Little," she returned. "To tell the truth, the gendarmes unearthed some of his stock. I gave them a hint about it. When they found he was dealing in forged French stamps, it put a different light on the matter. I'm to report tomorrow morning at the prefecture, and that's all."

"They must have let you go almost at once, then."

She nodded. "Yes. Probably before your friend Mac could arrive. I took a taxi to the Three Quarters and got out, meaning to catch the Métro home—then I saw you, and at the same time had a feeling someone was watching me—and you know the rest! But what do you mean by speaking of ten tomorrow morning?"

"The insurance companies will be open then," said Hanson, and took the plunge. "And I'll have five thousand to collect—dollars, not francs! The reward is still offered for the Goober pearls. You've heard of them?"

"Of course!" she agreed, interest in her

eyes. "You know where they are, then?"

"Sure," said Hanson cheerfully. "In my coat pocket."

"What!"

The re-cooked steak arrived and for a moment there was no further chance to talk. Then, when the waiter had departed, the eyes of the girl struck at Hanson eagerly, wonderingly.

"You mean it? You really have those pearls?"

"Sure. They're all mixed up with this case, in fact. They're the real reason why I ran off and left you to face the gendarmes alone. I knew they'd be found on me!"

"But what have they to do with this case?"

"You were wearing them until late this afternoon."



Her bewilderment drew a laugh from Hanson. He explained why Kurtzel had given them to her to wear. Then he abruptly confessed.

"When you let me look at them this afternoon, I substituted another necklace just like yours. I found an imitation one made up by a friend of mine. Kurtzel noticed the difference at once. Those men who decoyed you, wanted the pearls, of course."

She stared at him, angrily at first, then with a slow smile growing in her eyes. About Hanson was an ingenuous frankness which robbed his confession of all slyness, and the admiration in his gaze would have disarmed most women.

"You see the complications?" he said. "After the way Mac has acted, he's out of the split. You and I will divide that five thousand tomorrow at luncheon. Since we're both out of work, it will comfort us in our affliction. You're not angry?"

Her quick smile was his reply.

VII

AT SEVEN-FIFTY that evening, MacAllister annexed a corner seat of the Café Mazarin's comfortable padded cushions, with all the boulevard for a passing show, and the glass windshield to keep off the cold night wind. Just the other side of the windshield, where the

café lights did not strike him, stood a gendarme muffled in his blue cloak, apparently much interested in the night life wending to and from Montmartre.

Mac seemed quite cheerful and stirred his hot grog with much appreciation. It was just one minute to eight when he observed a tall, black-hatted figure threading its way across the street, to finally dodge a taxi and leap safely to the sidewalk. Mac beckoned the waiter and ordered another drink like his own.

The tall, saturnine figure came directly to him and the black hat was lifted. Mac gripped the hand extended to him, as its owner sat down opposite him at the little table, and held on to the hand.

"How's everything, Nick?" he demanded, unsmiling.

The other started. His eyes widened. He wrenched at his hand, but Mac shook his head, and now smiled.

"Don't do it, Ignatieff, don't do it! My left hand's in my coat pocket, and there's somebody looking at you through the glass—"

Ignatieff, looking around, saw the gendarme regarding him through the windshield. He turned pale, then relaxed in his chair. Mac loosed his hand.

"So the game's done, is it?" asked the dark man.

"Done, Nick," said Mac quietly, with an undertone of menace in his voice.

The waiter came with the hot grog. When he had gone, Mac sat back on his cushions and addressed the other.

"Better attend to your drink, now. It'll do you good, and we'll have a nice little chat. Kurtzel's done for, and you're—Well, it rests largely with you yourself what'll happen, Nick. That gendarme has moved up to the edge of the windshield now, and these birds over here carry their guns where they can get at 'em. You'd better sit pretty."

Ignatieff stared at him for a moment.

"So you are an American!" he said at length. "But how—how did you know—?"

Mac smiled again. "About the proper way of addressing you? Oh, we know a lot we don't say anything about, Nick. Here's luck all around."

The detective finished his drink, and Ignatieff sipped his own, without evident pleasure.

"S'pose we get to business," suggested Mac. "I might go right ahead with the pinch, but again I might not. I've attended to all the formalities, so don't get your

hopes up on that score. You know what state's evidence is? Having been in America, you do. And you Ruthenes or Slovaks or whatever you are, are pretty good at it. Kurtzel's dead, remember. I'm in charge of this case, and I'm offering you a chance to give up information. Get me?"

Ignatieff stared down at the reddish liquor, sipped it again, and nodded.

"What d'you want to know?" he asked sullenly.

"Just as a matter of interest," said Mac, "where did you land all that nice paper you brought over here from America?"

Ignatieff shook his head. "No! Not if it meant all the difference."

"Oh!" said Mac sagely. "A skirt in it, huh?"

"Never mind," returned the other. "Other things—the little I know—"

"Forget it," snapped Mac. "Think I'm offering you something for nothing, you big boob? I know all about your bringing over that paper from America—have known it for a long while. That was your part of the job. Now, what about the printing?"

"I do not know," responded the other sullenly.

"You're about as much use as a tin brick for a lifebelt," said Mac in disgust. "And that yarn won't dash worth a cent! Don't tell me you got away with the paper for two million in bank notes and don't know where they're being printed!"

"But it is the truth!" broke out Ignatieff with sudden access of energy. "Sweeny knows. I have never even seen Sweeny. All our orders came through Kurtzel. He knew where to find Sweeny, and nobody else knew."

"Hm!" grunted Mac, eyeing him. "You saw Kurtzel this afternoon at the stamp bureau and had a confab with him. What about?"

Ignatieff looked up and met the boring eyes squarely.

"Why should I tell you?"

"Why?" said Mac. "I've already tried to beat the why of it into your thick head! You got away with all that paper, and half a million of it has already gone back with printing very nearly as good as the paper. Your little share in the game is worth about twenty years up the river when I get you back—and I've got the papers all made out. Now, listen here!"

Mac leaned forward, and suddenly became alert, hard, intent.

"I want Sweeny a lot more than I want

you, see? I won't let you off going back to face the music, but I can shorten that twenty-year stretch a hell of a lot. If you want to help your Moscow friends any more, before you're too old to work, you'd better come across with the dope on this job."

Ignatieff sat silent, glooming at the table before him. Mac went on curtly.

"The greatest good for the greatest number—ain't that political economy? You can't help Sweeny by silence, but you can help me catch him a bit quicker. That way, you'll be able to go back to work with your bolshevist friends pretty soon."

Ignatieff brought out a cigarette and lighted it.

"If," he said, exhaling a thin cloud of smoke, "if I tell you all I know, it will not help much. Only Kurtzel was in touch with Sweeny—"

"Who engraved the plates and did the printing?"

"I suppose so. All I know is so little—"

"Spill it," ordered Mac, "and I'll guarantee to do my best for you, even if I make a bad bargain. But hold out on me, and I'll send you up for the full stretch!"

"All right," said the other, with a nod. "If anything happened to Kurtzel, it was arranged that Sweeny's address would be found on the back of a stamp, where it was put like a signature. Nobody would ever examine that closely or suspect it. The stamp would be a tete-beche pair of English three-halfpenny stamps."

