

Gavin paused wearily. "You can't stay here with me. It's late and you said they'd be here by dawn". "You can't make me go". Gavin sank down again into his chair and began to rock. He was thinking of Rittenhouse and how he had left him there, to rock to death on the porch of the Splendide. It was the only thing in his life for which he felt guilt. Beneath his black shirt his frail shoulders shook and croaks of pain broke from his throat, the stored pain shattering free in slow gasps, terrible to see. Clayton tried to call back the face of the man he had known. Against that other man he could rally his anger; against this bent man in the chair he was powerless. Gavin's lips moved so that Clayton had to stoop to catch the words. "Do you remember Big Charlie"? he whispered. "He stuck with me all these years. Just a half-breed 'pache, never said much, never meant anythin to me, but he stuck with me. He got into a fight with Tom English, your brother's son. It was a fair fight, the boy provoked it- Big Charlie told me so. I believed him. They killed Big Charlie, dumped his body in my rose garden two nights ago. My men, they all left me. Just cleared out. I didn't understand why, Clay. They just all cleared out. I treated them fair **h"

He wiped his lips with a sleeve, then stared at Clayton in a childish kind of wonder. "Do you mean"- he asked almost shyly- "you want me to go with you, wherever you're goin"? "Yes". "You don't hate me any more"?

Clayton choked, shook his head, murmuring, "No".

"Come here". The old man beckoned with one finger and Clayton went forward to him. Gavin slipped his arms around his chest and hugged him fiercely. "All my life", he said, "I tried. I tried. I saw you driftin away- but I tried. And you wanted no part of me when I had so much to give. Now there's nothin left of me. Laurel is gone, my men are gone, Ed is dead- and you come to me, to help me. Oh! God in Heaven, I can't refuse you now. That would mock me too much! Can't let you go way from me again **h" He closed his eyes, ashamed of his tears. "I'll go, Clay".

Clayton freed himself from the embrace and stepped back. The eyes followed him fearfully. "The horses. There isn't much time. I'll saddle the horses and bring them round. You get ready".

He burst from the hot confinement of the room into the cold night air. Gavin's stallion was in the barn and he tightened the cinches over the saddle blanket, working by touch in the darkness, comforting the animal with easy words. When he had finished he led him and the mare to the porch. The stallion had smelled the mare coming into heat and began to paw the turf, shaking his head. Clayton looped the reins in a knot over the veranda post and patted the warm flesh of his neck. The mare had backed away. "You take it easy, boy", Clayton

whispered. "She doesn't want you now. You take it easy, your time will come". Gavin stood on the porch, a thin figure. He had taken a carbine down from the wall and it trailed from his hand, the stock bumping on the wood floor. Clayton called to him and he came slowly down the steps. "Clay", he said, "where are we goin"? "To a ranch in the valley. There's someone there I have to see. We may take her with us- to California. I don't know yet, it's crazy; I have to think about it. But California is where we're goin". "California". Gavin began to nod. "That's a new land. A man could make a mark there. two men, together like us, we could do somethin fine out there, maybe find a place where no one's ever been. Start out fresh, the two of us, like nothin had ever happened". "Yes, like a father and son".

"I made you what you are", Gavin whispered. "I made you so you could stand up. I made you a man". "Yes, Gavin, you did". He approached the horse and laid a hand on the stallion's quivering neck. "Help me up, Clay. Help me up, I feel kind of stiff". Clayton lifted him gently into the saddle, like a child. "I hate to leave my garden", Gavin said. "They'll trample it down. I loved my garden". "It will grow again- in California". "I loved this valley", he whispered huskily.

"Lived alone here for three years, before any man came. Lived alone by the river. It was nice then, so peaceful and quiet. There was no one but me. I don't want to leave it". Clayton swung into the saddle and whacked the stallion's rump. The two horses broke from the yard, from the circle of light cast by the lamp still burning in the house, into the darkness.

#THIRTY-FIVE#

THEY

RODE at a measured pace through the valley. Dawn would come soon and the night was at its coldest. The moon had sunk below the black crest of the mountains and the land, seen through eyes that had grown accustomed to the absence of light, looked primeval, as if no man had ever trespassed before. It looked as Gavin had first seen it years ago, on those nights when he slept alone by his campfire and waked suddenly to the hoot of an owl or the rustle of a blade of grass in the moon's wind- a savage land, untenanted and brooding, too strong to be broken by the will of men. Gavin sighed bitterly. In that inert landscape the caravan of his desires passed before his mind. He saw them ambushed, strewn in the postures of the broken and the dying. In vain his mind groped to reassemble the bones of the relationships he had sought so desperately, but they would not come to life. The silence oppressed him, made him bend low over the horse's neck as if to hide from a wind that had begun to blow far away and was twisting slowly through the darkness in its slow search. They passed ranches that were framed dark gray against the black hills. Then at last the darkness began to dissolve. A bold line of violet broke loose from the

high ridge of the mountains, followed by feathers of red that swept the last stars from the sky. The wan light spread over the ground and the valley revealed in the first glimmer the contours of trees and fences and palely shadowed gullies. ##

THEY HAD been seen as soon as they left the ranch, picked out of the darkness by the weary though watchful eyes of two men posted a few hundred yards away in the windless shelter of the trees. The two men whipped their horses into town and flung themselves up the steps of the saloon, crying their intelligence.

The men in Pettigrew's were tired from a night's drinking, their faces red and baggy. But the liquor had flushed their courage. They greeted the news angrily, as though they had been cheated of purpose. Lester heard their muttering, saw their eyes reveal their desire. He worked his tongue round and round in the hollow of his cheek and his voice came out of his throat, dry and cracked. "He's leavin. That's what you wanted, isn't it? Clayton is with him, takin him out of the valley. You can't"- "Keep out of this", Purvis snarled. "He's not your brother, he's Gavin's son.

You see, he lied to us when he said he was leavin alone".

Joe Purvis was thinking back many years. First he thought of the time he had ridden to Gavin and told him how his cattle were being rustled at the far end of the valley. He remembered Gavin's smirk, his own cringing feeling, his impotence. Then he thought of a time when Clayton's horse had fallen lame in the Gap. His wife had said to him: "Nellie is in love with Clayton Roy. He wouldn't even dance with her at Gavin's party. He treats her like she was dirt. And you stand by like a fool and let him do it **h" He remembered Clayton's mocking smile in the saloon when he had asked him what he would do if they brought their cattle to water. It was the night Clayton had tricked them in the poker game. "You're Gavin's son", Joe Purvis had said. He turned to Lester.

"You brought him back to this valley thinkin he would help you find your boy. He meant to help Gavin all the time. He made a fool of you, Lester". He swung round to the other men- "We can catch him easy! There are plenty of fresh horses halfway at my place. If we let them go, they won't stay away, they'll find men to ride with them and they'll be back. There's only one way they can get out now and that's through the Gap- if we ride hard we can take them".

Lester's hand fluttered to Cabot's shoulder. The boy jerked away. "He killed Tom- do you understand that"? Cabot turned back to the men and he was drunk with the thing they would do, wild to break from the cloying warmth of the saloon into the cold of the ebbing night. He fled through the door and down the steps, running, and the men grunted and followed, pushing Lester to one side where he backed against the wall with the sleeve of his jacket raised before his eyes to shut out the light. Purvis and Silas Pettigrew

were the last to leave. They mounted up and rode slowly behind the others at a safe distance.

#THIRTY-SIX#

IN THE cold dawn the mist swirled low to the ground, then rose with a gust of sudden wind to leave the valley clear. The clouds parted and hard gashes of sunlight swooped down to stain the earth with streaks of white and gold light so that the shadows of the running horses flowed like dark streams over the dazzling snow. When they turned in the saddle they could see the men behind them, strung out on the prairie in a flat black line. The wind of their running was cold and wild, the horses were lathered and their manes streamed like stiff black pennants in the wind.

The mare began to tire and Clayton felt the spray of snow from the hoofs of Gavin's stallion. He looked over his shoulder at the thin dotting of pursuers. They neither gained nor fell back. He rode low on the mare's neck. Ahead of him Gavin turned slightly off the trail and pointed for the Gap, no more than a mile away. Gavin's face was bloodless with excitement. He did not look back; he could feel more than hear the staccato beat of hoofs that fanned out across the prairie to the north. He knew who was riding after him- the men he had known all his life, the men who had worked for him, sworn their loyalty to him. Now they were riding to kill him. And he was fleeing, running- fleeing his death and his life at the same time. The land over which he sped was the land he had created and lived in: his valley. With every leaping stride of the horse beneath him he crossed one more patch of earth that had been his, that he would never see again. The Gap looming before him- the place where had confronted Jack English on that day so many years ago- was his exit from all that had meaning to him. California is too far, he thought. He would never reach California. He was too old- when he passed up and through the corridor of pines that lined the trail he could see ahead, he was passing from life.

The sentry was not dead. He was, in fact, showing signs of reviving.

He had been carrying an Enfield rifle and a holstered navy cap-and-ball pistol. A bayonet hung in a belt scabbard. He was partially uniformed in a cavalry tunic and hat. Mike stripped these from him and donned them. He and Dean tied and gagged the man, using his belt and shirt for the purpose. They dragged him inside the building.

Fiske joined them, unsteady on his feet. Julia, seeing the bandage, rushed to him. "You <are> hurt"! she breathed. "I never felt better in my life", Fiske blustered. He turned to Susan and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you, My dear", he said. "You are very brave". Mike silenced them. "We'll talk later. First, we've got to get out of here". "We'll

grab horses", Dean said. "The main bunch is outside, but there are some over there inside the wall". Mike debated it, trying to decide whether Fiske was strong enough to ride. But it at least offered him a chance for living. He had none here. And, for the sake of Julia and Susan, it had to be tried. The guerrilla bivouac remained silent. Light showed in the orderly room across the parade ground. Someone evidently was on duty there. No doubt there would be men guarding the horses. About a dozen animals were held inside the stockade, as best Mike could make out in the moonlight. Evidently this was a precaution so that mounts would be available in an emergency. He handed the guard's rifle to Fiske. "Dean and myself will try to cut out horses to ride", he said. "We'll stampede the rest. You stay with the ladies. All of you be ready to ride hell for leather". He added, "If this doesn't work out, the three of you barricade yourself in the house and talk terms with them". He handed the bayonet to Dean and kept the pistol. Susan halted Dean and kissed him. She clung to him, talking to him, and dabbing at her eyes. Mike turned away. He was thinking that the way she had responded to his own kiss hadn't meant what he had believed it had. He felt unutterably weary. Dean turned from Susan and took Julia Fortune in his arms. He kissed her also, and with deep tenderness. She too began to weep. He released her and joined Mike. "All right", he said. Mike only said, "Later". "Be careful, McLish"! Susan said fiercely.

"The way you were careful"? he snorted. "Running around in the moonlight almost naked and slugging a man with a rock"?

He kept going. He wanted no more sentimental scenes with her. He might say or do something foolish. Something all of them would regret. He might tell her how sorry a spectacle she was making of herself, pretending to be blind to the way Julia Fortune had taken Dean's affections from her. And using him, Mike McLish, as a sop to her pride. He handed the bayonet to Dean and kept the pistol. "Stay well back of me", he said. "I'm going to walk up to the horses, bold as brass, pretending I'm one of the guerrillas. There's bound to be someone on guard, but the hat might fool them long enough for me to get close". Holding the pistol concealed, he walked to the rear wall of the stockade. It was pierced by a wagon gate built of two wings. One wing stood open. Mike passed through it and moved toward the dark mass of horses. They were tethered, army style, on stable lines. A voice spoke near-at-hand. "Who's thet"? Just me", Mike said. "Is that you, Bill"? He located his man. The guard stood in the shadow of the stockade wall just out of reach of the moonlight. Mike kept walking and got within arm's reach before the man became suspicious and straightened from his lax slouch. Mike struck with the muzzle of the pistol. But the luck that had been running their way left him. The guard instinctively parried the blow with his rifle. He tried

to veer the rifle around to fire into Mike's body. Mike, off balance, managed to bat the muzzle away a moment before it exploded. The bullet went wide. Mike swung the pistol in a savage backlash. This time it connected solidly on the man's temple, felling him. The explosion of the rifle had crashed against the walls of the stockade and the deep echoes were still rolling in the hills. The startled horses began rearing on their tethers. Dean came rushing up. "Are you hit"? he demanded. "No, but the fat's in the fire"! Mike said. "There's no chance now of all of us getting away. You'll have to try it alone". The sentry's saddled horse stood picketed nearby, having been kept handy in case of need. Mike took the bayonet from Dean's hand and slashed the picket line. "Up you go"! he said. "Ride"!

Dean resisted Mike's attempt to push him toward the horse. "Why not you"? he protested. "Dammit"! Mike said frantically. "You're lighter than me. It's our only chance now. Try to find these Feds. The rest of us can fort up in the house and hang on until you get back. You're the one that's taking the big chance". Dean still hesitated, but Mike lifted him almost bodily into the saddle and thrust the reins in his hand. "No telling how good this horse is", Mike panted. "Favor him and save something in case you hit trouble. Watch out for Apaches when it comes daylight. Take the pistol. You might need it. We'll still have the rifle, and I might be able to round up some more. I'll stampede the rest of these horses so they can't chase you".

Dean leaned from the saddle and gave him a mighty whack on the back. "McLish", he said as he kicked the horse into motion, "I'd be a mighty sad man if we never met again". Then he was on his way at a gallop. Mike ran down the line, slashing picket ropes with the bayonet. He lifted a screeching war whoop. That touched off a total stampede. He darted inside the stockade and freed the horses there. These poured through the gate and joined the flight. The animals thundered away into the moonlight, heading for the ridges. The guerrillas were swarming from their bivouac at the west end of the enclosure. "'Paches"! Mike yelled. "They're stealin' the stock"! He scuttled in shadow along the east wall of the stockade and then followed the south wall until he was at the rear of the two frame buildings. He crouched there. His shout had been taken up and repeated. The guerrillas were running across the parade ground and through the rear gate in the wake of the departing horses. All were carrying guns they had seized up, but they were half-clad or hardly clad at all. Durkin and Calhoun came running from the post. They had pistols in their hands. They bawled questions that were not answered in the uproar. They followed the others toward the east gate. Beyond the stockade rifles began to explode as some of the guerrillas fired at shadows that they imagined were Apaches.

Mike made a dash to the rear of the frame buildings. He crawled beneath the two supply wagons which stood between the buildings and peered around a corner. The area was deserted. A man was standing in the open door of the lighted orderly room a few yards to Mike's left, but he, too, suddenly made up his mind and went racing to join the confused activity at the east end of the stockade. Mike crawled to the door and peered in. The orderly room seemed to be deserted. A lantern hung from a peg, giving light. Ducking inside, he found that three rifles were stacked in a corner. A brace of pistols, holstered on belts, hung from a peg, along with ammunition pouches. An ammunition case stood open, containing canisters which contained powder cartridges.