"Hell!" exclaimed Mac in astonishment. Then he gestured. "Go on. You're earning your pay fast. Keep it up."

"Sweeny arranged all that," pursued Ignatieff. "It was only in case of anything happening to Kurtzel that we would know where to find the address. It would be so easy for somebody to send the address to the police, if they knew it! But Kurtzel alone knew, and only four of us knew where to find it if anything happened to Kurtzel. Well, Kurtzel was to give me that stamp this afternoon. I was to take it to Sweeny, as evidence that I came from Kurtzel, but it seems Kurtzel made a mistake and sold a similar pair of stamps and—"

A disgusted oath escaped the detective.

"Good Lord! And to think I had the whole game under my very eyes and didn't know it! So Kurtzel sold the wrong pair by mistake—oh, Lord! No wonder he was excited when he met you! And he went back and—"

Mac broke off short with another round oath, and motioned Ignatieff to go on.

"That's all," said the other. "Until we get in touch with Sweeny or he with us, we are helpless. And time is short, because we might miss the boat we arranged—"

"Don't worry about boats, you'll get yours free," said Mac grimly. "Which boat?"

"The *Ville de Paris*, sailing Thursday."



Mac nodded. "And the Goober pearls were to have gone over with this consignment of bank notes, eh?"

Ignatieff gave a gloomy assent.

"Good scheme," said Mac. "Worth more in America than here. And if you could get in a half-million in counterfeit notes, a pearl necklace would be a fleabite to your gang. But why print over here?"

"Because our organization wants to put much of the money into circulation abroad—we have already done so in Italy and Spain. The notes are not questioned so much."

"On the real paper, too—I should say not. Lord, how I'd like to cut all your throats, you damned political scoundrels!"

Ignatieff stirred in sudden alarm, but Mac rose and tapped on the glass. He flung a note on the table to pay for the drinks, as the gendarme came toward them.

"Come along, Nick," he said. "I got a busy night ahead, finding that pair of tete-beche stamps. Lordy, if I'd known this before!"

A common human complaint, but something new for MacAllister to voice. His chagrin would not have been lessened had he known he was within a hundred yards of Hanson at the moment.

VIII

DID that taxi driver ever show up to look at you?" asked Hanson.

"Yes. He nodded and saluted and went out again."

"Our friend still on deck?"

"With his *Paris Soir*, quite comfortably. He is just sending a note by the waiter to somebody outside, I think. Yes—the waiter's going out."

Hanson started, under the spur of an alarming possibility.

He had done even better than hoped for—it was now nearly nine o'clock and the liqueurs were not quite finished. Conscious that this might be his last meal in freedom

for some time, he had done the thing well, and was rewarded by the sparkle of animation that had flowed back into the girl's face. They had found one or two mutual acquaintances, and all in all, Hanson was extremely satisfied with the way things had turned out. He would have been content to sit here all evening, but for the ominous presence behind him.

The restaurant was well filled by this time and an orchestra was at work. Hanson soberly reflected that this note sent out by the bearded man might be very embarrassing. What better game could the man play than send word to a gendarme that the murderer of Kurtzel was dining here at the corner table? Instinctively, Hanson knew he had hit the nail on the head. He could feel it, could sense it. Seeing Jeanne Lasalle in company with him, perhaps recognizing him as the man who had broken up their afternoon session, the man might well jump at such a conclusion.

"Why so sober of a sudden?" demanded the girl gaily.

"Danger," said Hanson, pushing back his chair. "Are you willing to sacrifice your coat—at least, until we can recover it tomorrow?"

"Yes," she returned, questioning him with her eyes.

"Then I'm off—I'm leaving money for the waiter. They'll think I've gone to the dressing room. You can powder your nose, then go, too, leaving your coat here. I'll have to give up my hat—no loss. Come to the back of the place, and then to the side entrance. No time to lose about it—good luck!"

He rose and carelessly threaded his way among the tables toward the rear of the place, cut off from the front by a row of potted trees coming into the room from either side. Here, as he slipped into the passage leading to the side entrance, he glanced around to see a gendarme just entering the front door.

He went on outside, and waited. The taxicab was standing at the curb, the driver engaged in animated conversation with two men who had evidently wished to hire his vehicle. Recalling that he himself was unknown to the driver, who had seen only Jeanne, Hanson forced himself to patience, and lighted a cigarette.

A moment later he heard her quick, light step, and she was at his side. The chauffeur looked up, touched his cap, and swung open the door, then climbed to his seat. Hanson had his foot on the car step to follow the girl—when something happened.

The two men nearby fell upon him bodily. One clutched his collar and dragged him back, the other drove in a short-arm jolt in the ribs that sent him staggering and gasping across the sidewalk. As he recovered, he saw both men climbing into the taxi, which set off at once. Winded by the blow, Hanson tried to follow, but vainly. Before he had taken three steps, the taxi was swinging into the boulevard and dodging away amid traffic.

Out-generated!

Hatless, disheveled, Hanson staggered toward the corner—then came to frantic pause. From nowhere, apparently, came into sight a gendarme, heading for him, and a whistle shrilled. Without hesitation, Hanson whipped around and broke into a run down the dark and deserted street, dodging across to the opposite side as he did so.

Vainly he cursed his plight—he was a fugitive now, and his chance of getting decently out of the affair was lost. Glancing back, he saw running figures, heard the resounding echoes of pounding feet from the buildings around. Shouts pealed up in his wake, reiterated commands to halt. A bullet would come next, he felt.

Before him loomed the barren vastness of the Hotel Drouot, that tremendous building of auction halls. Hanson sped past it, then ducked suddenly up the street to the left. He knew where he was now, had his wind back, felt he had a fighting chance to slip clear. Then, from the gloom ahead, emerged the shape of a strolling gendarme.

Hanson went forward. His crêpe-rubber soles made no noise. He was not seen until he came within ten feet of the gendarme, who turned suddenly as the view-hallo of the chase broke at the corner behind. Hanson sent him staggering with one push, and plunged desperately forward. An instant later, a shot roared out behind, and he heard the bullet whistle, then came a renewed tumult of yells and shouts, amid which he distinguished his own name. So they knew him! That meant the end of everything.

None the less, he kept on, refused to stop now.

The strong glare of headlights suddenly filled the street behind him—a police car! None other would dare use full lights in the city. Down another street, and before he got to the corner, the headlights had followed him with their glare.

Hanson doubled around corners, down narrow streets. He made time and had

flung off some of the pursuit, yet could not get rid of those devilish headlights—between corners they had the speed of him.

Then, abruptly, he plunged out into the Rue Taitboud—and ahead of him, crawling along the curb, appeared a cruising taxicab. Knowing that his hatless appearance would mean nothing in Paris, where one does as he pleases, Hanson dashed at the cab and pulled open the door.

"Etoile, Avenue d'Iena, and across to the left bank," he ordered. "And quick!"

As he clambered into the still moving vehicle, his one idea was to get clear away from it all and have a chance to think—to reflect on how he might aid Jeanne Lasalle. By getting across the Seine, with his pursuers flung off the track, he would gain breathing-space.

Whether or not his method of evasion had been observed, he could not tell. A moment later his taxi was in the Boulevard Haussman and heading for the Arc de Triomphe amid a thin stream of traffic, every vehicle traveling as though the end in view were more death than destination. Hanson lay back on the cushions, resting, relaxing, panting from his long dash.

They had him now. Since they knew his name, had identified him, there could be no hope of ultimate escape, and he cursed the net of circumstance which had enmeshed him. Jeanne was in the clutches of the gang, and lost to him. The pearls in his pocket would damn him utterly if found, yet he dared not try to get rid of them. He had staked too heavily on the reward to throw it up. His mad flight had practically condemned him for the murder of Kurtzel.

"The one chance left," he thought desperately, as the heavy masses of the Arc and its top rim of lights broke the perspective ahead, "is to get away, lie low, and turn in the pearls tomorrow for the reward. That done, I can face the music and clear myself. Otherwise, I'm done."

He looked back, trying to make out any glare of headlights, but the car had swerved to swing around the Etoile and against the dazzle of street lights everything else was lost. He lighted a cigarette and forced himself to relax his tension again and sit back, smoking.

The circuit of the Arch completed, the taxicab swung into the Avenue d'Iena and went downhill at mad speed, horn clawking industriously, for the river. Off to the right hung the lighted masses of the Trocadero—and behind, the white spread of headlights picked them up. Hanson looked

back, swore softly to himself, threw away his cigarette.

The spidery, ghostly outline of the Eiffel Tower soared up into the sky ahead, looming over everything. The taxicab missed a tram by inches, frightened another taxicab into wrathful oaths, and took the crossing before the bridge with that utter disregard of other traffic only compassed by a Parisian chauffeur. Now they were whirring over the bridge, the dark waters of the Seine and the glowing red navigation lights to either hand, and off to the left the glittering splendors of the exposition.

Then, abruptly, Hanson was flung forward off balance as the taxi came to a halt with a scream of brakes. Two gendarmes stood ahead, with upraised truncheons gleaming white, and two others were running to their aid. The taxi halted, an electric torch played its lights over the interior, and Hanson met with a curt order to descend.



He obeyed, with a sense of utter futility, helplessness. He was trapped. As he alighted, the flaring headlights of a car coming over the bridge picked out the scene in detail.

"Attendez, m'sieu," said a gendarme. Another ordered his taxicab on, and there was an immediate and violent protest over the fare. Hanson held out a twenty-franc note, and a gendarme passed it on. The taxi churned away.

The four gendarmes regarded him impassively. None made a move to touch him, yet they had him hemmed in. The car with the glaring headlights came to a halt, and from it descended a number of officers—and MacAllister.

"So you squealed on me, did you?" said Hanson angrily.

IX

MAC regarded him grimly. "Squealed nothing, you poor boob!" he growled. "Hand over that pair of tete-beche stamps with the signature—quick!"

Hanson stared. "The stamps—what?"

Aren't you satisfied with getting me jailed—?"

MacAllister swore heartily, amazedly.

"Jailed? Forget it! My Lord, every cop in Paris is hunting you to get hold of those stamps! We don't want to jail you. I want those stamps, and the prefect wants to hang a medal on you for killing Kurtzel."

"You—what?" demanded Hanson. "What's all the shemozzle about, then?"

"Those stamps, damn it!" exploded Mac. "They've got the address we need—get 'em!"

Hanson felt in his pocket and drew forth his wallet containing the stamps he had bought that day. In the light of an electric torch he opened it and sorted out the forged pair of stamps in question. Mac seized upon them, someone thrust forward a pocket magnifying glass, and the detective bent over.

"Quarante-trois, Rue de Marsan, St. Cloud," he read aloud, and there was a buzz of voices at the words. "Quick, George! In with you—get to the finish of it and you'll have a cracking good story! I owe you that much anyhow."

Half dazed, Hanson felt himself thrust into the police car, Mac and others crowding in after him, and with a roar the machine started away. The readjustment was violent. Instead of facing a murder trial, Hanson found everything much ado over little; he had not been chased for murder, but for the sake of these stamps he was fumbling back into his pocket! It was hard to realize.

Suddenly he clutched the arm of the detective.

"Mac—they've got her, Jeanne!" he cried hoarsely. "We left that restaurant—"

"I know—and they got those birds in the taxi with her—were getting 'em when I came on the scene after you," said MacAllister grimly. "You'll find her at the prefecture when we get through here, never fear! Now shut up. I got to talk French with these frogs."

Jeanne safe, then! Hanson sat back and lost himself in blissful relaxation.

A little later, after a wild ride, he found for the first time in his life it was possible to evade the cumbrous law which compels all cars to have their gas measured, nominally, on entering or leaving Paris. The big car slowed somewhat at the Port de St. Cloud, the driver shouted something at the uniformed gendarme by the curb, and then they were leaping down the gloom of the

Avenue de la Reine with headlights on full flare.

It was a wild, mad ride down to the bridge at the entrance to St. Cloud, with tram crossings shot at reckless speed. Then they were across the Seine. Here, swerving sharply, is one of the steepest grades to be found near Paris, but they went up the hill with a roar, passed the station, and thundered along for half a mile farther. Then, before Hanson realized it, they had reached their destination and he was tumbling out of the car with the others.

There was narrow pavement, an alley that disgraced its pretentious name, torchlight flashing on door-numbers. What followed was swift and sharp, electric in its accuracy, and even Mac looked on admiringly. Two men disappeared, two others knocked at a door. When it opened, they thrust in at it. A pistol barked, and a bullet flew wild.

Ahead showed a corridor, with a man bolting down a stairway. They were after him at once, Mac and Hanson after the gendarme officer. A moment more and they were in a large basement room equipped with tables and presses.

Three men here. Two bolted by a rear door—and recoiled before two gendarmes with leveled pistols. The third, a quiet, anemic individual, swung at Mac's voice.

"Got you, Sweeny! Put 'em up."

Sweeny looked at the detective and smiled. "Life?" he queried. "Life, Mac?"

"It's life if you've touched French notes, all right," said Mac. "Here—keep 'em up."

But Sweeny only smiled a little more, put down his arms, and quietly toppled forward.

"Life," he said again. "Beat you, Mac—"

He lay quiet, and the odor of bitter almonds rose in the room.

"Hell!" said Mac, disconcerted. "Cleverest counterfeiter of the age, George, and look at the poor devil!"

"I'm more interested in Jeanne," said Hanson, turning away. "Let's go find her."

"All right." Mac took his arm. "The frogs can have everything here, and, George, you give her my share in the Goober pearl reward as a wedding present, savvy? On condition you give me that pair of tete-beche as a souvenir."

"Done with you," said Hanson, and grinned. "They're yours, but they're forged!"



ISLAND HONOR

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Author of "Sagebrush Slings the Bull," "Grist," etc.

A DREADFUL CHOICE WAS PUT UP TO THIS AGED RULER OF AN ISLAND PEOPLE: A CHOICE FEW MEN WOULD CARE TO FACE. AND UNDER THE TROPIC STARS A WHITE MAN OR SO HELPED HIM TO DECIDE — IN TRUE AMERICAN FASHION

QUITE miraculously, there was an opening in the mangrove swamps and what looked like a river or harbor beyond. Such things are not to be expected when you have been very much bored by two days of unvaried contemplation of mangrove swamps on the one hand, and totally empty sea on the other. So we on the *Shikar*—most promising name for a devilish slow and unexciting tub—tacked in. There were three of us and two native boys and we thought we were being very daring and reckless, coasting down the China Sea in a fifty-footer.