Mike seized a blanket from a pallet in a corner, spread it on the floor and used it to form a bag in which he placed his booty.

Shouldering the load he peered from the door. His looting of the orderly room had taken only a minute or two and the vicinity was still clear of guerrillas. He looked at the looming hoods of the supply wagons, struck by a new inspiration. He set his bundle down. Snatching the lantern from its peg, he shattered its globe with a blow against a post. He picked up the powder canister and ran out. Bursting paper cartridges, he scattered powder beneath the nearest wagon and dumped the contents of the canister upon it. He shouldered the blanket again, backed off, and tossed the lantern with its open wick beneath the wagon. He turned and raced across the parade ground toward the rock house. Powder flame gushed beneath the wagon. The stockade was brilliantly lighted and the guerrillas sighted him. They realized the truth. Bullets began to snap past him. One struck the muzzle of one of the rifles that projected from the shoulder pack. Its force spun him around, but he recovered and got into stride again. A bullet tore the earth from beneath his foot when he was a stride or two from safety. Another struck him heavily in the thigh and he went down. Guerrillas were racing toward him. Susan and Julia came from the door and dragged him with them. The three of them floundered through the door into the interior and fell in a heap.

Susan bounced to her feet and slammed the door. She crouched aside as bullets beat at the portal, chewing into the planks. Some tore entirely through the whipsawed post oak. The iron hinges held, but the planks were in danger of being torn from the crossbars.

Mike rolled to Susan, grasped her around the knees, dragging her off her feet. He hovered over her to shield her, for spent bullets were thudding against the rear walls. He peered from a loophole. Guerrillas were only a dozen yards away, charging the house. Mike snatched a pistol from the heap of scattered booty and fired. He dropped a man with the first bullet. At the same moment Wheeler Fiske fired the rifle Mike had given him and another guerrilla was hit. That halted the rush. The guerrillas scattered for cover. The wagons were burning fiercely. The mudwagon had caught fire also. The blaze was spreading to the frame buildings. The guerrillas realized

they faced a new problem. "Gawdamighty"! one screeched. "There goes our grub an' ammunition"! "Get a bucket line going"! Calhoun shouted. "Hurry! Hurry"! The guerrillas began a frantic search for pails in which to bring water from the spring. But what few containers they found were inadequate. Many of them, in increasing panic, came running with water in their hats in a ludicrous effort. Both buildings were in flames. The heat drove the guerrillas back. The roof of the command post began to buckle.

"Drag the wagons to the spring"! Lew Durkin yelled. "Run 'em right into the spring! Hustle"! One of the wagons erupted a massive pillar of flame. A sizable supply of powder had been touched off. The wagons and the coach were beyond saving and so were the buildings. The glow of the fire reached through the openings in the windows, giving light enough to examine Mike's wound. The bullet had torn through the flesh just above the knee, inflicting an ugly gash that was forming a pool of blood on the floor. But it had missed the bone and had passed on through. Susan and Julia ripped strips from their clothing and bound the injury. Mike tested the leg and found that he was able to hobble around on it.

"So it wasn't the earthquake that made him return to his village"!

"No. Now dammit, I don't want to go into any more explanations. Here comes Jason. Keep this to yourself".

Reverend Jason, looking worried, hurried toward us. "Anything wrong, cap'n? The men seem to think so". "Dirion found a large war party south of us. They'll probably attack at dawn", Montero said. He brushed past the clergyman and walked into the center of the camp. Using his hands as a trumpet he shouted, "Fort up! Fort up! There's a large war party on their way"!

For a second, engages, cooks, voyageurs appeared struck dumb. Then Little Billy began shouting orders to round up the ponies and fill the water buckets and for the cooks to hurry up with the meal. They all flew into action. "That was a terrible thing to do",

I

said to Oso. The Aricaras treated us like friends. And here all the time you knew the Sioux would be using our rifles on them! God, what a world you people live in". Oso gave me an unruffled look. "Old Knife's got the largest war party ever seen on the river", he said calmly. "What would you have done in Montero's moccasins? Let Old Knife come up and kill you and your people, or would you steer him on someone else"? He shook his head. "Mr& Manuel did that in the war. That's why the British never got the tribes to fight for the King. Mr& Manuel whispered in the ears of the Sioux that the Cheyennes were comin' to raid 'em for their horses. Then he went on to the Cheyennes and told them that the Sioux was goin' to move up. He did that with all the Nations. Hell, they were fightin' each other so hard they had no time for anyone

else. The War Department wrote Mr& Manuel a letter and said he was a hero. I saw that letter. He carried it in a little wallet made of fish skin". "But that was war", I said. "There's no war on now". "You're wrong, Matt. In this country there's a war on every time the grass turns green. First it was the Nations against themselves, then it was them against the whites. And it's goin' to go on like this year after year until the white people take over this land". I remember being told it would happen so fast people would think it took place overnight. "That's why this company's important. Once we get over the mountains others will come along. That's why the Trust don't want us to make it. That bastard Chambers!- Old Knife's not the only chief he'll get to do his dirty work! Before we get through he'll have the Blackfeet hankerin' for our hair and our goods. Well, talkin' ain't goin' to help- let's fort up"! As I dug in behind one of the bales we were using as protection, I grudgingly found myself agreeing with Oso's logic, especially when I imagined what would have happened to Missy if Old Knife's large party of screeching warriors had overrun our company. For, unlike the Sioux and the Crows, the Aricaras are not great horsemen, nor are they aggressive like the savage Blackfeet. More of an agricultural nation, they have relied on their warriors only for defense and for survival in the endless wars of the plains. Still, I was disgusted with myself for agreeing with Montero's methods. Surprisingly, he had told the others what he had done. In the brief moment I had to talk to them before I took my post on the ring of defenses, I indicated I was sickened by the methods men employed to live and trade on the river. "I think Montero did right", Amy said firmly. "Let the savages kill each other What do we care"?

Reverend Jason was understandably bitter. "It was a terrible thing to do. Those little children **h". But Oso replied calmly, "Trouble ain't easy to dodge out in this country, rev'rend".

#28. ATTACK#

GRAY EYES ATTACKED OUR camp just as the first pink threads stitched together the hills and the sky. Our camp was in the center of a wide valley. Montero had set up a strong position, using every bale and box we had in addition to barricades of logs and brush. He had ordered the ponies brought inside the fortified circle and had assigned Pierre and a band of picked engages the job of trying to keep them steady under fire. The pony herd was the one flaw in our defense; the Rees undoubtedly would try to cut down as many of the animals as possible. Wildly bucking horses would make the position difficult to defend against charging warriors. The cooks had prepared one of the best meals we'd had in a long time, and on Montero's orders had baked enough bread to last the day. Buckets were filled, the herd fed and watered. The worst part had been the waiting; although we didn't expect the attack before dawn, the long cloudy night, filled with the sounds of the industrious insects, seemed

endless. Coyotes and hunting wolves sounded like signaling Indian scouts, the whinny of a restless pony made one's skin crawl. Oso slept unconcernedly, his rifle cradled in his arms; I didn't catch a wink. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Gray Eyes rushing at me with a knife. It was a relief when they finally came.

They poured through the opening in the valley, then spread out in a long line to come at us, brandishing their lances and filling the morning with their spine-chilling scalp cry. "Oso", Montero called "I'll get Gray Eyes". "That'll be a pleasure to see", the big black murmured as he stared down the barrel of his rifle. "Hold your fire", Montero was shouting. "Wait until my shot. I'll shoot the first man who doesn't".

I could see them in my sights. They were about a mile off; under me the ground quivered slightly. At first they were only feathers and dark indistinguishable faces and bodies, hunched over their horses' heads. Gradually they emerged as men. Gray Eyes was in the lead. His face was split by a vermilion streak, his eyes were pools of white; jagged red and black medicine symbols covered his chest. He was naked except for a clout. Next to him was a young boy I was sure had sat near me at one of the trading sessions. His mouth was open, his neck corded with the strain of his screams. I found his chest in my sights. It had a red circle. The circle came nearer and nearer.

My God, how long is he going to wait, I thought **h. Montero's rifle cracked. At first I thought he had missed. Gray Eyes remained erect. The feathered lance was still above his head. As he started to slump over, another warrior swung him onto his horse.

I squeezed the trigger. At the last second I dropped my sights from the bare chest and bright red circle to the chest of his pony. I saw the pony fall like a stone and the young warrior flew over its head, bouncing like a rubber ball. He started to run but Oso's shot caught him on the wing. He jerked once in the grass and lay still.

"If you're goin' to kill 'em- kill 'em"! Oso growled. What else he said was lost in the rattle of gunfire on all sides. The Aricaras broke under the devastating fire, wheeled and retreated. "Lead up! Lead up! They'll be back"! Montero was shouting. Far up the valley I could see the Rees circling and reorganizing. Out in front of our walls the grass was covered with dead and dying men, war shields, lances, blankets and wounded and dead horses. The morning air was filled with the sweetish odor of new-spilled blood, the acrid stench of frightened horses, and the bitterness of burned powder. A horse screamed as it twisted from side to side in a frenzy. A rifle cracked; the square head fell over. One of the warriors suddenly leaped to his feet and began running across the valley to the trees that lined the small creek. His legs pumped furiously, his long black hair streamed out behind him. There was a ragged volley. He was dead before he hit the ground.

"For Christ's sake, don't waste your powder on one of 'em"! Montero shouted furiously. "Wait for the charge! The charge, I tell you"! The sharp cries at the end of the valley were faint. They grew louder as the Indians charged again. I could see their faces glistening with sweat and bear grease, their mouths open, shouting their spine-chilling cries. "Gray Eyes is back", Montero said. The war captain had been badly wounded and was fighting to hold his seat. I could see the blood running down his chest. He was riding between two warriors, who held him erect when he started to slump. I forgot to aim. In my sights I watched him looming bigger and bigger. Montero's shot had caught him high in the chest; there was no doubt he was dying. Again we waited for Montero. This time he delayed so long that some of the engages shouted frantically, but they held their fire. The horses were only several lengths away when he fired. The bullet flung Gray Eyes from his horse. Our rolling volley swept most of the other riders from their mounts. But a few reached our wall. I heard the whir of an ax and a Canadian's face burst apart in a bloody spray. I saw Little Billy rise and fire almost point blank and an Indian's face became shattered flesh and bone. A second leaped from his horse to the top of the bale, firing four arrows in such rapid succession it didn't seem possible they were in flight. Men screamed. Oso reached up, jerked the buck from the bale and snapped his neck. Other Indians were running at the ponies, shrilling and waving blankets. Reverend Jason got one, the Canadians the others. I saw the clergyman kneel for a moment by the twitching body of the man he had shot, then run back to his position.

The ponies were almost uncontrollable. The pall of dust they raised made it difficult to see when the Aricaras charged again. This time more of them hurdled the barrier. A small Indian dived at Montero, who caught him with a swift upward stroke of his rifle butt. It sounded like a man kicking a melon. Above me a dark rider was whipping his pony with a quirt in an attempt to hurdle the bales.

Although my shot killed his horse, he rolled off the bale on top of me. I could smell woodsmoke, grease, and oil. His eyes were dark, fluid, fearful, and he gave a sigh as my knife went in. Coming over the wall he had seemed like a hideous devil. Now under me I could see him for what he really was, a boy dressed up in streaks of paint **h.

The Aricaras made one last desperate charge. It was pitiful to see the thin ranks of warriors, old and young, wheeling and twisting their ponies frantically from side to side only to be tumbled bleeding from their saddles by the relentless slam, slam of the cruelly efficient Hawkinses. Others, badly wounded, gripped hands in manes, knees in bellies, held on as long as possible and then, weak from ghastly wounds, slipped sideways, slowly, almost thoughtfully, to be broken under the slashing hoofs. Some gracefully soared from the backs of their wounded, screaming mounts to make one last defiant charge before the lead split their hearts or tore their guts **h. None of them reached our walls again. The few survivors grudgingly turned away. In

the distance we could hear the drums and the wail of the death song. She was carrying a quirt, and she started to raise it, then let it fall again and dangle from her wrist. "I saw your fire", she said, speaking slowly, making an effort to control her anger. "You could burn down this whole mountainside with a fire that size. It wouldn't matter to a fool like you. It would to me". "All right", Wilson said quickly. "The fire's too big. And I appreciate the advice". He was losing patience again. An hour before, with the children asleep and nothing but the strange darkness, he would have appreciated company. She had helped him change his mind.

"I'm not advising you", she said. "I'm telling you. That fire's too big. Let it burn down. And make sure it's out when you leave in the morning". He was taken aback. It took him a long time to compose himself. "There's some mistake", he said finally. "You're right about the fire. It's bigger than it has to be, though I don't see where it's doing any harm. But you're wrong about the rest of it. I'm not leaving in the morning. Why should I? I own the place". She showed her surprise by tightening the reins and moving the gelding around so that she could get a better look at his face. It didn't seem to tell her anything. She glanced around the clearing, taking in the wagon and the load of supplies and trappings scattered over the ground, the two kids, the whiteface bull that was chewing its cud just within the far reaches of the firelight. She studied it for a long time. Then she turned back to Wilson and smiled, and he wasn't quite sure what she meant by it. "You own this place"? she said, and her tone had softened until it was almost friendly. "You bought it"?

"From a man in St& Louis", Wilson said. "Jake Carwood. Maybe you know him". The girl laughed. "I know him. I ought to. My father ran him off here six years ago". Wilson didn't say anything. He stood watching the girl, wondering what was coming next. She had picked up the quirt and was twirling it around her wrist and smiling at him. "Carwood didn't tell you that", she said. "No", Wilson said. "But it's understandable. It's not the kind of thing that a man would be proud of. And it doesn't make any difference. He sold me a clear title. I have it with me, right here. If you want to see"- "Never mind", she said sternly. "It wouldn't matter to my father, and not to me. I meant what I said about that fire. Be sure it's out when you leave. That's all. I'll let you go back to doing the dishes now". It was meant to insult him, and didn't quite succeed. He took the reins just below the bit and held them firmly, and it was his turn to smile now. "I don't mind washing dishes now and then", he said pleasantly. "It doesn't hurt. It might hurt <you,> though. Somebody might mistake you for a woman".