The miracle continued. We did not ground on a bar. It was a river of sorts. A kite rose heavily from something unpleasant on a sand-bank and soared away. And then we saw a white man's house with a flag floating from a flagpole before it, which was most miraculous of all. And that was where we found Vetter.

I don't know what nationality he was, though this part of the world was French. He wasn't that, I'm sure. We went ashore and met him and found that he considered himself lord of all creation, and wasn't at all averse to converting us to his own belief. Technically, he was political agent for Kuramonga. None of us envied him the

job. Neither did we feel called upon to console him with an extended visit. But the hunting looked promising and we dropped anchor for the night at least. And then when the soft tropic night had fallen we were too lazy to be polite and call on him.

"I want to kick him," said Cary, puffing smoke at the stars. "I haven't any reason, but I want to kick him. So for my manner's sake, if you chaps go ashore tell him I'm dead or something and couldn't come."

There was a jungle off to the right somewhere and we could hear the night noises coming from it over the water. Little squeakings, and once a scream like a human being's, which was probably a monkey, and once, very far away indeed, a snarl that would have made your blood run cold if it hadn't been muted by the distance.

"Tiger, that," said Cary hopefully. "Maybe we can get Vetter to let us have some beaters tomorrow and take a shot at him."

The doctor grunted.

"Breeding season," he said. "Why not play leap-frog with a locomotive? More healthy. And no beaters will tackle them now."

"If Vetter tells them to go, they will," insisted Cary. "He's got those natives

under his thumb. They're scared to death of him."

"Paranoiac," grunted the doctor. "He thinks he's lord of creation."

It was curious. You saw that about Vetter the minute you met him. Perhaps he was a little mad on the subject of himself. Perhaps it was Kuramonga that did it, because Kuramonga is the last place on earth that God made, and it was finished up with swamps and malaria and jungles and bad water that couldn't be worked in anywhere else. They used to send men somebody had a grudge against, to Kuramonga, to drink themselves to death for the glory of *la belle France*. But Vetter liked it. He was the only white man in a hundred miles, and he had twenty little Annamite soldiers to keep his district in order with. He'd seemed much more anxious to impress us with his wonderful hold over the natives than to talk about anything else. He had said more or less flatly that he was the law and the prophets and most of the religion in Kuramonga. And he gloried in it.

Cary, in white duck trousers and nothing else, reached out of his hammock and gave himself a push to swing a little for a breeze.

"Damned luxurious beggar," said the doctor enviously. "Get out of that hammock and let somebody else have a chance."

I rose to tilt him amiably on the deck when I heard a little noise above the lapping of the river waves. Somehow, it sounded furtive, and so it wasn't a time for fooling.

"Listen!" I said sharply. There was a splash of a paddle.

"Dacoits?" asked Cary hopefully. "Thinking maybe they can slip over the side and rush us?"

He beamed and slung his feet out of the hammock, to get some guns from below. Cary was always hopeful of trouble.

"We're right in front of the Residency," said the doctor dryly, "and Vetter has a steam-launch. They know it. Don't be an ass. Dacoits? No!"

Cary hesitated. Then somebody called to us across the water. Very softly, in Malay, as if they didn't want to be heard on shore.

"They want to come aboard," grunted the doctor. "Get your guns if you like, Cary, but you might want to put on a shirt, too. There's a girl with them."

Cary swung down the companionway and the doctor stretched himself luxuriously in the hammock. A dark shape took

form in the moonlight. It was a regular Malay dugout with three natives in it. A man in the bow and another in the stern, with a girl between them. They came on the *Shikar's* deck as Cary reappeared with both arms full of guns.

Cary got the first look at the girl, and he dropped the guns and looked foolish. The doctor grunted and offered to get lights, but the two men protested politely but very sincerely against it. They sat down and exchanged polite phrases with the doctor, who was the only one of us who could talk decent Malay.

I sat back and wondered, feasting my eyes on the girl. Sixteen—seventeen—eighteen? I don't know. I do know she was at the prettiest age any girl could be. Malay all through, yes. But her skin was fair as mine and her eyes were wonders. There was grace and pride and blood and breeding in every move she made. She looked at the doctor mostly, quietly and composedly, but her eyes alternately flamed and brooded. Now and then she glanced at the two men.

And one of them was an old chap, white haired and stately, with a ceremonious looking kris on one side of his sash and an old percussion pistol on the other side. In the moonlight you could see his clothes were all of silk, and mighty fine quality, too. Not at all the sort of thing a man would wear who made a habit of paddling himself around. The other man was a well-set-up young chap with eyes like a hawk who looked like a young prince out of the Arabian nights. Somehow, you'd take to those two.

You just imagine it. Us three white men, disheveled and half-dressed, on the deck of a fifty-foot schooner in an unmapped harbor with the furtive jungle noises a hundred yards away. Talking to these three who'd come out of nowhere, dressed like princes and a princess in a dream. Off on the other side of the river there was Vetter's house with a light burning somewhere and his toy soldiers standing guard while he slept. And those three silk-clad figures sitting on our deck, regarding us with a poise and courtesy that made me feel like a clumsy fool.

The old chap twisted his mustache gently and looked at us. He was the picture of an honorable gentleman, somehow. Brown skinned, but you liked him. He asked quietly if he might ask advice for his daughter, without Vetter hearing that he had asked.

"You understand," said the doctor, "if

there's anything we ought to repeat to him—anything political—”

“No, *Tuan*,” said the old chap gravely. “I am Buro Sitt.”

The doctor sat up at that, and so did I. I'd heard a yarn or so about him. He'd fought the French to a standstill, years back, and he'd been licked. But he'd fought like a gentleman and when it was over he took his medicine like a man. One or two old-time Colonials had yarned to us in Saigon about the fighting in times past and an ancient colonel had sworn that Buro Sitt was the finest fighter and the most chivalrous opponent that ever gladdened the heart of his enemy.



“Go ahead,” said the doctor. “I know you. I'd like to shake hands.”

Buro Sitt did not move, but he bowed very politely.

“It may be, *Tuan*,” he said, “that you understand the ways of we *Orang Malagi*.” He talked quite impersonally. “You know that our ways are not as your ways. But you know that we have our honor, also.”

“Yes,” grunted the doctor. “Especially Buro Sitt.”

Buro Sitt's face did not change.

“My daughter desires to go to the house of the *Tuan Vetter*,” he said without an inflection in his voice. “She loves him. But I would ask your advice before she goes.”

Cary moved abruptly. The younger of our two visitors caressed the handle of his kris with fingers that quivered suddenly. The girl stared at us defiantly—and then her eyes clouded with abysmal shame. But a moment later they were flaming.

“Well?” asked the doctor. His face did not even move a muscle.

“There is another woman in the *Tuan Vetter*'s house,” said Buro Sitt. “Who also loves him. Will it be the custom of the white men to send her away when my daughter goes to him?”