He meant to say more, but he never got the chance. She was quick. She brought the quirt down, slashing it across his cheek, and he tried

to step back. She swung the quirt again, and this time he caught her wrist and pulled her out of the saddle. She came down against him, and he tried to break her fall. He grabbed her by the shoulders and went down on one knee, taking her weight so that some of the wind was driven out of him. It made him a little sick, and he let go of her. He got up slowly, and she was already on her feet, and he stood facing her. He wiped the blood from his cheek. "I ought to"- he said. He was shaking with anger, his breath coming in long, painful gasps. "That quirt- I ought to use it on you, where it would do the most good. If you were a man"- "She isn't, mister". The voice came from behind him, and Wilson turned. The fire had gone down, and the man was only a shadow against the trees. But a moment later he brought his horse forward into the light, and Wilson had a good look at him. He was tall and dark-skinned, a half-breed, Wilson thought. And he was handsome, despite the long thin scar that slanted across his cheek. "She's not a man, mister", he said. "I am. If you've got any ideas". He raised the Winchester and pointed it at Wilson's chest. "Put the rifle down, Joseph", the girl said. She seemed irritated. "I thought I told you to stay home". The half-breed eased the Winchester down and rested it across his lap. The scar looked pure white in the half-darkness; his eyes were black and deep-set, and expressionless. "You shouldn't be riding up here after dark, Judith", he said quietly. "I can take care of this. It's no job for you". The girl tapped the quirt impatiently against her knee and glared at him. He took it without flinching. "I said go home, Joseph. You've got no business up here". The half-breed didn't answer this time. But the scar seemed to pull hard at the corner of his mouth, and his eyes were hurt and angry. It made Wilson wonder. He watched the half-breed as he turned silently. They could hear the pony's feet on the dry leaves for a while, then the sound faded out. Wilson brushed the dust from his coat. "Who was that"? he asked. "Your personal guard? You're pretty hard on him". "He works for my father", the girl said, and then seemed to change her mind. "He's a friend. His name's Joseph Sanchez. Is there anything else you want to know"?

"Not now", Wilson said. "I guess I'll find out soon enough. You've got blood on your cheek. Not yours. Mine. It must have got there when you fell against me". She wiped it off with the sleeve of her coat. "I'll bet that's as close as you've been to a man since you were a baby", Wilson said.

He saw her hand start to work down the leather thong toward the handle of the quirt, and he grabbed her wrist. "Oh, no", he said, and he was without humor now. "I've had enough of that. I've had enough of you. I don't know what goes on around here, and I don't care. I don't know what makes you think you can get away with this kind of business, and I don't care about that, either. You took me by surprise. But I'll know how to handle you next time".

She brought up her free hand to hit him, but this time he was quicker. He side-stepped her blow and she fell, stumbling against the gelding. She finally regained her balance and got up in the saddle. Her hat had come off and fallen behind her shoulders, held by the string, and he could see her face more clearly than he had at any time before. He had forgotten that she was so pretty. But her prettiness was what he had noticed first, and all the other things had come afterward: cruelty, meanness, self-will. He had known women like that, one woman in particular. And one had been too many. He watched the girl until she had gone into the trees, and waited until he couldn't hear the sound of her horse any longer, then went up to where the children were sleeping. They weren't sleeping, of course, but they thought they were doing him a favor by pretending. He hadn't shown up too well in their eyes, letting himself be browbeaten by a woman. They expected greater things from him, regardless of how trying the circumstances, and they were disappointed. And determined not to show it. They lay a little too stiffly, with their eyes straining to stay closed.

"Go to sleep", he said. "Both of you. There's better things to do than listen to something like that. I'll be down at the creek finishing the dishes, if you want me". He found the pan where he had dropped it and carried it back down to the stream. The coyote was calling again, and he hoped that this time there would be no other sounds to interrupt it. Not tonight, at any rate. He had a feeling that the girl meant trouble. If she did, he could stand it better in the light. He scrubbed absent-mindedly at the pans and reflected on how things had turned out. That afternoon when they had pulled up in front of the broken-down ranch house, his hopes had been high. Already some of the pain had gone from Amelia's death. Not all of it. There would still be plenty of moments of regret and sadness and guilty relief. But they were starting a new life. And they had almost everything they needed: land, a house, two whiteface bulls, three horses. The land wasn't all Wilson had expected of it. Six hundred and forty acres, the old man back in St. Louis had said; good grass, good water. Well, the grass was there, though in some places the ground was too steep for a cow to get to it. The water was there, so much of it that it spread all through the dead orchard. And there was a house; livable perhaps, but badly in need of repairs. In the last analysis, though, Wilson had little cause to complain. The place had been cheap- just the little he had left after Amelia's burial- and it would serve its purpose. There was only one place where Jake Carwood's description had gone badly awry: the peace and quiet. It hadn't started out that way. And he had a feeling- thanks to the girl- that things would get worse before they got better.

#2#

They had the house cleaned

up by noon, and Wilson sent the boy out to the meadow to bring in the horses.

He stood on the porch and watched him struggling with the heavy harness, and finally went over to help him. Kathy was already in the wagon. They were going to town, and they were both excited.

Wilson backed the team into the traces, and wished they weren't going to town at all. He had an uneasy feeling about it. That girl last night, what was her name? Judith Pierce. It was the only thing about her that was the least bit hard to remember. He finished with the team and filled his pipe and stood looking about him. He had spent two hours riding around the ranch that morning, and in broad daylight it was even less inviting than Judith Pierce had made it seem. There was brush, and stands of pine that no grass could grow under, and places so steep that cattle wouldn't stop to graze. But there was water. There was an artificial lake just out of sight in the first stand of trees, fed by a half dozen springs that popped out of the ground above the hillside orchard. Yes, there was plenty of water, too much, and that was probably the trouble. There were tracks of cattle all over his six hundred and forty acres. The first part of the road was steep, but it leveled off after the second bend and curled gradually into the valley. It was hotter once they reached the flat, and drier, but the grass was better. A warm breeze played across it, moving it like waves. A red-tailed hawk flew in behind them and stayed there, watching for any snakes or rabbits that they might stir up from the side of the road. It took them an hour before they came to the first houses of Kelseyville. The town was about what Wilson expected: one main street with its rows of false-fronted buildings, a water tower, a few warehouses, a single hotel; all dusty and sunbaked. The place was quiet.

Such was my state of mind that I did not question the possibility of

this; under the circumstances I was only too willing to confess all.

I was nearly thirty at the time. I went to the hall in the afternoons only, on these preliminary matters. It was dark and, I sensed, very large; only the counter at one end was lighted by a long fluorescent tube suspended directly above it. Sometimes I was aware of people moving about in the darkness. I would turn away from my writing

in the hope of getting a good look at them but I never quite succeeded.

A glimpse of three or four vague figures, at the most. Drifting here and there. Squatting, as if waiting. The pulsing glow of a cigarette. Since they could see me but I not them, their presence in the hall disturbed me. The clerk paid them no attention. This impressed me, until I realized how limited was his sphere of influence.

His job simply consisted in registering new men. When the phone rang he answered it. His authority extended to the far edge of the counter, no further. None of the men hanging around the hall bothered to speak to him. Baldness was attacking his pate. He spoke to me in a gruff voice, an affectation which quite belied his personality. He wore his white shirt open at the neck, revealing a bit of scrawny pale chest

underneath. It was obvious that he wished himself different from the sort of person he thought he was. But it was not easy for him and he often slipped. When one of the men in the hall behind us spat on the floor and scraped his boot over the gob of spittle I noticed how the clerk winced. I felt certain he was really a spineless little man.

His hat (the cause of his baldness?) hung on a hook on the wall, and underneath it I could see his tie, knotted, ready to be slipped over his head, a black badge of frayed respectability that ought never to have left his neck. The morning's tabloids were on the counter, and a stack of dog-eared men's magazines. On a shelf in the office behind the counter was a small radio dialed permanently on a station which broadcast only vulgar commercials and cheap popular music. Everything about the clerk was trivial. Once, pressing him, I learned that his job was only part-time, in the afternoons when nothing went on in the hall. Noticing my disappointment he attempted to salvage what scraps and shreds of authority he felt might still be clinging to his person. With distaste I saw him assume a pompous air. When he saw me coming he turned his radio off. He made a show of rearranging my forms on the shelf. He would pick up the ringing phone with studied negligence, then bark into it with gruff importance. What limited knowledge he possessed he forced upon me. In the mornings, I was informed, fluorescent tubes, similar to the one above the counter, illuminated the entire hall. They, and the two large fans which I could dimly see as daylight filtered through their vents, down at the far end of the hall, could be turned on by a master switch situated inside the office. He pointed out the switch to me and for a moment I foolishly believed that he would let deed follow words. I was shown, instead, a batch of white tickets of the sort handed out, he told me, every morning. Now, here was something of obvious importance to me, yet when I reached for the tickets he snatched them away from my hand. He couldn't afford to have anyone mess around with them, he said. Each of those tickets was of great value to its rightful recipient. I withdrew my hand.

Later I would remember what this pompous little man had told me about the worth of a ticket. Having nothing else to do except wait for my forms to be processed, I gave myself over to speculations concerning the hall itself. When suitably lighted, what would it look like?

The presence of the two exhaust fans seemed to indicate that the hall could become crowded for air. One afternoon, upon receiving permission and the necessary instructions from the clerk, I had visited the toilet adjoining the hall. By counting the number of stalls and urinals I attempted to form a loose estimate of how many men the hall would hold at one time. For although I had crossed a corner of the hall on my way to the toilet I still could not tell for sure how far to the rear the darkness extended. I could observe the two fans down at the end, but their size in themselves meant nothing to me as long as I had no measure of comparison. I had for some time been hoping, in vain, for one of the dim figures to pass between the fan vents and myself. I knew that three or four of them were almost always present in the hall, but what they were doing, and exactly where, I could not tell.

It was, I felt, possible that they were men who, having received no

tickets for that day, had remained in the hall, to sleep perhaps, in the corners farthest removed from the counter with its overhead light. This light did not penetrate very far back into the hall, and my eyes were hindered rather than aided by the dim daylight entering through the fan vents when I tried to pick out whatever might be lying, or squatting, on the floor below. Also the clerk appeared to disapprove of my frequent curious glances back over my shoulder. No sooner would I turn my head away from the counter before he would address me, at times quite sharply, in order to bring back my attention. And I had hardly finished my business in the toilet on the aforementioned occasion when the lights in that place, like the hall lights controlled from the switch in the office, flicked off and on impatiently. This sort of petty vigilance annoyed me. I felt certain it was self-appointed. It sprang from a type of mentality I'd encountered often enough but certainly had not expected to find here. I decided to see no more of the clerk until the processing of my papers was completed. I felt strongly attached to the hall, however, and hardly a day passed when I did not go to look at it from a distance. I lived in a state of suspense because of it. I could not cling to my past nor did I wish to. I had signed it off on the forms. My future lay solely with the hall, yet what did I know about the hall at this point? Although I had been inside it I had not yet seen it functioning. I wished to prepare myself but did not even know what sort of clothes I ought to be wearing. I did not despair, however; far from it! I was constantly searching for clues around the neighborhood of the hall. Though only a relatively short walk separated it from my own part of town, its character was wholly foreign to me. Large warehouses flanked the street on which the hall fronted. The river was only a few blocks away but an unbroken line of piers prevented me from seeing it. Sometimes I noticed the tops of ships' masts and funnels reaching above the pier roofs. The sounds issuing from beyond- winches whirring, men shouting- indicated great activity and excited me. The hall, on the other hand, appeared lifeless and deserted on these long waterfront afternoons. It resembled nothing I'd ever seen before. Its front was windowless, but irregularities in the masonry might be an indication that windows, now blinded, had once looked out upon the street. I kept circling the block hoping to see, from the street behind it, the rear of the hall. But it was not a tall structure and other buildings concealed it. For weeks I wandered about this neighborhood of warehouses and garages, truck terminals and taxi repair shops, gasoline pumps and longshoremen's lunch counters, yet never did I cease to feel myself a stranger there. I returned to the hall, despite my dislike for the clerk. As I had expected, he insisted that my visits to the hall would do nothing to further the process of my application. Meanwhile spring had passed well into summer. At last, when I put it to him directly, the clerk was forced to admit that the delay in my case was unusual. When I asked him what, if anything, I could do about it, he surprised me by referring me to the director of the hall. I could consult this personage on any weekday morning, though not before ten o'clock. The clerk impressed this upon me: that I should not arrive in the hall before ten o'clock. When I went for my interview

with the director I saw why. Although it was dark as usual I could see that the hall had only recently contained a great many people. Cigarette butts littered the floor. The big fans were going, drawing from the large room the remnants of stale smoke which drifted about in pale strata underneath the ceiling. I had felt the draft they were making while mounting the stairs. The staircase itself seemed still to be echoing the heavy footfalls of many men. I stopped by the counter. No one was behind it, but in the rear wall of the office I noticed, for the first time, a door which had been left partially open. Past it I could see part of a desk, a flag in a corner, a rug on the floor. The director's office. I rapped my knuckles on the counter. The director came to the door. I was at once disappointed, although just what I had expected him to look like I could not have explained. He was a man in his late forties, with graying hair, of medium height; he looked dapper in a lightweight summer suit, brown silk tie and green-tinted soft collar. He wore perforated, white-topped shoes; they somehow made me expect to see him launch into a vaudeville tapdance routine any moment. But he came toward me sedately enough, showed me around the counter, offered me a seat inside his office, then walked to a file cabinet and got out my application. I had the impression that he had read my forms, perhaps several times. He did not look at them now. As he lowered himself on the chair behind his desk I wondered what this dapper, slightly ridiculous man could possibly have to do with the workings of the hall. He spoke, in a voice as immaculate as his appearance. Why had I registered? Begging my pardon, he must express his astonishment over seeing a person of my background applying at the hall. He had looked over my forms and was impressed by what he had seen there; indeed, my scholastic qualifications were such that he, a college graduate himself, must envy me them. Was I sure, he asked, that I knew what I was applying for? What sort of men I would come into contact with, at the hall? These questions did not surprise me; I felt certain that the director, like the afternoon clerk, seldom moved beyond the counter, that the hall, to them, was a jungle, a dark and unwelcome place. Though I doubted that he would understand me, I told the director my motives for applying. I had always, I said, hankered after working hard with my hands. This desire, I went on, growing voluble as my conviction was aroused, had mounted at such a rate recently that I now found its realization necessary not only to my physical but also to my spiritual wellbeing. To this effect I had already severed all connections which bound me to my former existence. The flat, hard cap was small, but he thrust it to the back of his head.

"Tie him up". "Hell with it". Before they could guess his intention Rankin stepped forward and swung the guard's own gun against the uncovered head, hard. The man went over without sound, falling to the bare floor. Barton said harshly, "Why did you do that"? Rankin sneered at him. "What did you want me to do, kiss him? He dumped me in solitary twice".

Barton caught the lighter man's shoulder and swung him around. "Let's get one thing straight, you and me. The only reason we brought you was to get Miller out. If you ever try anything without my orders I'll kill you". Fred Rankin looked at him. It seemed to Barton that the green eyes mocked him, the thin-lipped smile held insolence, but he had no time to waste now.

"Come on. Let's move". They filed out through the guard-room door, into the paved square. There were three other men within this prison whom Barton would have liked to liberate, but they were in other cell blocks. There was no chance. They moved slowly, toward the main gate, following the wall. There was no moon. They had chosen this night purposely. They reached the guard house without alerting the men on the walls above, and Powers slipped through the door.