“He might,” said the doctor tonelessly, “and he might not. It would be considered disgraceful to him among other white men to have one woman living in his house if he were not married to her. It would be doubly disgraceful to have two. And of course it would be called disgraceful in the women. They would be scorned by all

whita men. Not scorned—despised.”

The girl's face did not change. She was staring defiantly at the three of us. The younger man caressed the handle of his kris.

“Would you, then,” asked Buro Sitt woodenly, “point out to him that he should send away this other woman when my daughter comes to him?”

The doctor held up his hand. He looked grim, all of a sudden.

“Buro Sitt,” he said quietly, “you are lying.”

Buro Sitt's hand dropped to his sash with a sudden movement. Then he bit his lip.

“Royal blood,” said the doctor, “does not speak as you are speaking. Royal blood does not send royal blood to be a white man's mistress. And especially, royal blood does not speak of its disgraces. What's back of this, Buro Sitt?”

There was sheer agony in Buro Sitt's eyes.

“*Tuan*,” he said, as if the words were wrenched from him, “if you were a man and a *raja*, and your honor as a man were against your honor as a king, what could you do?”

It might seem funny to think of a petty princeling—Buro Sitt could not be more—speaking of his honor as a king, but it wasn't funny then.

“Once,” he said fiercely, “I led a thousand fighting men. I fought against the French. When it was ended, there were fifty left. Now there are six hundred men again who follow me. Their lives are in my hands, and their women, and their children also. And the *Tuan Vetter* has demanded my daughter.”

He was telling the truth this time.

“You're going to truth?” demanded the doctor. “It's folly; suicide!”

Buro Sitt's hands clenched.

“Suicide?” he echoed bitterly. “If that were all! I am *raja* of my people. If I die, they fight—and are killed. All of them. And enough men have died for me before, Allah knoweth. Speak to him,”—he pointed to the young chap who was caressing his kris. “My daughter was to have been his wife. There are two hundred swords that follow him. And yet, if we rise—”

He was shaking all over.

“If we rise—ruin,” he said bitterly. “My people slain, my villages burned, my children slaughtered! That is the price of the honor of a man, *Tuan*. And for their lives, *Vetter* demands my daughter.

Which"—he clenched his teeth in the quintessence of bitterness—"is the price of the honor of a king."

Cary moved. He was listening to the old chap now, looking from him to the girl and back again.

"You mean," said the doctor slowly, "Vetter will set a gunboat on your people if you keep your daughter from him, no matter how?"

"If she stabs herself!" said Buro Sitt, his voice breaking. He looked swiftly at the younger Malay and then his eyes went suddenly blank again as he got control of himself once more. "So she will go to him, Tuan. As the ransom for my villages, and the ransom for my people's lives."

Cary began to talk angrily, spouting what Malay he knew with his whole vocabulary of Chinese thrown in to make his meaning clear. The main point of his speech was that he'd like to wring Vetter's neck and would do so at the first favorable opportunity. Buro Sitt listened without a flicker of expression on his face. He had himself in hand again.

"Tuan," he said evenly, to the doctor, "will you speak to him and urge that he sends away this other woman? It will not even be safe for my daughter. There is always poison—"

"I'll remember," said the doctor, not quite directly.

"The blessing of Allah be upon you," said Buro Sitt evenly.

He swung down into the canoe. The girl and the young man followed him. They drifted off into the darkness, where the jungle noises began at the water's edge. For a little while there was no sound but the lapping of the river waves and the furtive noises that came out of the squirming mass of vegetation.

Then the doctor said thoughtfully, "I wonder what he's really up to."

"It isn't what he's going to do," said Cary angrily. "It's what I'm—"

"You're going to do nothing," said the doctor calmly. "Vetter thinks he is lord of creation, which he isn't, but he is the lord of Kuramonga. Also he has some little tin soldiers. You can't do anything direct, and as for reporting him—Well, we're civilians and foreigners to boot. The powers that be would pay absolutely no attention to us. We'd better leave it up to Buro Sitt."

"But he can't do anything," protested Cary angrily, "and I can kick Vetter, anyhow."

"Buro Sitt," said the doctor, "can't kill

Vetter, because Vetter's doubtless arranged that if he's scragged Buro Sitt will get the blame. And he can't kill the girl, because Vetter would trump up a rebellion on him if he did, and his record is bad. His villages would be wiped out at once. But —"

"Do you mean you're going to stand by and watch?" demanded Cary furiously. "Let that beast Vetter—"

"I'm going to do what Buro Sitt wants me to do," said the doctor. "I'm going to do nothing whatever but sit still and look on. And, of course, remember what Buro Sitt told us. I don't like Vetter. He's a paranoiac. And it's always unhealthy to have even an ordinary swelled head. Anywhere, Cary," he added kindly. "Anywhere at all. So I just wonder what Buro Sitt is going to do."

Cary and I wrangled for an hour about it. The thing did look cold-blooded. A white man in a position where he could demand Buro Sitt's daughter—which would cost him his honor as a man—on penalty of ravaging his people and destroying them—which would certainly compromise his honor as a king. A *raja* counts himself the equal of any king, anywhere. And Buro Sitt had led his people to disaster once before. He'd taken out a thousand men and brought back just fifty. He'd feel now as if he had to make up for that.

Then the doctor shut us up and turned in. Cary woke everybody up in the middle of the night to suggest that we kidnap the girl by arrangement and let the young chap who wanted to marry her know where to find her. The doctor threw a shoe at him and went back to sleep.

"Son," he told Cary, "you forget two things. Buro Sitt did not come out here to ask us to lecture Vetter. He did have a reason for coming out here. And Vetter has a swelled head. Go to sleep."

A minute later he was snoring.

I woke at sunrise, listening to noise of the surf down at the sea splashing and roaring among the mangrove roots. It's always strangely loud at daybreak. And the jungle was making noises as the night things went to their hiding places and the day things came out again. And presently a boat came out from Vetter, asking us not to go away because he'd have something amusing to show us that night.

We guessed more or less what it was, from our opinion of Vetter and Buro Sitt's call. But we didn't leave. We loafed on the boat all day and Cary talked mor-

osely about how pretty the girl was and wondered what her name was and how old she was. And the doctor fished.

Meanwhile I wondered how Buro Sitt, who was obviously Malay, could be a *raja* up on the China Sea, and learned that about one in four people up there are Malays, the other three-fourths being Chinese and so on.

And then night came on and the jungle that had looked very tropic and pleasant during the day began to make unpleasant noises. And Vetter sent his steam launch for us to come and see what he had to show.

The doctor had it right when he said Vetter thought he was lord of creation. Political agent over a district nobody else wanted, with a gunboat coming in every six months or so. Twenty little soldiers to back him up. Not even a telegraph line to connect him with the outside world. But in his own district he was the Almighty.

Vetter's soldiers were stiff as ramrods. They saluted when we came ashore and took us into a room to wait for him. He kept us waiting, like an emperor. When he came in he was strutting. Oh, he thought he was the great old Bhud, all right. He clapped his hands for drinks, and his servants served him with exquisite haste. Then he flung himself into a chair and grinned at us.

"You've come from the north," he reminded us. "Japan, and China, and so on. Not very respectful to white men, these Asiatics, eh?"

We agreed politely.

"I will show you," he said, showing his teeth in a grin, "how a strong man treats these swine. I keep them under."

He held out his open hand and clenched it like he was crushing something. He didn't wait for us to say anything. We weren't important except as an audience. But he wasn't crazy. He just had a case of swelled head that had been aggravated by authority, and he wanted to show off. He was feverishly anxious to show off. He believed he was lord of creation, and some people with that belief are pitiful, and some are amusing, but Vetter managed to be unpleasant.

"There's a *raja* here," he told us, grinning, "traces back his ancestry to the *rajas* of Malacca, in the thirteenth century. Proud as hell. Royal to his fingertips. Now watch!"

Big, and beefy, and dark, with the close-shaved hairs showing through his skin. He lay back in his chair and grinned at us.

"I'm a white man," said Vetter, "so I demand royal honors, no less. Once Buro Sitt—this *raja*—refused his taxes. He said he would appeal to Saigon. And the gunboat came in the harbor two days later. Buro Sitt came down with his retinue to meet it. Very much armed. He was going to complain of me. Of me! Only the marines from the gunboat and my men were on their way to his village. My men opened fire at sight of the guns his men carried. Like any Malays, they fired back. He lost fifteen men and we burned one of his villages."

He winked at us, and laughed. I don't think he was French. Not all French, anyway.

"The gunboat *capitaine*, he reported Buro Sitt in a revolt, and that I had him well under control. Buro Sitt paid the tax—twice over," he added significantly. "That's the way to treat these swine."

Cary scowled. I began to understand that Buro Sitt was right when he said Vetter would ruin his people if he weren't obeyed. I began to get very unfond of Vetter.

"Indeed?" the doctor grunted.

Vetter took it for admiration. He was crazy with self-applause anyhow. Ordinarily, admiration of one's self isn't a very healthy occupation, but Vetter thrived on it. He went on to explain further.

"Royal honors I demand," he grinned.

"I am a white man, and a white man is royal, while I'm the white man. You'd think Buro Sitt had had enough of a lesson, eh? But no. Two weeks ago I marched through his chief village. I looked for royal honors. He did not offer them. I was patient. I asked him why he did not receive me as a *raja*—a sultan and his overlord. He said I was only a Frenchman, so—"

A sort of hubbub started off in the jungle somewhere. Vetter grinned nastily.

"This is the result." He waved toward

the window. "I thought I'd show you how I treat these swine. I told Buro Sitt his impertinence meant he meant to revolt. He'd have to give me a hostage for good behavior. His daughter."

Vetter laughed exuberantly. "A hostage, you understand. And she will taste every



particle of food I eat, so Buro Sitt will not dare poison me."

The doctor grunted again.

"He won't?"

"Not he," Vetter nodded wisely, and grinned again. "I shall make love to her, of course. One does. I shall be to her as a god—a kindly god. But to her father I—"

The noise in the jungle drew nearer and louder. Then one of the sentries challenged sharply. There was an answer, and then the shrill and nasal reply of the sentry to the corporal of the guard.

Vetter waited, grinning. Presently two soldiers escorted Buro Sitt and the girl into the room. The young chap with the hawklike eyes was nowhere about. Buro Sitt looked absolutely impassive, though his nostrils were distended a little. The girl—well, she was white and queerly silent.

Vetter looked Buro Sitt up and down.

"Since when," he asked in Malay, without any polite prefix, "are you permitted to wear arms into my presence?"

Buro Sitt, without a word, handed over his kris to one of the soldiers. His antiquated pistol followed. Vetter snapped at his soldiers and they went out. Buro Sitt was like a stone image. Vetter looked at us out of the corner of his eye. Then he laughed.

"Your daughter," he said insolently to Buro Sitt, "will taste all my food hereafter, lest there be poison in it."

"I understand, *Tuan*," said Buro Sitt evenly.

"And she will share my room," added Vetter grinning, "lest a snake be placed in that."

"I understand, *Tuan*," said Buro Sitt.

His nostrils looked white, somehow. It was a pretty horrible thing to watch, Buro Sitt handing over his daughter—sacrificing his honor as a man to keep faith with his people as a king.

"Then," said Vetter insolently, "you may go."

Buro Sitt bowed. Then he said, "But I beg, *Tuan*, that you send away that other woman, lest she poison both you and my daughter. Women are jealous, *Tuan*."

Vetter looked at him for an instant through half-closed eyes.

"I'll have a drink." He clapped his hands and ordered a siphon and a glass. When the servant brought it in he ordered the girl to mix him a drink.

Then he got up and walked over to Buro Sitt and laughed in his face. It was just showing off, you know, making a raja of

the best blood in the East watch his daughter perform a servant's work for a white.

She brought the glass, deathly white and with flaming eyes. Vetter took it, then laughed.

"She will taste all I eat and drink," he reminded Buro Sitt. He motioned to her to taste it.

Staring at him defiantly, she raised it to her lips, and Vetter snatched it away and threw it on the floor.

"So soon?" he laughed. "And willing to drink too! But there is a mirror on the wall, my dear. I saw you drop a little white powder in it. We would have died together, eh? But it is much better to live."

He sat down and laughed while I saw Buro Sitt quivering and almost—almost leaping for him. But two soldiers came rushing in. They'd heard the crashing glass. And they led Buro Sitt away, with more despair on his face than I thought any human being could show.

I waited for a signal from the doctor, but he looked on composedly. Vetter turned to us, laughing.

"One needs to be omniscient, eh? To know their secret thoughts. There is no other woman. That was for you. So that when I died of poison you would report that I and—she"—he jerked his thumb negligently at the white-faced girl—"were poisoned by a jealous woman."

"I see," said the doctor dryly. So did I. It fitted in nicely. Buro Sitt's call of the night before and his talk of another woman would make us into witnesses that Vetter had been poisoned through jealousy. And it was quite clear that Buro Sitt was ready to see his daughter die too if it were any way necessary.

But Vetter believed he was all powerful, and the events of the last five minutes had given him extra proof. So he grinned and nodded a farewell and pushed the girl—shaken and shivering now—before him and left us. For all the world it was like a king or something dismissing his attendants. Vetter'd only wanted us for an audience, and now the show was over.

But Cary was raving. He turned to the doctor, his fists doubled, wanting to go and half kill Vetter. And I wasn't any too peaceable myself. Not heroism, you know. Just ingrowing dislike of Vetter. He didn't act like a white man should.

"We can't interfere," said the doctor coolly, "only when we've got proof that will stick in the teeth of Vetter's say-so. And we haven't."

There was a little noise. A queer little noise, like a sick man coughing. Then a little thud. Then nothing. The doctor looked grim.

"I think we've got it now," he said, with his mouth twisted wryly.

He put his hand in his pocket and went streaking to where Vetter had gone. I thought I heard the murmur of his voice. Then he came back. He was smiling, but most unpleasantly.

"You were mistaken," he said pleasantly, "if you thought you heard me talking to anybody. Vetter is sick. Very sick. Cary, go to the boat and get my medicine-case. And you," he said to me, "you tell the sergeant in command of the soldiers that Vetter is sick with fever brought on by excitement, and there mustn't be any noise. Not even challenges. And certainly no shooting. Not under any circumstances."