Two men were on duty inside, playing pinochle, relaxed. They looked up in surprise as Powers came in. "What are you doing out of the block"? "It's Curtiss", he said, naming the man Rankin had hit. "I've got to have help". They stared at him. The sergeant in charge climbed to his feet.

"What's wrong with him"? "He's having some kind of a fit". The sergeant turned to the door. As he passed through it Barton shoved his gun against the man's side. "One sound and you're dead". The sergeant froze. Powers had not followed. Powers was covering the remaining guard. The man half-reached for the cord of the alarm bell. Powers knocked his arm aside. Deliberately, with none of Rankin's viciousness, he laid the barrel of his gun alongside the guard's head. They were free. Even Barton could not quite believe it. It had gone without a hitch. They slid through the wicket in the big gate, ghosted across the dark ground. Five minutes later they reached the horses. Barton was relieved to see that Carl Dill and Emmett Foster had brought extra mounts. He had been worried that with Miller and Rankin added to the escape party they would be short. No one hurried. They walked the horses, heading along the river, Barton and Emmett Foster in the lead, seven men riding quietly through the night. The only thing which would have attracted attention was that two wore the uniform of prison guards, three the striped suits of convicts. Five miles. In a small grove against the river they halted, turning deep into the protection of the trees. Foster had brought extra clothing also. A good man, Emmett. He had been one of the original Night Riders, one who had escaped the trial. It was to him that Barton had sent Carl Dill on Dill's release from the prison. Clyde Miller was crying softly to himself, shedding his striped suit and fumbling into the nondescript butternut pants, the worn brown shirt. Kid Boyd was unusually silent, Rankin watchful, a few paces apart. Barton finished his dressing and extended his hand to Powers.

"I won't even try to thank you". The ex-prison guard was embarrassed. He said in a studied voice, "I didn't do it for

you. I did it for the valley. You're the only man the Night Riders will follow. We've been starving and I don't like to starve".

Barton turned away, his eyes falling upon Rankin beside his horse. "Good luck". The murderer lifted his head. "Meaning you want me to ride out"? "You aren't one of us. There's nothing for you here". "I got no place to go". Barton hesitated. He did not trust Rankin, his violent temper, his killer instinct. But ten years in prison had taught him realities. They were in a fight, outweighed in both numbers and money. It was all right to put a bunch of ranchers onto horses, to call them Night Riders, to set out to attack the largest mining combination the country had ever seen if all they wanted was adventure. But if they really hoped to succeed they needed professionals, men who knew how to use a gun against men, who would match the killers on the other side. "Your choice", he said briefly, and turned to Kid Boyd. "Bury those uniforms so they won't be found".

Then Barton touched Carl Dill's arm and moved off, up the river bank. He wanted a careful, uninterrupted report from Dill on the conditions in the valley. They squatted on their heels in the deep mud and Dill found a cigar in his breast pocket, passing it over silently. He too knew the agony of going for weeks, sometimes months without the solace of tobacco. Mitchell Barton drew in the fragrance deeply, letting the smoke lie warm and soothing in his throat for a moment before he exhaled. Through the gloom he could not see the man beside him clearly but he knew him thoroughly. For his first five years in prison, they had shared a cell. Carl Dill was neither a rancher nor a valley man. He had been the auditor for the mining syndicate, and he had stolen fifty thousand dollars of the syndicate's money. He had done time for the theft. The one thing they had in common was their hatred. Both hated Donald Kruger. It had drawn them together, and since his release from prison Dill had worked tirelessly to effect this night's escape. He said

now, "I've got the perfect headquarters set up. The old Haskell mine". Mitch Barton knew the place. Twenty years before a group of Easterners had bought out the Haskell claims in the rocky hills south of Grass Valley. They had spent a million dollars, carving in a road, putting up buildings, drilling their haulage tunnel. Then the vein had petered out and the whole project had been abandoned.

"The road's washed badly", said Dill, "but there's a trail you can get over with a horse. A company of cavalry couldn't come in there if two men were guarding that trail". Barton nodded. "How do the valley people feel"? "As mad as ever. But Kruger's men keep them off balance, and they don't trust me. I'm an outsider. When they learn you're in the hills though, they'll rally, don't worry about that". Barton waited for a long moment, then asked the question which lay always uppermost in his mind. "My boy. Did you find him"? Dill

was silent as if he hated to answer, and Barton had a cold, sick feeling of apprehension. "He's in Morgan's Ferry".

Barton half-straightened in surprise. "What's he doing there"? Again Dill hesitated. "Dealing faro". "Dealing faro? How come"? "Your sister-in-law has the faro bank in Cap Ayres' saloon". Barton cursed under his breath. After another long pause he asked, "How many people know who they are"? "Everyone. Your cousin Finley saw to that. He's quite a rat, you know. He sold out to Kruger's men. He's informed them of everything you've ever written him. He wants your ranch". Barton stood up. He said tensely, "All right. Let's go get the boy". Dill had come up also. "I was afraid of this. I almost didn't tell you". "If you hadn't I'd have killed you". Dill's voice tightened. "But you can't ride into the Ferry. That's what they'll expect you to do. They'll be there waiting for you. I understand how you feel about the child **h". "The hell you do". Barton's voice was rougher than Dill had ever heard it. "I never saw him. My wife died in childbirth after I was sent away. "I can't leave him there. Donald Kruger would like nothing better than to hold him as hostage, and I wouldn't entrust a snake to his tender care. I've got to get the boy. Let's ride".

#CHAPTER TWO#

BARTON'S MEN CUT the telegraph wires in half a dozen places, carrying away whole sections to make repairs more difficult. It was over an hour before their escape was discovered, but still the news that Barton was free flashed across the central portion of the state.

It reached Donald Kruger in his massive home in Burlingame. It reached the mines at North San Juan and Bloomfield. It brought men out of bed and sent them into hurried conferences. For everyone involved knew that the whole valley was a powder keg, and Mitchell Barton the fuse which could send it into explosive violence.

Creighton Hague sat in his office above the lone pit. The office was of logs, four rooms, each heated by an iron stove. The building was dwarfed by the scene outside. There a dozen giant monitors played their seventy-five-foot jets of water against the huge seam of tertiary gravel which was the mountainside. The gravel was the bed of an ancient river, buckled in some prehistoric upheaval of earth. It was partially cemented by ages and pressure, yet it crumpled before the onslaught of the powerful streams, the force of a thousand fire hoses, and with the gold it held washed down through the long sluices. A million dollars' of gold a month. A million tons of rock and soil and brush. The monitors ran twenty-four hours each day. Their roar, like the swelling volume of a hundred tornadoes could be heard for miles. Hague, like all who worked near the pits, was partly

deafened from the constant assault against his eardrums. He was a big man, wearing a neat flannel shirt against the cold foothill air. Fat showed in loose rolls beneath the shirt. Ten years older than Mitch Barton, he had clawed his way up from mucker in the pits to manager of the operation. He was proud of his accomplishments, proud of his job, proud that Donald Kruger and his associates trusted him. He lived and breathed for the mining company. No man could have reached his spot nor held it without being ruthless, and Hague had made a virtue of ruthlessness all of his life. There came a ghost of noise at the office door and Hague swung to see Kodyke in the entrance from the outer room. Hague had never accustomed himself to Kodyke. The man was tall, thin, with a narrow face and a too-large nose. The eyes always held Hague, eyes of a dead man, lidless as a lizard's, with the fixed intensity of a cobra. Even Hague was repelled by the machinelike deadliness that was Kodyke. He knew nothing about the man's history. Kodyke had appeared at the mine one day bearing a letter from Kruger. Kodyke was to head the dread company police. He ran the change rooms. He threw out the hi-graders. He supervised the cleanups and handled the shipments of raw gold which each week went out to San Francisco. Hague squeezed down his uneasy dislike. He pulled open the top drawer of his desk and drew out a tintype. "This is Mitchell Barton. He broke out of Folsom last night. Apparently he bribed one of the guards. We want him back there or we want him dead". Kodyke took the picture in a lean hand, studying it thoughtfully. "Dangerous"?

"Dangerous, yes. You know how the ranchers in the valley are. They blame us for all their troubles. Ten years ago they blew up some of our ditches. It cost us a hundred thousand dollars and thirty days lost time to fix them. We don't want Barton's Night Riders loose again". The gunman nodded, slipping the picture into his breast pocket, saying nothing. Normally Hague wasted no words, but now he found himself unable to stop their flow although he knew Kodyke was aware of all he said.

If she sensed any unusual preoccupation on the part of her mother, she did not comment upon it. After they had finished eating, Melissa took Sprite the kitten under her arm- "so that Auntie Grace can teach it about the whistle"- and climbed into the station wagon beside her mother. She had offered to walk, but Pamela knew she would not feel comfortable about her child until she had personally confided her to the care of the little pink woman who chose to be called "Auntie". When they reached their neighbor's house, Pamela said a few polite words to Grace and kissed Melissa lightly on the forehead, the impulse prompted by a stray thought- of the type to which she was frequently subject these days- that they might never see one another again. Then she turned the station wagon around and headed it back down the hill, with the village as her ostensible destination.

As she drove, she thought about her plan. It was really quite simple. So simple, in fact, that it might even work- although Pamela, now, in her new frame of mind, was careful not to pretend

too much assurance. That mistake, she thought, had cost her dearly these past few days, and she wanted to avoid falling into any more of the traps that the mountain might set for her. She must be cautious so as not to alert the scheming forest. When the station wagon drew abreast of the dusty dirt road that led up to the porch of the Culver house, Pamela turned the wheel, guiding the car to its familiar parking spot close to the house, and stopped. All of her movements were careful and methodical, partaking of the stealth of a criminal who has plotted his felony for months in advance and knows exactly which step to take next in the course of the final execution of his crime. She locked the ignition, removed the keys, stepped out of the car and went into the house. Here, she dropped the keys on a small table beside the door and went upstairs to her bedroom. On her bureau lay a small, brass ornament of simple design and faded engraving- an object which, Pamela believed now, had been the property of her great-grandfather, Major Hiram Munroe Culver. He had belonged to this land and, perhaps, had desecrated it- and this was the only material symbol that remained of him. If she, Pamela, were being held responsible for his crimes, then hers must be the final act of expiation. She would return this symbol to the mountain, as one pours seed back into the soil every Spring or as ancient fertility cults demand annual human sacrifice. Slowly and thoughtfully, she slipped the ornament into the pocket of her slacks, moved down the stairs and out of the house. There was only one place where the mountain might receive her- that unnamed, unnameable pool harbored in its secret bosom. Atonement, if atonement were possible, could only be made at that sacred, sacrificial basin. It was there that she would have to enact her renunciation, beg forgiveness. Perhaps it was insane, Pamela thought. Perhaps it was all a vividly conceived dream. But she was caught in it, and she faced the terrible possibility that, if it were a dream, it was one from which she might never awaken. Facing the forest now, she who had not dared to enter it before, walked between two trees at random and headed in what she believed was the direction of the pool. She remembered little of her previous journey there with Grace, and she could but hope that her dedication to her mission would enable her to accomplish it. The forest was open and freely welcoming, extending an enchanted hand. The ground was covered with soft pine needles and the slope was gentle. Birds chirped and chattered in the trees and the sun, all dewy-eyed and soft, caressed her shoulders warmly from time to time. It was not, thought Pamela, such an evil place after all. No wonder Melissa responded so completely to its beckoning. Perhaps she had no reason to fear these trees that whispered their secrets above her head as she passed. Was it not possible, after all, that the forest was in league with her and her child or that its sympathy lay with the Culvers or that she had erred in failing to understand this? Pamela felt calm and peaceful as she walked along. The slight flutter that had disturbed the motion of her heart when she entered the forest was gone now, and even the dim groves of trees through which she occasionally passed did not reawaken her fear. She regarded them as signs that she was nearing the

glen she sought, and she was glad to at last be doing something positive in her unenunciated, undefined struggle with the mountain and its darkling inhabitants. Having persisted too long in deliberate ignorance and denial of the forces that threatened her, Pamela was relieved now to admit their potency and to be taking definite steps toward grappling with them. A few days ago, she would have thought such an expedition as this utterly ridiculous; today, on the contrary, it seemed utterly reasonable. She did not pause to consider what she would do if her plan should fail; she directed all of her mental and physical energy toward achieving this one goal. If, as she walked, her steps fumbled from time to time, she chose to ignore that omen. If the slope grew steeper and the groves more dim, she tried not to heed. Success depended upon maintaining her equanimity; she must be poised and proud and unafraid in order to prove to the mountain that she was in earnest. The forest took on an impersonal aspect. It did not care what sort of person prowled its woods, plucked at its bark or stripped the berries from its bushes. Unconcerned, indifferent, unmotivated, the forest was simply there- fighting man's depredations with more abundant growth and man's follies with its own musical evening laughter. Red man or white man, pacifist or killer, the forest would accept them all- knowing that it could thrive equally well on slaughter and beneficence; knowing that its ageless mass would always dwarf the short span of time allotted to any man. Pamela shook her head. She must not think about time. That was another one of those traps. In her grim pursuit of tranquillity, Pamela focused her thoughts on her husband. If, when this was all over, she found the words to tell him about it, she wondered if he would ever understand. How could he comprehend her need when he himself was innocent? Indian ghosts would not impinge upon his nights, nor would his days be haunted by the dimly-outlined, ill-conceived figure of her benighted ancestor. His bright, daylight mind would whistle away such images; they would not dare to face his scoffing. Pamela was glad Jim was nowhere near. His presence would have interfered with her duty. The mountainside grew steeper and she slipped once or twice on the smooth pine needles. The trees huddled more closely together, their limbs and leaves intertwined in a coarse curtain against the sun. Bushes and vines abetted the rocks in forming thorny detours for the struggling stranger, and without the direct light of the sun to act as compass, Pamela could no longer be positive of her direction.