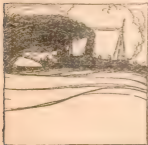
We went. The doctor's face was curious; grim and queerly amused. But I knew he hadn't found exactly what he expected when he chased Vetter. I knew just what had happened the minute he let me in the room. There was nobody in the room but Vetter. The girl had disappeared. The doctor made me help him, and it was an unpleasant job.

When Cary came back, the doctor kept him busy on errands to the soldiers. He kept the soldiers busy, getting hot water hotter and cold water colder and generally occupied with duties that certainly weren't guard-duty. And bringing sheets and pillows and one thing and another. Cary, at the door, always growled that he'd no taste for trying to keep Vetter alive. Cary was sentimental about a pretty girl.

The sun had just risen when the doctor stopped. We came out of the sick-room and he told me to tell the sergeant the news. I went and broke it as positively as I knew how. Vetter was dead, of fever with complications. And the sergeant shuffled un- easily and said that the gunboat would be

due in a week more.

I went back, and Cary was staring at the figure on the bed that we'd drawn a sheet over. There were one or two suspiciously wet spots on



the floor, but Cary didn't notice them, or

think that they looked as if we had been scrubbing there.

He stared at the figure. Then he tipped over and drew back the sheet from the face. Curious to look at a man you cordially disliked, when he's past being disliked any more.

"What was the matter with him?" asked Cary.

"Fever," said the doctor.

I felt very weak and sick from the reaction from what we'd had to do, but I grinned feebly.

The doctor handed Cary a package that was wrapped up in part of a sheet; he wanted it dropped overboard in deep water. The handle stuck out of it, and the handle was that of the kris the young Malay with the hawk-like eyes had been caressing while he sat with Buro Sitt on our boat deck.

"M-my God!" said Cary, shaken and sick. "He—he—"

"He died," said the doctor firmly, "of fever. A special sort that always follows paranoia. I'm a doctor and my report will stand, if we get him buried before the gunboat gets here. Fever, Cary, fever."

And his report did stand. I heard later that the next Political to take Vetter's post made shocked reports of how Vetter had been mistreating the natives. He had Grossly Exceeded his Authority, and all that sort of thing. Every effort would have to be made to restore the loyalty to *la belle France* that Vetter's actions would have undermined. That meant, of course, scrupulously fair treatment thereafter.

But it struck me as rather humorous that the doctor met Vetter's successor later on and listened for half an hour to hair-raising accounts of the evil deeds Vetter had done.

"*M'sieur*," said the new Political, excitedly, "it is incredible that he was not *assassiné!* That he died naturally, of fever, *c'est incroyable!*"

"Oh, not at all," said the doctor. "That's the price one pays for not taking things in time. Vetter had paranoia, and he didn't do anything to cure himself. His 'fever' was the inevitable price of his neglect."

In my mind I was contrasting Buro Sitt, with the price that had been set on his honor as a man, and the greater price set on his faith with his people. But just then a young doctor laughed at the doctor's ignorance in speaking of Vetter's death as the price he paid for not trying to cure his paranoia—which is usually nothing more or less than a swelled head, or the belief that one is lord of creation.



THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

WILD WEST TODAY

THAT ancient, but never stale controversy, which by the way you can hear argued pro and con as much in the West as anywhere else, as to whether there is any of the old West left today outside of movie studios, goes on as lively as ever. When the experts, the men who live it disagree, what are the rest of us who spend most of our lives in cities and desk chairs to think? Here on this table today are two new books on this subject. Both are by Westerners, men who were born in the country, lived the life and ought to know. Yet their conclusions disagree completely. Will James spent his life as a cowboy from the Canadian border to the Rio Grande until an injury made it impossible for him to continue as a rider. Now, as an artist and as the author of two fascinating books in the cowboy lingo he is an interpreter of the life. Owen P. White of El Paso is not an old man but he "knew the West when it was young" and he saw his home city of El Paso change from a roaring cowtown and mining center to a place of big business and Rotary clubs. He has written an equally salty book of the West called "Them Was the Days—from El Paso to Prohibition." Agreed that each is a specialist? Very well then, see what they say:

Will James— In "The Drifting Cowboy": "I don't mean that he's passing, and even though quite a few have wrote on the passing of the cowboy while going through on an observation car, the cowboy has passed all he's going to for a spell. It's mighty sad and true that he has been crowded and that the land boosters have took some of that land away from him, but, as I've remarked in my first book, 'Cowboys, North and South,' there's still places where the cowboy can spread his loop without having it caught on a fence post."

"There's still hundreds of miles of country where there's plenty of cattle and no fences, where the cowboy wears his boots out in the stirrup and not in irrigating ditches or shoveling hay. There's still outfits whose calf crops

runs into thousands every year, many of them outfits have three roundup wagons out every season, with fifteen or twenty riders to each wagon, and a 'remuda' of around two hundred saddle horses— So, figgering all, where does the cry 'the cowboy has vanished' come in at?"

Owen P. White:— "Though according due recognition to the high quality of imaginative art which has imparted a distinctly romantic tinge to the literary atmosphere of the Southwest, I must say, in all frankness, that most of the fiction written about my native country is pure bunk.

"—Negatively they do the Southwest the very great injustice of rarely telling the truth, because the strained effort of every man who sits down to write a 'thriller' seems to be to invest the personalities of Apache Indians, cowpunchers, gamblers, painted ladies, gunmen, prospectors, frontier school teachers, pioneer traders, and prairie coyotes with romantic tendencies which were, in reality, as foreign to their natural dispositions as charity is to a rattlesnake.

"Also, and I suppose this is because familiarity breeds contempt, I can never look upon a gunman, not even one who shot from the hip and carried two pieces of artillery, as very much of a hero. When I was a child, and also when I was an adolescent youth, men of this kind came frequently into my daily life, and naturally, as they wore no halos at that time, it is impossible for me to visualize them now with any such headdresses."

Take your choice, friends. If we were going to vote, it would be with Mr. James, having seen a little of certain parts of the country away from Pullman cars. As for Mr. White's words, we strongly suspect he is more familiar with the West than with Western fiction. Do you who know a fair sample of the work of Western authors whose work appears in *SHORT STORIES* see very much in common with what he says? We don't. No, Mr. White, you know your Southwest all right, but you don't know the fiction you are criticizing.

Still another bit of testimony of an entirely unconscious and disinterested nature comes in an account of the annual mid-winter ball of the Cody Stampede Association in Cody, Wyoming, the old home town of Buffalo Bill. The Cody Stampede is a

rodeo and in the summer it is out to sell the tourist some Wild West. In the winter there are no tourists and the town activities are all devoted to the local people and surrounding ranchmen. These bits, then from the account of the ball in *The Cody Enterprise* written by Caroline Lockhart, herself a well known writer of Western books and stories, throw an interesting sidelight on the Wyoming range today when the tourist and the dude are back home hugging the steam radiator.

"Well, the country hasn't gone hay-wire yet," observed a spectator with his trousers in his boots and his hair standing on end as he looked over the jam of Western folk that crowded the Irma barroom to its capacity last Friday night. "Thank God for the Stampede Ball whur a feller can let off a little steam once a year anyhow!"

Some 800 others felt the same way about it if smiling faces and exuberant spirits are any signs by which to judge. People were present from Ten Sleep, Billings, the Big Horn Mountains, Bridger, Belfry, Grass Creek, Denver, Casper, Deaver, Bear Creek, Meeteetse, Sunlight, Clarke, Powell, Elk Basin, while Lovell and Greybull turned out strong. To a man they declared they felt well repaid for the distance they had come. Everyone went home happy—except those who lost their hats.

Will Richard's decorations of saddles, pack-saddles, chaps, bridles and hackamores, were put up in his best style, while Jack Horisky, handing out the punch behind the bar and wearing his red shirt and pearl handled gun was not only a picturesque figure but so reminiscent of other and livelier days that it fair made the old-timers weep to look at him. Jack said he had to use the gun to run off the barflies when they got too thick. One of his signs read: "We sell near beer here, because there's no real beer near here."

Lou Ericson, who made a two days' ride from the Dry Head country to build the aforesaid beverage, declared that running wild horses on Wild Horse Mesa was a restful occupation as compared to serving punch at the Stampede Ball.

With the understanding that nobody wearing hobnailed boots was to stand on top or walk on the keys, Mrs. Lulu Hall, who is always kind to the Stampede Committee, loaned her piano for the occasion.

The worst kind of luck befell Pete Bloom. Pete came into town and hired a room for the night of the ball. It occurred to him early in the evening that he would be greatly refreshed in looks and feelings if he took a nap before he went. Through a mistake, Pete got in the wrong room and went to sleep in a baby's bed. He was awakened some time along in the middle of the night by the father of the child who was threatening to whip him. Pete says that coming out of a sound sleep and getting a shock like that upset him so that he wasn't in any mood to enjoy himself.

Some time for the benefit of people like Mr. White we should like to run a few biographical notes about the authors whose

stories appear regularly in these pages. We think he'd find that they are about as well equipped to write of the West as he is and that their view is based on an understanding of that spirit of gallantry and adventure which is there today as much as it ever was.

THE LONESOME DESERT

HERE'S a rather interesting note H. C. Wire wrote us about "Four-Clawed Friendship" in this issue:

"Four-Clawed Friendship" is simply handling a trait in old-timers on the desert that has often amused me.

"You will seldom find one who admits he is lonesome, yet they pick up all sorts of queer things for companionship. Burros, of course, become persons to them, and they hold conversation day after day with the long eared fools. If they have a permanent cabin up in the hills somewhere, you are certain to find pet coyotes, foxes, desert turtles and tame lizards about the place.

"The queerest one I ever knew was always on the watch for knotted misshaped growth on brush or trees, which he would carve into faces. He had these things stuck up around the inside of his shanty—men, women, devils, until no matter which way he looked there was someone grinning back at him. His eye for spotting a possible face on a limb was too much for me.

"The man in my story does not go to such limits, but he follows the trait.

"H. C. WIRE."

KNOW YOUR NEIGHBOR

WHEN you hear Americans grumbling about the ignorance of their country displayed by Englishmen and inhabitants of other European countries, you know that they display a bitterness only equalled by Canadians lamenting the fact that Americans know so little of Canada.

A few numbers ago *SHORT STORIES* published "The Honor of Hugh Garth," by George Marsh, and in that story Ottawa, the capital of Canada, was placed in the Province of Quebec. This, of course, was a bad oversight on our part. We know that Ottawa is in Ontario, as we know that Philadelphia is in Pennsylvania, but the slip in Mr. Marsh's story hit a blind spot and went through in a way which has brought us a flood of letters from our readers. We admit our error, apologize, and promise to keep a better weather eye on our geography in the future.

DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR
OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:

Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1 _____ 3 _____
2 _____ 4 _____
5 _____

I do not like:

_____ Why? _____

NAME _____ ADDRESS _____

THE MAIL COMES IN

FROM THE WEST

Editor, SHORT STORIES,

DEAR SIR:

I became acquainted with SHORT STORIES through the courtesy of friends who sent me magazines to read while isolated in the High Sierra country of California on a lonesome job last summer. Watching brown bear, deer and other wild game of that country became a monotonous pastime through the long starlit evenings, and I took to reading everything that fell under my eye. A copy of SHORT STORIES was among the many magazines that were sent me, and now the one fault I find with it is that I am always late to work on the mornings following the 10th and 25th of each month.

Keep up the little illustrations that dot the stories. They help the imagination wonderfully. Give us more of Robertson, Tuttle, Perkins, Hendryx, Gregory, Bower, Mowery, Roberts, and a few shorts by Greene, Yore, and Pelley will not be amiss. But for goodness sake, cut out prize-fights and sport stories. It appears to me that SHORT STORIES has grown up and is finding its most palate pleasing food in the great Westerns that comprise its greater being, and to give us more of them would mean to increase its host of admirers.

I'm going back to my High Sierra camp in May, and the bears and deer may as well hunt other companionship, for SHORT STORIES is going to require most of my time.

Yours for better Westerns,

WALTER B. TATE,
1907 Alcatraz Ave.,
Berkeley, Calif.

AND FROM THE EAST

Editor, SHORT STORIES,

DEAR SIR:

As a regular reader of your splendid maga-

zine since 1918, I should like to express my opinion of several typical features of SHORT STORIES, believing that you are interested in your readers' tastes.

I find your shorter stories by far the least interesting—I eliminate both baseball and boxing stories from this, as I never read them, and sometimes I find my English sense of humor is not tickled by what is obviously humorous in America. But apart from that there is a "samepess" in them.

It is very pleasing to read stories in which the love interest is subsidiary to the main plot, and to criticize the setting of the stories is perhaps dangerous, as "one man's meat" etc., but I will venture to say that I consider you have far too great a proportion of stories about the North and West. We only rarely get a good railroad story, but they are good when we get them. The cow country stories are in fair proportion and always make fine reading—your best features. The long desert stories are your second best, I think. I should like more sea stories, and when are we going to get another Cultus Collins yarn?

The country I think you neglect and for no apparent reason is central, west or east Africa—not South Africa. Detective stories are always welcome and a Northern story about the Mounted Police I do like even though it is set far north. In fact, I realize that all I want is to continue as usual—substituting the tropics for the North in 33¼ to 50% of existing arrangement, and say two very long stories and portion of serial as at present; only three or four at the outside shorter stories—in fact cut out the three or four page story.

I trust you will take this not as carping criticism but as warm interest in the finest magazine printed in English speaking countries.

Yours very truly,

Mrs. B. R. DAVIES,
1 Manvers Street,
Bath, Somerset,
England



"The spring of 1924 is memorable to me for what I suffered through loss of sleep, nervousness—general run-down condition; for six continuous weeks I endured boil after boil on neck and back, and naturally I looked a 'wreck.' Kind people recommended Yeast, but it took a well-known physician to convince me. I can truly say that before I had finished one week's treatment of two yeast cakes a day, I felt a change in my system. Every boil disappeared, my skin cleared, my strength increased, my skin cleared, my strength increased. I feel different and look it. Life seems to hold more 'pep.'"

MISS ROBERTA O'BRIEN, Montreal, Can.

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You'll quickly receive Patented Trial Kit with instructions for testing on a single lock. Then call on druggist for full size bottle, or order direct from me.

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