Nevertheless, she continued to move upward. She was sure she would reach the pool by climbing, and she clung to that belief despite the increasing number of obstacles. The forest had become an alien world where she strove, alone, unprotected, unguided, to deal with whatever hindrances were offered. It was a bold, dark castle of pine boughs that stood like a medieval fortress, eclipsing the sun and human time. At one and the same time, she was within it but still searching for the drawbridge that would give her entry. Silence came into the forest- a solid being that clapped its hand over the murmuring mouths of the birds and the whispered comfort of the trees. Silence

walked at Pamela's side, its presence numbingly close, yet too far for her to hear. Silence stood in front of her, waiting, and in back of her, blocking her retreat. She stumbled over the root of a tree that protruded maliciously above the earth. In spite of her attempt to preserve her balance, she fell, bruising her arm on a naked stone. For a moment, she could not catch her breath and then, her breath returning in short, frightened spasms, she lifted herself to her feet laboriously. She started to brush the dirt and bits of leaves off her clothes. Her arm bled slightly, and the offended skin cried out in pain. She looked around. She was bewildered. She seemed to have come such a long distance- too far for her destination which had wilfully been swallowed up in the greedy gloom of the trees. She stood quite still, trying to focus upon a direction in which to turn, a path to follow, a clue to guide her. She was standing in a thick grove. The trees were crowded so closely together that their branches overlapped, virtually shutting out the sun completely. The earth smelled moist and pungent as it might in a cave deprived of the cleansing effect of the sun's rays. She had the feeling that, under the mouldering leaves, there would be the bodies of dead animals, quietly decaying and giving their soil back to the mountain. The thought made Pamela shudder. A terrible chill swept through the grove. Not a breeze exactly, but a pocket of icy air that settled with a loathsome familiarity upon the deep confines of the grove, catching Pamela in a leering embrace. There was a peculiar density about it, a thick substance that could be sensed but never identified, never actually perceived.

Where before had she felt or dreamt or imagined such a scene? She already knew this unwholesome, chilling atmosphere that was somehow grotesquely alive. It enclosed her clammy hands and twined around her ankles. It crept into the open neck of her blouse and slid down her body, seeping into her flesh through all the quivering pores of her skin. It crawled across her breasts, suffocating the life in her nipples. It circled her thighs, exploring with its icy tentacles. It entered her body with the ghastly intimacy of an incubus, and its particles, spreading, creeping, crawling, joined themselves into steel bands that constricted her knees so tightly that they ached; stifled her lungs so that her breath came in harsh gasps; clutched her throat and sucked up the moisture in her mouth so that her tongue was dry and hard and stuck to the roof of her mouth and her teeth were clenched together in the rigid fixture of her jaws. She had to get away from here before this demonic possession swallowed up the liquid of her eyes and sank into the fibers of her brain, depriving her of reason and sight. But she did not know which way to go. The shadows of the trees engulfed her, foreclosing every possible exit from the grove. She had been snared here by a vile sensuality that writhed around her throat in ever-tightening circles. She could not scream, for even if a sound could take shape within her parched mouth, who would hear, who would listen? Does the mountain listen?

Pamela groped blindly. She had to escape. She had to move in some direction- any direction that would take her away from this evil

place. She thrust forward through the shadows and the trees that resisted her and tried to fling her back. Her own body protested, aching painfully where the blood in her veins had congealed, where cold demon wisps still clung and caressed. Every movement she made seemed unnecessarily noisy. Twigs cracked loudly under her feet; bushes swished and scratched at her slacks; tree branches snapped as she pushed them ruthlessly away from her.

Miraculously, she found exactly the right statement. She began it deliberately, so that none of her words would be lost on him.

"I want to tell you something Thomas DeMontez Lord. I'm well aware that you've got a pedigree as long as my leg, and that I don't amount to anything. But"- "But it don't matter a-tall", Lord supplied fondly. "To me you'll always be the girl o' my dreams, an' the sweetest flower that grows". Beaming idiotically, he pooched out his lips and attempted to kiss her. She yanked away from him furiously. "You shut up! <shu-tt up-pp!> I've got something to say to you, and by God you're going to listen. Do you hear me? You're going to listen"!

Lord nodded agreeably. He said he wanted very much to listen. He knew that anything a brainy little lady like her had to say would be plumb important, as well as pleasin' to the ear, and he didn't want to miss a word of it. So would she mind speaking a little louder?

"I think you stink, Tom Lord! I think you're mean and hateful and stupid, and- louder"? said Joyce. "Uh-huh. So I can hear you while I'm checkin' the car. Looks like we might be in for a speck of trouble". He opened the door and got out. He waited at the car side for a moment, looking down at her expectantly. "Well? Wasn't you goin' to say somethin'"? Then, helpfully, as she merely stared at him in weary silence, "Maybe you could write it down for me, huh? Print it in real big letters, an' I can cipher it out later". "Aah, go on", she said. "Just go the hell on". He grinned, nodded, and walked around to the front of the car. Lips pursed mournfully, he stared down at its crazily sagging left side. Then he hunkered down on the heels of his handmade boots, peered into the orderly chaos of axle, shock absorber, and spring. He went prone on his stomach, the better to pursue his examination. After a time, he straightened again, brushing the red Permian dust from his hands, slapping it from his six-dollar levis and his tailored, twenty-five-dollar shirt. He wore no gun- a strange omission for a peace officer in this country. Never, he'd once told Joyce, had he encountered any man or situation that called for a gun. <And he really feels that way>, she thought. <That's really all he's got, all he is. Just a big pile of self-confidence in an almost teensy package. If I could make myself feel the same way> **h She studied him hopefully, yearningly; against the limitless background of sky and wasteland it was easy to confirm her analysis. Here in the God-forsaken

place, the westerly end of nowhere, Tom Lord looked almost insignificant, almost contemptible. He <was> handsome, with his coal-black hair and eyes, his fine-chiseled features. But she'd known plenty of handsomer guys, and, conceding his good looks, what was there left? He wasn't a big man; rather on the medium side. Neither was he very powerful of build. He could move very quickly, she knew (although he seldom found occasion to do so), but he was more wiry than truly strong. And his relatively small hands and feet gave him an almost delicate appearance. <Just nothing>, she told herself. <Just so darned sure of himself that he puts the Indian sign on everyone. But, by gosh, I want him and I'm going to have him!>

He caught her eye, came back around the car with the boot-wearer's teetering, half-mincing walk. <Why did these yokels still wear boots, anyway, when most had scarcely sat a horse in years?> He slid in at her side, tucked a cigar into his mouth, and politely proffered one to her. "Oh, cut it out, Tom"! she snapped. "Can't you stop that stupid clowning for even a minute"? "This ain't your brand, maybe", Lord suggested. "Or maybe you just don't feel like a cigar"? "I feel like getting back to town, that's what I feel like! Now, are you going to take me or am I supposed to walk"? "Might get there faster walkin'", Lord drawled, "seein' as how I got a busted front spring. On the other hand, howsomever, maybe you wouldn't either. I figger it's prob'ly a sixty-five-mile walk, and I c'n maybe get this spring patched up in a couple of hours". "How-with what? There's nothing out here but rattlesnakes". "Now, ain't it the truth"? Lord laughed with secret amusement. "Not a danged thing but rattlesnakes, so I reckon I'll get the boss rattler to help me". "Tom! For God's sake"!

"Looky". He pointed, cutting her off. "See that wildcat"? She saw it then, the distant derrick of the wildcat- a test well in unexplored country. And even with her limited knowledge of such things, she knew that the car could be repaired there; sufficiently, at least, to get them back into town. A wildcatter had to be prepared for almost any emergency. He had to depend on himself, since he was invariably miles and hours away from others.

"Well, let's get going", she said impatiently. "I"- She broke off, frowning. "What did you mean by that rattlesnake gag? Getting the boss rattlesnake to help you"? "Why, I meant what I said", Lord declared. "What else would I mean, anyways"? She looked at him, lips compressed. Then, with a shrug of pretended indifference, she took a compact from her purse and went through the motions of fixing her make-up. In his mood, it was the best way to handle him; that is, to show no curiosity whatsoever. Otherwise, she would be baited into a tantrum- teased and provoked until she lost control of herself, and thus lost still another battle in the maddening struggle of Tom Lord Vs& Joyce Lakewood.

The car lurched along at a snail's crawl, the left-front mudguard banging and scraping against the tire, occasionally scraping against the road itself. Lord whistled tunelessly as he fought the steering wheel. He seemed very pleased with himself, as though some intricate scheme was working out exactly as he had planned. Along with this self-satisfaction, however, Joyce sensed a growing tension. It poured out of him like an electric current, a feeling that the muscles and nerves of his fine-drawn body were coiling for action, and that that action would be all that he anticipated. Joyce had seen him like this once before- more than once, actually, but on one particularly memorable occasion. That was the day that he had practically mopped up the main street of Big Sands with Aaron McBride, field boss for the Highlands Oil + Gas Company. Tom had been laying for Aaron McBride for a long time, just waiting to catch him out of line. McBride gave him his opportunity when he showed up in town with a pistol on his hip. He had a legitimate reason for wearing it. It was payday for Highlands, and he was packing a lot of money back into the oil fields. Moreover, as long as the weapon was carried openly, the sheriff's office had made no previous issue of it. "So what's this all about"? he demanded, when Lord confronted him. "I'm not the only man in town with a gun, or the only one without a permit". It was the wrong thing to say. By failing to do as he was told instantly- to take out a permit or return the gun to his car- he had played into Lord's hands. The trouble was that he had virtually had to protest. The deputy had forced him to by his manner of accosting him. So, "How about it"? he said. "Why single me out on this permit deal"? "Well, I'll tell you about that", Lord told him. "We aim t' be see-lective, y'know? Don't like to bother no one unless we have to, which I figger we do, in your case. Figger we got to be plumb careful with any of you Highlands big shots". McBride reddened. He himself had heard that there was gangster money in the company, but that had nothing to do with him. He was an honest man doing a hard job, and the implication that he was anything else was unbearable.

"Look, Lord", he said hoarsely. "I know you've got a grudge against me, and maybe I can't blame you. You think that Highlands swindled you and I helped 'em do it. But you're all wrong, man! I'm no lawyer. I just do what I'm told, and"-

"Uh-huh. An' that could mean trouble with a fella that's workin' for crooks. So you get rid of that pistol right now, Mis-ter McBride. You do that or take you out a permit right now".

McBride couldn't do either, of course. Not immediately, as the deputy demanded. Not without a face-saving respite of at least a few minutes. To do so would make his job well-nigh impossible. Oil-field workers were a rough-tough lot. How could he exert authority over them- make them toe the line, as he had to- if he knuckled under to this small-town clown? "I'll get around to it a little later", he mumbled desperately. "Just as soon as I go to the bank,

and"- "Huh-uh. <Now,> Mis-ter McBride", said Lord, and he laid a firmly restraining hand on the field boss's arm.

It was strictly the deputy's game, but McBride had gone too far to throw in. Now, he could only play the last card in what was probably the world's coldest deck. He flung off Lord's hand and attempted to push past him, inadvertently shoving him into a storefront. It was practically the last move that McBride made of his own volition. Lord slugged him in the stomach, so hard that the organ almost pressed against his spine. Then, as he doubled, gasping, vomiting the breakfast he had so lately eaten, Lord straightened him with an uppercut. A rabbit punch redoubled him. And then there was a numbing blow to the heart, and another gut-flattening blow to the stomach **h But he couldn't keep up with them. No more could he defend himself against them. He seemed to be fighting not one man but a dozen. And he could no longer think of face-saving, of honor, but only of escape. <Why, he's going to kill me,> he thought wildly. <I meant him no harm. I've given willful hurt to no man. I was just doing my job, just following orders, and for that he's going to kill me. Beat me to death in front of a hundred people>. Somehow more terrible than the certainty that he was about to die was the knowledge that Lord would probably not suffer for it: the murder would go unpunished. He, McBride, would be cited as in the wrong, and he, Lord, would go scot-free, an officer who had only done his duty, though perhaps too energetically. McBride staggered into the street, flopped sprawling in the stinging dust. Fear-maddened, fleeing the lengthening shadow of death, he scrambled to his feet again. He couldn't see; he was long past the point of coherent thinking. Dimly, he heard laughter, hoots of derision, but he could not read the racket properly. He could not grasp that Lord had withdrawn from the fight minutes ago, and that his leaden arms were flailing at nothing but the air. He hated them too much to understand- the people of this isolated law-unto-itself world that was Lord's world. This, he was sure, was the way they <would> act; laughing at a dying man, laughing as a man was beaten to death. And nothing would be done about it. Nothing unless **h <Donna!> Donna, his young wife, the girl who was both daughter and wife to him. Donna was like he was. She lived by the rules, never compromising, never blinded or diverted by circumstance. And Donna would-

When he regained consciousness he was in Lord's house, in the office of Doctor Lord, the deputy's deceased father.

The Brannon outfit- known as the Slash-B because of its brand- reached Hondo Creek before sundown. The herd was watered and then thrown onto a broad grass flat which was to be the first night's bedground. Two of the new hands, a Mexican named Jose Amado and a kid known only as Laredo, were picked for the first trick of riding night herd. The rest of the crew offsaddled their mounts and turned them into the remuda. They got tin cups of coffee from the big

pot on the coosie's fire, rolled and lighted brown-paper cigarettes, lounged about. There was some idle talk, a listless discussion of this or that small happening during the day's drive. But they deliberately avoided the one subject that had them all curious: the failure of the boss's wife and son to join the outfit. It especially bothered the older hands. The cook, Mateo Garcia, had arrived there long before the herd. He'd started a fire and put coffee on, and now was busy at the work board of his chuck wagon. He was readying a batch of sourdough biscuits for the Dutch oven. Supper would be ready within the hour. The Maguire family was setting up a separate camp nearby. Billie had unhitched the mules from both Tom Brannon's and his father's wagon. Hank had gathered wood for a cookfire, and his wife was busy at it now. Conchita kept an eye on the twins and little Elena, trying to keep them from falling into the creek by which they persisted in playing. Conchita nagged at the younger children, attempting without success to keep her thoughts off Tom Brannon.

Tom Brannon had caught up with the outfit shortly after the Maguires joined it, which had been at midday. He'd come alone, without his wife and child. He'd been in an angry mood: Conchita had thought his face almost ugly with the anger in him. She wondered what had taken place in town, between him and his wife. She wished that she could talk to her mother about it. Not that her mother knew what had happened, but they could speculate upon it. But her mother would rebuke her if she mentioned it, and say that it was none of her concern. "Pat, get out of that creek! You too, Sean! Elena, you'll get mud all over your dress"! Even as she called to the children, Conchita let her gaze seek Tom Brannon. Tomas, she called him- as the Mexican hands did. He was in earnest conversation with her father and the old vaquero, Luis Hernandez. Whatever they are talking about? Conchita wondered. It bothered her that she probably would never know. Certainly, she wouldn't dare ask her father afterward. He would tell her not to pry into grownups' affairs- as though she were a little kid like Elena!

At the moment, the three men were not saying much of anything. They were sitting on their heels, rider-fashion, over by the still empty calf wagon. Brannon was hunkered down with his broad back to the left rear wheel, with the other two facing him. He held a cigarette in his right hand. It was burning away, forgotten. His face was clouded with unhappiness. He'd told Hank Maguire and Luis Hernandez about his wife's refusal to come with him and about what he now intended to do. They were considering it gravely, neither seeming to like what he planned. Finally Hernandez said, "I could offer you advice, Tomas, but you wouldn't heed it". "Let's hear it, anyway". "Wait a little while. Let Senora Brannon live in her father's house for a time. Give her time to miss you. Maybe she will then come to you. After all, you want the senora as much as you want the boy. You need her even more than you need him". "She won't change her mind", Brannon said. "John Clayton will see to that". "But after a time

away from you **h". "A year, Luis? Five? Ten? How long should I wait"? "Maybe in a year, Tomas **h". "In a year she'll like living in Clayton's house too much to come back to me", Brannon said flatly. "And the boy will be too much under his influence by then. I've got to take Danny away from Clayton before I lose him altogether. Hell, in a year or five or ten, the boy will have forgotten me- his own father"! "But to take him and leave his mother behind is not good". "In my place, you'd follow such advice as you give me"? Hernandez looked suddenly uncertain. "That I can't answer, for I can't imagine something like this happening to me. Maybe I should withdraw my advice- no"? Brannon looked at Hank Maguire. "And you? What would you do in my place"? Hank shook his head. "I don't know, Tom. Like Luis, I can't see something like this happening to me. With Maria and me, there's never any problem. Where I go, she goes- and the kids with us. You're going to need your woman. And the boy will need his mother. If you take the one, you'd better take both". Brannon shook his head. "I won't force Beth to come against her will. But I'm going to have my son". They were silent for a little while, each looking glum. Finally Luis Hernandez said, "What must be, must be. I am with you, of course, Tomas". And Hank Maguire added, "So am I, Tom". "All right", Brannon said, rising. "We'll ride out as soon as we've had chuck". ##

Brannon timed it so that they rode in an hour after nightfall. They had for cover both darkness and a summer storm. During much of the fifteen-mile ride they had watched a lurid display of lightning in the sky to the east. Later, they'd heard the rumble of thunder and then, just outside Rockfork, they ran into rain. Those who had slickers donned them. The others put on old coats or ducking jackets, whichever they carried behind their saddle cantles. There were seven of them, enough for a show of strength- to run a bluff. It was to be nothing more than that. There was to be no gunplay. If the bluff failed and they ran into trouble, Brannon had told the others, they would withdraw- and he would come after his son another time. He didn't want to put himself outside the law. With him were Hank Maguire, Luis Hernandez, and Luis's son Pedro. The Ramirez brothers were also along. The seventh man was Red Hogan, a wiry little puncher with a wild streak and a liking for hell-raising. They were all good men. It was dark early, because of the storm. Also because of the storm, the streets of Rockfork were deserted. Lighted windows glowed jewel-bright through the downpour. They reined in before the town marshal's office, a box-sized building on Main Street. A lamp burned inside, but Brannon, peering through the window, saw that the office was empty. He'd hoped to catch Jesse Macklin there. "Probably just stepped out", he said. "Maybe to have supper. Red, come along. The rest of you wait here". With Red Hogan, he rode to the Welcome Cafe. Hogan got down from the saddle and had a look inside. "Not there", he said, getting back

onto his horse. "Maybe he's at the hotel". They rode to the Rockfork House, a little farther along the opposite side of the street. They reined in there, Brannon remaining in the saddle while Hogan went to look for Jesse Macklin in the hotel dining room. Brannon had no slicker. He'd put on his old brown corduroy coat and it was already soaked. But he felt no physical discomfort. He was only vaguely aware of the sluicing rain. He hardly noticed the blue-green flashes of lightning and the hard claps of thunder. Hogan reappeared, stopped on the hotel porch, lifted a hand in signal. Brannon dismounted and climbed the steps. "He's finished eating", Hogan said. "Sitting with a cup of coffee now. It shouldn't be long". It seemed long, at least to Tom Brannon. He and Hogan waited by the door, one to either side. Macklin was the third man to come out, and he came unhurriedly. He was puffing on a cigar, and he was turning up his coat collar against the rain. It was not until he moved across the porch that he became aware of them, and then it was too late. They closed in fast, kept him from reaching inside his coat for his gun. "Just come along", Brannon told him. "Don't start anything you can't finish". "Now, listen"- Macklin began. "We'll talk over at your office".

"Brannon, I warn you"! "Let's go, Marshal", Brannon said, and took him by the arm. Hogan gripped the lawman's other arm. They escorted him down from the porch and through the rain to his office. The other five Slash-B men followed them inside, crowding the small room. His face was stiff with anger when they let go of his arms. He looked at each of them in turn, Brannon last of all. "I'll remember you", he said. "Every last one of you. As for you, Brannon"- "Put your gun on the desk, Marshal". "Now, hold on, damn it; I won't"-

Red Hogan's patience ran out. He lifted the skirt of Macklin's coat, took his gun from its holster, tossed it onto the desk. "Too much fooling around", he said. "Don't press your luck, badge-toter". Brannon said, "Now the key to the lockup, Marshal". "Key"? Macklin said. "What for"?

"Can't you guess"? Brannon said. "We're putting you where you won't come to harm. Come on- the key. Get it out"! "Damned if I will. Brannon, you've assaulted a law officer and"- They moved in on him, crowded him from all sides. No man laid a hand on him, but the threat of violence was there. His face took on a sudden pallor, became beaded with sweat, and he seemed to have trouble with his breathing. He held out a moment longer, then his nerve gave under the pressure. He swore, and said, "All right. It's here in my pocket". "Get it out", Brannon ordered. Then, as Macklin obeyed: "Now let's go out back". Resignedly, Macklin turned to the back door. They followed him into the rain and across to the squat stone building fifty feet to the rear. The door of the lockup was of oak planks and banded

with strap iron. It was secured by an oversized padlock. Macklin balked again, not wanting to unlock and open the door. They crowded him in that threatening way once more, forced him to give in. Once the door was open, they crowded him inside the dark building. He was uttering threats in a low but savage voice when they closed and padlocked the door. They returned to the street, mounted their horses, rode through the rain to the big house on Houston Street. Its windows glowed with lamplight. Deputy Marshal Luke Harper still stood guard on the veranda, a forlorn, scarecrowish figure in the murky dark. He came to the edge of the veranda, peered down at them with his hand on his gun. "Don't try it", Brannon told him, dismounting and starting up the steps with his men following. "Don't get yourself killed for something that doesn't concern you". He strode past the now frightened man, entered the house. Miguel and Arturo Ramirez remained on the veranda to keep Harper from interfering. The others followed Brannon inside. They trailed him across the wide hallway to the parlor, four roughly garbed and tough-looking men who probably had never before ventured into such a house. They brought to it all the odors that clung to men like themselves, that of their own sweat, of campfire smoke, of horses and cattle. They tracked mud on the oaken floor, on the carpet. Their presence fouled the elegance of that room. And their arrival caught John Clayton and Charles Ansley off guard.

The author of the anonymous notes seemed to be all-knowing. For men who had left cattle alone after getting their first notices had received no second. But the day of the deadline came and passed, and the men who had scoffed at the warnings laughed with satisfaction. For, with a single exception, nothing had happened to them. The exception was an Iron Mountain settler named William Lewis. After walking out to his corral that morning, he'd been amazed to see the dust puff up in front of his feet. A split second later, the distant crack of a rifle had sounded. He'd mounted up immediately and raced with a revolver ready toward the spot from which he'd estimated the shot had come. But he had found all of the thickets and points of cover deserted. There had been no sign of a rifleman and no track or trace to show that anyone had been near. Lewis was a man who had made a full-time job of cow stealing. He hadn't even pretended to be farming his spread. His land had never been plowed. He had done his rustling openly and boasted about it. He had received both first and second anonymous notices, and each time he had accused his neighbors of writing them. He had cursed at them and threatened them. He was a man, those neighbors testified later, who didn't have a friend in the world. William Lewis made the rounds of all who lived near him again, that August morning after a bullet landed at his feet, and once more he accused and threatened everyone. "I'll be ready next time"! he raged. "I'll be shootin' right back".

He had his chance the very next morning, for exactly the same thing happened again. This time Lewis had his own rifle in his hands, and he threw some answering fire back at the mysterious far-off

shot, then spent most of the day searching out the area. He found nothing, but he still refused to give up and move out. "Just let me meet up with that damned bushwhackin' coward face-to-face"! he exploded. "That's all I ask"! He never got that chance. For the unseen, ghostlike rifleman aimed a little higher the third time. A .30-30 bullet smashed directly into the center of William Lewis' chest. He slumped against a log fence rail, then tried to lift himself. Two more shots followed in quick succession, dropping him limp and huddled on the ground. An inquest was held, and after a good deal of testimony about the anonymous notes, the county coroner estimated that the shooting had been done from a distance of 300 yards. Rumors of the offer Tom Horn had made at the Stockgrowers' Association meeting had leaked out by then, and as a grand jury investigation of the murder got underway, the prosecuting attorney, a Colonel Baird, ordered that the tall stock detective be summoned for questioning. It took some time to locate Horn. He was finally found in the Bates Hole region of Natrona County, two counties away. Prosecutor Baird immediately assumed he was hiding out there after the shooting and began preparing an indictment. But that indictment was never made. For Tom Horn, it turned out, had a number of rancher and cowboy witnesses ready and willing to swear with straight faces that he had been in Bates Hole the day of the killing. The former scout's alibi couldn't be shaken. The authorities had to release him. He immediately rode on to Cheyenne, threw a ten-day drinking spree and dropped some very strong hints among friends.

"Dead center at three hundred yards, that coroner said"! he'd grin. "Three shots in that fella 'fore he hit the ground! You reckon there's two men in this state can shoot like that"?

Publicly, he denied everything. Privately, he created and magnified an image of himself as a hired assassin. For a blood-chilling ring of terror to the very sound of his name was the tool he needed for the job he'd promised to do. ##

Tom Horn was soon back at work, giving his secret employers their money's worth. A good many beef-hungry settlers were accepting the death of William Lewis as proof that the warning notes were not idle threats. The company herds were being raided less often, and cabins and soddies all over the range were standing deserted. But there were other homesteaders who passed the Lewis murder off as a personal grudge killing, the work of one of his neighbors. The rustling problem was by no means solved. Even in the very area where the shooting had been done, cattle were still disappearing. For less than a dozen miles from the unplowed land of the dead man lived another settler who had ignored the warnings that his existence might be foreclosed on- a blatant and defiant rustler named Fred Powell. "Fred was mighty crude about the way he took in cattle" his own hired man, Andy Ross, mentioned later. "Everyone knew it, but he sort of acted like he didn't care who knew it- even after them notes came, even after he'd heard about

Lewis, even after he'd been shot at a couple o' times hisself"!

On the morning of September 10, 1895, Powell and Ross rose at dawn and began their day's work. Haying time was close at hand, and they needed some strong branches to repair a hay rack. Harnessing a team to a buckboard, they drove out to a willow-lined creek about a half-mile off, then climbed down and began chopping. Andy Ross had just started swinging an ax at his second willow when the distant blast of a rifle sounded. He looked around in surprise, then noticed that Fred Powell was clutching his chest. The hired man ran over to help his boss. "My God, I'm shot"! Powell gasped. And he collapsed and died instantly. Ross had no intention of searching for the assassin. He heaved the dead man onto the buckboard, yelled and lashed at the team and got out of there fast. But he brought back the sheriff and several deputies, and to the lawmen the entire affair seemed a repetition of the Lewis killing.

A detailed scouring of the entire area revealed nothing beyond a ledge of rocks that might have been the rifleman's hiding place. There were no tracks of either hoofs or boots. Not even an empty cartridge case could be found. Once again, Tom Horn was the first and most likely suspect, and he was brought in for questioning immediately. Once again, he shook his head, kept his face expressionless and his voice very calm, and had a strongly supported alibi ready. Later, riding in for some lusty enjoyment of the liquor and professional ladies of Cheyenne, he laid claim to the killing with the vague insinuations he made. "Exterminatin' cow thieves is just a business proposition with me", he'd blandly announce. "And I sort o' got a corner on the market". "Tom", a friend asked him once, "how come you bushwhacked them rustlers? They wouldn't o' stood no chance with you in a plain, straight-out shoot-down".

He had lots of friends, then as always. Even as he became widely known as a professional killer, nearly every cowboy and rancher in Wyoming seemed proud to call him a friend. No man's name brought more cheers when it was announced in a rodeo. "Well", he explained,

"s'posin' you was a nester swingin' the long rope?
Which would you be most scairt of- a dry-gulchin' or a shoot-down"?

"Yeah, I can see that", the friend was forced to agree. "But **h well, it just don't seem sportin' somehow"!

"Sportin'"! The tall sunburnt rustler-hunter stared in amazement. "Sportin'"! he echoed again in soft wonder. "I seen a lot o' things in my time. I found a trooper once the Apache had spread-eagled on an ant hill, and another time we ran across some teamsters they'd caught, tied upside down on their own wagon wheels over little fires until their brains was exploded right out o' their skulls. I heard o' Texas cattlemen wrappin' a cow thief up in green hides and lettin' the sun shrink 'em and squeeze him to

death. But there's one thing I never seen or heard of, one thing I just don't think there is, and that's a sportin' way o' killin' a man"! After the first two murders, the warning notes were rarely ignored. The lesson had been learned. The examples were plain. When Fred Powell's brother-in-law, Charlie Keane, moved into the dead man's home, the anonymous letter writer took no chances on Charlie taking up where Fred had left off and wasted no time on a first notice: <IF YOU DON'T LEAVE THIS COUNTRY WITHIN 3 DAYS, YOUR LIFE WILL BE TAKEN THE SAME AS POWELL'S WAS>.

This was the message found tacked to the cabin door. Keane left, within three days. All through Albany and Laramie counties, other men were doing the same. Houses of settlers who'd treated the company herds as a natural resource, free for the taking, were sitting empty, with weeds growing high in their yards. The small half-heartedly tended fields of men who'd spent more time rustling cattle than farming were lying fallow. No cow thief could count on a jury of his sympathetic peers to free him any longer. Jury, judge and executioner were riding the range in the form of a single unknown figure that could materialize anywhere, at any time, to dispense an ancient brand of justice the men of the new West had believed long outdated.
##

For three straight years, Tom Horn patrolled the southern Wyoming pastures, and how many men he killed after Lewis and Powell (if he killed Lewis and Powell) will never be known. It is possible, although highly doubtful, that he killed none at all but merely let his reputation work for him by privately claiming every unsolved murder in the state. It is also possible, but equally doubtful, that he actually shot down the hundreds of men with which his legend credits him.

For that legend was growing explosively, Rumor was insisting he received a price of \$600 a man. (The best evidence is that he received a monthly wage of about \$125, very good money in an era when top hands worked for \$30 and found.) Rumor had it he slipped two small rocks under each victim's head as a sort of trademark. (A detailed search of old coroner's reports fails to substantiate this in the slightest.)

One thing was certain- his method was effective, so effective that after a time even the warning notices were often unnecessary. The mere fact that the tall figure with the rifle and field glasses had been seen riding that way was enough to frighten three rustling homesteaders out of the Upper Laramie country in a single week.

"My reputation's my stock in trade", Tom mentioned more than once. He evidently couldn't foresee that it might be his downfall in the end. He had made himself the personification of the Devil to the homesteaders. But to the cattlemen who had been facing bankruptcy from rustling losses and to the cowboys who had been faced with lay-offs a few years earlier, he was becoming a vastly different type of legendary figure. Such ranchers as Coble and Clay and the

Bosler brothers carried him on their backs as a cowhand even while he was receiving a much larger salary from parties unknown. He made their spreads his headquarters, and he helped out in their roundups.

In the cow camps, Tom Horn was regarded as a hero, as the same kind of champion he was when he entered and invariably won the local rodeos. The hands and their bosses saw him as a lone knight of the range, waging a dedicated crusade against a lawless new society that was threatening a beloved way of life. The wailing, guitar-strumming minstrels of the cattle kingdom made up songs about him. By 1898, rustling losses had been driven down to the lowest level ever seen in Wyoming.

When several minutes had passed and Curt hadn't emerged from the livery stable, Brenner reentered the hotel and faced Summers across the counter. "I have a little job for you, Charlie. I'm sure you won't mind doing me a small favor". Brenner's voice was oily, but Summers wasn't fooled. He moistened his lips uneasily. "What is it you want me to do, Mr& Brenner"?

Brenner shrugged carelessly. "It's very simple. I just want you to take a message to Diane Molinari. Tell her to come here to the hotel". Vastly relieved, Summers nodded and started toward the door. "One thing, Summers", Brenner said. "You're not to mention my name. Tell her Curt Adams wants to see her". Summers pulled up short, and turned around.

"I don't know, Mr& Brenner", he said haltingly, beginning to get an inkling of Brenner's plans. "It doesn't seem quite right, telling her a thing like that. Couldn't I just"- His voice trailed off into silence. Brenner continued to smile, but his eyes were cold. He turned and looked around at the lobby as though seeing things he hadn't before noticed. "You know, Summers", he said thoughtfully. "Eagle's Nest ought to have a fire company. If someone were to drop a match in here, this place would go up like a haystack". He started toward the stairway, then turned to add, "Tell her to come to Adams's room, that Adams is in trouble. Tell her to hurry". "Yes sir". His face pale, Summers headed for the street. ##

Curt's visit to the livery stable had been merely a precaution in case anyone should be watching. He paused only long enough to ascertain that Jess's buckskin was still missing and that his own gray was all right, then climbed through a back window and dropped to the ground outside. The fact that Jess's horse had not been returned to its stall could indicate that Diane's information had been wrong, but Curt didn't interpret it this way. A man like Jess would want to have a ready means of escape in case it was needed. Probably his horse would be close to where he was hiding. From the back of the barn it was a simple matter to reach Black's house without using the street. Curt

approached the place cautiously, and watched it several minutes from the protection of a grove of trees. There was a light in Black's front room, but drawn curtains prevented any view of the interior. Curt circled the house and located a barn out back. He could hear horses moving around inside, and nothing else. There was no lock on the door, only an iron hook which he unfastened. He opened the door and went in, pulling it shut behind him. Again he stood in the darkness listening, but there was only the scrape of a shod hoof on a plank floor. He moved ahead carefully, his left hand in front of him, and came to a wooden partition. Horse smell was very strong, and he could hear the crunch of grain being ground between strong jaws. He found a match in his pocket and lit it. There were two horses in the barn, a sway-backed dun and Jess Crouch's buckskin. Curt snuffed out the match. It was certain now that Jess was in the house, but also, presumably, was Stacey Black. Curt wanted to get Jess alone, without interference from anyone, even as spineless a person as the store owner. He studied the problem for a few seconds and thought of a means by which it might be solved. Reaching across the side of the stall, he slapped the buckskin on the rump. The startled animal let out a terrified squeal and thrashed around in the stall.

As Curt had hoped, the house door banged open. He slapped the buckskin again and it kicked wildly, its hoofs rattling the side of the stall. Curt moved over beside the door and waited. Presently he heard footsteps crossing the yard, and Jess's smothered curses. The door swung open, and Jess said sourly, "What the hell's the matter with <you?>" The horse continued to snort. Curt doubted that any animal belonging to Jess would find much reassurance in its owner's voice. Jess cursed again, and entered the barn. A match flared, and he reached above his head to light a lantern which hung from a wire loop. As he crossed to the side of the stall, Curt drew his gun and clicked back the hammer. "Before you try anything", he said. "Remember what happened to Gruller".

Jess caught his breath in surprise. He started to reach for his gun, but apparently thought better of it. "That's the stuff", Curt said. "Just hold it that way". He reached out to pull the door shut and fasten it with a sliding bolt. "You and I have a little talking to do, Jess. You won't be needing this". He moved up and lifted Jess's pistol out of its holster.

"Damn you, Adams"- Jess was beginning to recover from his initial shock. "We ain't got nothing to talk about. If I don't come back in the house, Breed's going to"- "Your trigger-happy brother isn't <in> the house. About now he's probably having supper. That long ride the four of you took must've given him a good appetite. Now turn around so I can see your face".

Jess turned. There was raw fury in his eyes, and the veins of his neck were swollen. "You're about as dumb as they come, Adams. I don't know what you're up to, but when Brenner"-

"You can forget about Brenner, too", Curt said. "It's Ben Arbuckle we're going to talk about". "Arbuckle"? Jess stiffened. "I don't know nothin' about him". "No? I suppose you don't know anything about a piece of two-by-four, either; one with blood all over it, Arbuckle's blood". Curt's fingers put a little more pressure on the trigger of his gun. "So help me, Crouch, I'd like to kill you where you stand, but, before I do, I'm going to hear you admit killing him. Now start talking. Who told you to do it? Was it Dutch Brenner"?

Curt was holding Jess's gun in his left hand. He drew back his arm to slash the gunbarrel across Jess's face, but didn't finish the motion. Pistol-whipping an unarmed man might come easy to someone like Jess, but Curt couldn't bring himself to do it. Apparently sensing this, and realizing that it gave him an advantage, Jess became bold. "Having all the guns makes you a big man, don't it, Adams? If we was both armed, you wouldn't talk so tough".

"No"? Curt reached out and dropped Jess's pistol back into the holster. He retreated a step and holstered his own.

"All right, Crouch; we're on even terms. Now draw"!

Sweat bubbled out on Jess's swarthy face. The fingers of his right hand twisted into a claw, but he didn't reach for the gun.

Curt, angry enough to be a little reckless, raised his hands shoulder high. "Does this make it any easier, coward"?

"I ain't drawin' against you", Jess said thickly. "I heard how you outdrew Chico. I ain't a gunslinger". "No. You're the kind of bastard who sneaks up on a man from behind and hits him with a club. I just wanted to hear you say so".

Jess stared at him without answering and let his hands fall to his sides. He had found Curt's weakness, or what to Jess was a weakness, and was smart enough to take advantage of it. Somewhere in the distance, a woman screamed. Curt was too involved in his own problems to pay much attention. He had to make Jess talk, and he had to do it before Stacey Black got curious and came to investigate. Once more he lifted Jess's gun from its holster, only this time he tossed it into the stall with the frightened buckskin. He dropped his own beside it. "We'll do it another way, then", he said harshly.

Jess's coarse features twisted in a surprised grin which was smashed out of shape by Curt's fist. With a roar of pain and fury Jess made his attack. Curt managed to duck beneath the man's flailing fist, and drove home a solid left to Jess's mid-section. It was like hitting a sack of salt. Pain shout up Curt's arm clear to the shoulder, but Jess seemed hardly aware that he had

been hit. He slammed into the wall, bounced back, and caught Curt with a roundhouse right which sent him spinning. An inch lower and it would have knocked him out. As it was, his vision blurred and for a moment he was unable to move. When his eyes began to focus, he saw Jess charging at him with a pitchfork. Curt twisted to one side, and the tines of the fork bit into the floor. Jess wasted a few seconds trying to yank them loose. It gave Curt time to stagger to his feet.

The tines broke off under Jess's twisting, and he swung the handle in an attempt to knock Curt's brains out. His aim was hurried; so the pitchfork whistled over Curt's head. By now Curt was seeing clearly again. He stepped inside Jess's guard and landed two blows to the big man's belly, putting everything he had behind them. They made Jess double over. When his head came down, Curt grabbed him by the hair and catapulted him head first into the wall. The building shook, setting the lantern to swaying, and the buckskin to pitching again. Even Black's old crowbait began to snort, and from the house Black yelled, "Jess! What's going on out there"? Jess didn't seem too sure himself. He lurched drunkenly to his feet, lowered his head, and took one step away from the wall. Curt caught him flush on the nose with a blow which started at the floor. Jess had had enough. Blood gushed from his nose, and he backed off as rapidly as he could, stumbling over his own feet in his frantic haste to get away from Curt's fists.

Curt was in almost as bad shape, but he wouldn't quit. He backed Jess into a corner, grabbed a handful of the man's shirtfront, and drew back his right fist. "Tell me about Arbuckle! You killed him, didn't you"? "It was Brenner's idea", Jess mumbled, dabbing at his nose. "He found out about you and Arbuckle talking. He wanted to show the town what happened to anyone who tried to start trouble". "You mean anyone who stood up for his rights", Curt said. He let go of the shirt, and Jess slumped to the floor. Turning his back, Curt crossed to the stall, reached over to untie the buckskin's halter rope, and waved his hand in the animal's face. The buckskin bolted out of the stall. Curt moved in and picked up his gun. He shook loose straw out of the action, and placed the gun in his holster. Leaving Jess's where it lay, he left the stall. "Get up, Crouch. We're going someplace".

Jess painfully got to his feet as someone rattled the door. "Who's in there"? Black called fearfully.

Curt opened the door, grabbed Black by the shoulder, and pulled him into the barn. "You're staying right here for a while. This dirty coward just admitted killing Arbuckle. I'm going to let him tell it to somebody else". He shoved Black toward the stall, and pointed his pistol at Jess. "Get out of here. You're coming along peacefully, or I'll put a bullet in your leg".

Jess stumbled through the door. Curt followed, reaching behind him

to shut the door and hook it. Black would have little trouble getting out, but it might delay him a few minutes. "Where're you takin' me"? Jess asked worriedly. "We're going to Marshal Woods's house. Maybe if the marshal hears this himself, it'll make a difference. Somebody in this town must still have some backbone".

Over his shoulder he could see Max's loose grin and the Burnside's glowering faces. "Honey", he whispered. "Soon as we send them on their way and make camp, let's you and me go for a walk down by the Snake- all by ourselves". "Sally", admonished her mother, "you've got all evening to visit with Dan. His wounds need dressing now". Mrs. Jackson's words recalled Dan to his lack of fitness for courting. What a spectacle he was, caked with dirt and sweat and blood, filthy as a pig and naked as an Indian, kissing the finest, the sweetest, the bravest, and absolutely the prettiest girl in this whole wonderful world. He released her reluctantly for her enthusiastic reunion with Old Hap. "Got a lot to tend to, but I'll get back quick as I can", he assured her.

Dan could hear Clayton Burnside and Eben Jackson summing up their final reckoning for rental on the oxen. Jackson was doing most of the talking. So long as Sally's pa was coming out best on the haggle, Dan didn't feel the need of putting in his two-bits' worth.

Soon as the Burnside's moved on, he'd lead Rex down by the river; there he could shave and scrub himself up for the evening. Damn it, he thought bitterly, picking up his shirt and staring at the fresh bullet hole in the sleeve. If I hadn't got Nate stopped when I did, my duds'd all be shot plumb to hell! He stooped, picked up his ruined hat, and pursed his lips thoughtfully. From the way the wound in his head was itching, Dan knew that it would heal. But his only hat was something else again. "Nate! Nate"! he shouted.

The Burnside's, now ready to roll, were purposefully deaf to his cry. "Nate"! he bellowed to the retreating back directly in front of him. "I ain't going to fight you no more". Nate turned his head, attempting to speak in a soothing voice.

"I know you ain't"! Dan affirmed, feeling ten feet tall. He moved in close, jerked the handsome, broad-brimmed beaver hat from Nate's head and clamped it on his own. "Here's a present for you", he said, shoving his bullet-riddled hat down over Nate's purpling forehead. "Me and you's trading hats so's you'll have something permanent to remember me by"! Sally left her choring to stand beside Dan. Slipping her hand in his, they silently watched the Burnside's make the bend in the road and disappear from sight. Much as they had to look forward to, they didn't begrudge a moment of the time they spent seeing them go.

#40.#

AT FIRST Matilda

could not believe her own eyes. She had spent too many hours looking ahead, hoping and longing to catch even a glimpse of Dan and finding nothing but emptiness. And now she could see him, looking uncommon handsome, standing there beside Sally Jackson and her folks in front of their trail-worn wagon. Seeing them waiting there at the foot of Emigrant Rock was so overwhelming that, for a good minute after they rounded the bend and started down the grade leading toward them, Matilda could not speak at all. Then, with a glory that almost wiped out the deep, downward sags in her careworn face, Matilda leaned over the wheel and shouted to Hez, who was stumbling along in the heat and the dust on the opposite side of the wagon "Pa! Pa! I can see Dan. And he's with the Jacksons"! "What about Burnside's"? Hez asked, who still believed they'd have them to lick. "They ain't even in sight"! she replied.

By then Hez could see for himself, and so could the others. Soon they were all shouting greetings, exchanging smiles, and rejoicing to think that they were all back together again. But even a reunion as joyous as this one did not make a break in the routines of the day. Nor could they stop and find out about all that had happened until they made circle, tended the cattle, tethered the horses, gathered fuel, carried water, and started their cooking fires. Then, and only then, with the Jacksons and Dan as their true guests of honor, did the Harrows take time to catch up on the news. No sooner did they hear of Dan's injury than both Gran and Matilda went into immediate action. The wound in his scalp was examined, pronounced healing, and well doctored with simples, before they dished up the victuals. From then on, in keeping with the traditions they had followed since childhood, the whole group settled down to relish their food. Even Sally, in spite of her gaiety and obvious welcome, followed the old taboo of "quitting the gab when wearing the nosebag". After their supper, the evening turned into a regular "Hoe-Down". Only, they carefully substituted old country folk dances for the Virginia Reels and square dances that were so popular among more worldly trains in the great westward migration. But with Bill O'Connor on the fiddle, and Gran Harrow exuberantly shouting "Glory Be" and "Hallelujah" above their united chant of the lilting old ballads, they played their quaint folk games with all the fervor and abandon of a real celebration. "Golly", Rod exclaimed to Harmony as he dutifully stood by her side among the ringed spectators, "don't that fiddle make you wish the Bible didn't say us Baptists can't dance"?

"Nor Methodists, neither", she replied. "Not that it matters to me, being this far along". Rod gave her a warm pat on the shoulder before he replied. "Come spring, you'll be

kicking up your heels and feeling coltish again too, gal". At these words of sympathy and understanding, Harmony said generously, "I don't mind setting here along with Gran while you go out and join in the games". Rod shifted his eager eyes from the milling group out in the circle long enough to reply, "I ain't much of a hand for Dare-Base and Farmer-in-the-Dell, but I'd sure like to get in on the handhold and wrestles". He looked down at his big hands and slowly flexed his long fingers. "Don't reckon there's nobody out there, 'cept maybe Dan, who can outgrip me, Harmony".

With Rod on his way and Matilda visiting with Mrs& Jackson while they searched out familiar names on the face of the cliff, Harmony settled on the edge of the grub box, to ease the pressure of her swollen body on her bone-weary legs, and worried about all that might have happened to Sally. And she was deeply thankful that she could see her now, out there in the midst of a gay, youthful circle, skipping and singing, "Farmer in the dell, Farmer in the dell, Heigh-ho the dairy-oh, the farmer in the dell". At the sight of Sally's happy face and carefree expression, Harmony's dark, brooding eyes quickly brightened with unshed tears. She was glad, completely and unselfishly glad, to see that things were working out the right way for both Sally and Dan. **h And she really tried to go a step further and say she hoped they'd be just as right as they now were for her and for Rod. But she couldn't, not yet. Not with the memory of her folks and the lost Conestoga still holding her close **h.

Out in the center of the circle the farmer, who was Dan, wasted no time when they came to the line, "The farmer choose his wife". With a swift swoop of his big arms, he grabbed Sally out of the circle surrounding him, and then kissed her soundly before setting her down so she could stand by his side while they jointly chose the rest of their "outfit". Soon the child, the dog, the cat **h and even the cheese, all joined them out there in the circle. By now Harmony could see that most of the adults in the train were winded and resting, or else siphoned off from the games by the challenging lure of the great cliff towering above them. No matter how many registry rocks they came to on this journey, each one exerted its own appeal. Even strange names seemed to make them feel closer to some kind of civilization when stumbled across out here in this wilderness. Already a few hardy folk from their own train were zealously chipping away at the register rocks, leaving their own records along with those made by the earlier trains. Soon she saw Rod and Hez moving over to join them.

No sooner were they through and the guards posted, than the whole camp turned in for a night of sound sleep. For Matilda, it was the first she had known in many a night. Even the knowledge that she was losing another boy, as a mother always does when a marriage is made, did not prevent her from having the first carefree, dreamless sleep that she had known since they dropped down the canyon and into Bear Valley, way, way back there when they were crossing those other mountains.

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Next morning, they moved on again. "My souls' a-gracious"! Gran Harrow exclaimed, watching their rippling muscles as Rod and Dan swung her up into the load. "A body would swear I floated right up here on a cloud"! Rod and Dan released their holds on the arms of her hickory rocker and exchanged embarrassed grins. "Shucks, Gran", they said almost in unison. "That wasn't nothing at all"! Leaning forward in her chair, Gran nearsightedly scrutinized Dan's face. "How's Sally like rubbin' agin that thar little ticklebrush ye're a-raising"?

"Quit ragging him, Gran", Rod protested. "I ain't ragging him"! Gran peered again at the week-old blond mustache shadowing Dan's upper lip. "But honest-to-Betsy, I've seed more hair than that on a piece o' bacon". The two tall brothers waited silently while their mother handed Gran her cold snack and water jug, placed the chamber pot beside her feet, and returned to her place at the front of the wagon with Alice. "Rheumatics worse, Pa"? Dan asked Hez, who had limped back from his team to hold the notched-stick chair braces in place while his boys swung up the tailgate and tied it tight at the ends. "My right leg's stiff as a board this morning", he replied. "But the sun'll fry it out'n me onct we git to rolling". The three men stepped out to the side to wait for Captain Clemens' signal.

Hez looked up at the high face of Emigrant Rock, official signboard for the Raft River turnoff, and gloated, "Seems funny that them Burnsidese never took time to leave their John-Henry up thar".

"Wonder what made them hurry so", Rod drawled, giving Dan a sly wink. Dan grinned, and changed the subject. "From now on, Sally and me and her folks aim to give you our turn when it comes up and fall in behind you and Rod's outfit". "Ain't no sense you eating our dust", Rod protested. "Sally and her ma want to trade off on account of Harmony being so far along", Dan explained. "Jackson recruited his critters, and him and me fixed up his wagon while we was waiting for you to catch up. He's got the tightest running gear in the train now. Besides, 'tain't no more'n right for me to follow with my black oxen, so's I can unhook and pull up fast if either of you get in a pinch". Captain Clemens' signal shot sent the men hurrying to their waiting teams. "Reckon ye're right, Dan", Hez called back over his shoulder. "I'll shore be needing ye both on the pull out o' the canyon". Rod looked apprehensively ahead at the narrowing, precipice-walled gorge. "We'll double teams zigzagging up the mountain, Harmony", he spoke reassuringly, concerned by the pinched look around her mouth. "Like enough we'll all be up on top by sundown". Out of the corner of his eye, he could see his father's wheels beginning to turn. Before Harmony had a chance to reply, Rod cracked his long whip over his thin oxen's backs **h.

While no larger than Dutch Springs, this mining supply town had the appearance of being far busier and more prosperous. Men crowded the streets and freight rigs and teams were moving about. Although they were forced to maintain a sharper watch, this activity enabled them to ride in and rack their broncs without any particular attention being paid them. "Gyp'll be holdin' forth in some bar if he's here at all", Cobb declared, glancing along the street as they stretched their legs. There were no less than six or seven saloons in Ganado, not counting the lower class dives, all vying for the trade of celebrating miners and teamsters. Pat only nodded. "Take one side of the street, and I'll take the other", he proposed. "If you spot Carmer give a yell before you move in". Cobb's assent was tight. "You do the same. It's all I ask, Stevens".

Separating, they took different sides of the main drag and systematically combed the bars. Russ visited two places without result and his blood pressure was down to zero. Suddenly it seemed to him insane that they might hope to locate Gyp Carmer so casually, even were he to prove the thief. He tramped out of the Miners Rest with his hopes plummeting, and headed doggedly for the Palace Saloon, the last place of any consequence on this side of the street. The Palace was an elaborate establishment, built practically on stilts in front, with long flights of wooden steps running up to the porch. Behind its ornate facade the notorious dive clung like a bird's nest to the rocky ribs of the canyon side. Russ ran up the steps quickly to the plank porch. The front windows of the place were long and narrow, reaching nearly to the floor and affording an unusually good view of the interior. Heading for the batwings, Cobb glanced perfunctorily through the nearest window, and suddenly dodged aside. Nerves tight as a bowstring, he paused to gather his wits. Against all expectation, Carmer was inside, clearly enjoying himself to the hilt and already so tipsy that it seemed unlikely he was bothering to note anything or anyone about him. Fierce anger surged through Russ. He fought down the impulse to rush in and collar the vicious puncher on the spot.

Reaching the porch rail beyond view of the bar windows, he feverishly scanned the busy street below. Stevens was nowhere in sight. Muffling an exclamation, Russ sprang to the nearest steps and ran down. As luck had it, he had not gone twenty feet in the street before Pat appeared. "What luck, Cobb"? he said swiftly.

Russ pointed upward. "He's there", he got out tersely, curbing his rising excitement. Hitching his cartridge belt around, Pat glanced upward briefly at the Palace and started that way with Cobb at his side. Climbing the steps steadily, they reached the top and headed for the door. Pat pushed through first. Forced behind him momentarily, Russ followed at once and halted two steps inside. His eyes widened. While five minutes ago the place had presented a scene of easy revelry, with Gyp Carmer a prominent figure, it was now as somnolent and dull as the day before payday. Carmer himself was nowhere

to be seen. A man knocked the roulette ball about idly in its track, and another dozed at one of the card tables. Two men murmured with their heads together at the end of the bar, while the sleek-headed bartender absently polished a glass. Looking the setup over, Stevens started coolly for the rear of the place. "Where yuh goin'?" It was the barkeep. Halting, Pat turned to survey him deliberately. He did not reply, going on toward the back. Less

assured than the tall, wide-shouldered man in the lead, Cobb followed alertly, a hand on his gun butt. The bartender measured this situation with heavy eyes and decided he wanted no part of it. He said no more. A hall opened in back of the bar, running toward an ell. Pat moved into it. Small rooms, probably for cards, opened off on either side. All the doors were open at this hour except one, and it was toward this that Stevens made his way with Russ close at his shoulder.

The door was locked. A single kick made it spring open, shuddering. Pat saw Gyp Carmer staggering forward, a half-filled bottle upraised as if to strike. Russ sprang through to bat it nimbly aside. With a bellow Carmer lunged at him. But he was more than half-drunk, and his faculties were dulled. Cobb unleashed a single powerful jab that sent Gyp reeling wildly and crashing down with a whining groan. He started to struggle up, heaving desperately. Russ gave him a brutal thrust that tumbled him over flat on his stomach. Kneeling, Cobb planted a sturdy knee in the small of his back, holding him pinned.

"Okay, Stevens. I've drawn his fangs", he snapped. "Go through his pockets, will you? If we have to we'll take him apart and see what he's made of"! Complying methodically, Pat pulled pocket after pocket inside out without finding a thing. Cobb watched this with hunted eyes, his desperate hope waning by the moment. Stevens was grunting over the last empty pocket when Russ abruptly rose and lunged toward Carmer's hat, which had tumbled half-a-dozen feet away when he first fell. Cobb got it. Straightening up, his eyes ablaze, he held out the battered Stetson. "Look at this"! Inside the crown, stuffed behind the stained sweatband, could be seen thin, crumpled wads of currency. Carmer's ingenious cache for his loot had been found.

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"By golly, Stevens! You were right", Russ exclaimed, tearing the loose bills out of Carmer's hat. "That is, if we can be sure this is Colcord's money"- Pat grunted. "Where else would he get it? Count what you've got there, Cobb. We can soon tell". Russ ran through the bills and named an amount it was highly unlikely any cowpuncher would come by honestly. Pat nodded. "It's within a hundred of what Crip had", he declared. "We know Penny spent some-

and Carmer must have dropped a few dollars getting that load on".

Handing the money over, Russ wiped his hands on his pants-legs as if ridding himself of something unclean. His glance at Gyp Carmer was disdainful. "Shall we get out of here"? Leaving the card room, they moved back through the Palace the way they had come. Glowering looks met them in the bar, but there was no attempt to halt them. Pausing in the outside door to glance behind him, Pat looked his unspoken warning and stepped out. He and Cobb clattered down the high steps to the street. Neither spoke till they reached their horses. Pat paused there, looking across at the young fellow. It'll be a pleasure for you to return this money to Colcord and tell him about it, Russ". He started to return it. To his faint surprise Russ held up his hand. "Not me", he ruled decidedly. I've had enough. It was you that tracked it down anyway, Stevens", he pursued strictly. "I'll shove along home".

"Whatever you say". Pat swung into the saddle, yet still he delayed, his brows puckered. "You owe it to Penny to give her a chance to explain that she was defending you, really", he observed mildly.

"Old Crip wasn't", retorted Cobb tartly. "He'll know when you tell him. But I want this to sink in awhile. Then maybe next time he won't be so quick on the trigger". "Pat had never pretended to give advice in such affairs. "You're the doctor", he returned with a smile. "But I still think Penny's an awful nice girl, Russ"- "You don't have to tell me", flashed Cobb. Giving the other a dark look, he hauled his bronc around and trotted down off the street. Pat let him go, following more leisurely. At the first restaurant he sensibly pulled up to go in for his dinner, and as a consequence did not see Cobb strike the open range at the mouth of the canyon and head straight across the swells for Antler. The truth was, the puncher was both bewildered and dismayed by his own mixed luck. "Penny's always glad to see me over there", he mused bleakly. Yet had he not visited the girl at Saw Buck he would never have been involved in this latest tangle.

Over and above that, however, was his growing suspicion of Chuck Stober's part in recent events. "Gyp Carmer couldn't have known about Colcord's money unless he was told- and who else would have told him"? he asked himself. "It's the second time War Ax hands made a play for that money. How much of an accident could that be"? Nearing home, he jerked to attention at the distant crack of a gun. In town no one paid much attention to an occasional shot; but on the range gunfire had a meaning. Hauling up, Russ listened carefully. Two minutes later it came again- a double explosion, followed by a third, sounding more distant. As near as Cobb could determine the shots came from the direction of the Antler ranch house. He tightened up in a twinkling. So far as he knew, only his father could be there. What did it mean? Clapping spurs to the bronc he set off at a sharp canter, with growing alarm.

His first glimpse of the ranch house across the brushy swells
told

him nothing. Still a quarter-mile away, the fresh clap of guns only served
to increase his speed. Setting a course straight for the house,
he was covering ground fast when an angry bee buzzed past close to his
face. When it was followed by a second, whining even closer,
Cobb

swerved sharply aside into a depression. He knew now what he was
up against. Whoever was out there hiding in the brushy cover was besieging
the Antler house and, having spotted his approach, was determined
to drive him off before he could get into the fight. Cursing
himself for having ridden out the last few days without a rifle in
his saddle boot, Russ drew his Colt and examined it briefly. If he
wondered whether the attackers would allow him to pull away unmolested,
he had his answer a moment later. "Over this way! He ain't
gone far"! a harsh cry floated to him across the brush.

A carbine cracked more loudly, and a slug clipped fragments from the
brush off at one side. The would-be assassin had his position figured
pretty close. Dismounting, Russ looked about hastily. Toward the
west this depression led toward a draw. Leading his pony, he hurried
that way, not remounting till he was well below the level of the surrounding
range. Swinging up then, and bending forward over the
horn, he urged his mount down the meandering draw. He had not covered
a hundred yards before a gun crashed from somewhere behind. He had
been sighted, and his attacker pumping shot after shot. A shot or two
went wild before Cobb felt something tug at his foot. A slug had torn
half of his stirrup-guard away. A second twitched his shirtsleeve,
and he felt a brief burn on his upper arm. Another snarled close overhead.

"Jumping Jerusalem! Let's get out of here"!

At the first shot Russ had hurled his mount to the left toward
the side of the winding draw. The long minute before he reached effective
cover seemed endless. Sweeping a look around, he saw that he
was safe for the moment. He heard cries from behind him, but he could
make out no words. He dashed madly for the next elbow turn in
the draw, and made it. Recklessly hurling the bronc sidewise into an
intersecting draw, he plunged forward with undiminished speed. Gradually
the wash climbed upward, forcing him toward open range. Yet he must
chance it. He clambered out of the dwindling wash, the loose dirt
flying behind him, and flashed a look about.

Early in November the clouds lifted enough to carry out the assigned
missions. And Sweeney Squadron put its first marks on the combat
record. Every plane that could fly was sent into the air.

Cricket took eight ships and went south across the Straits and along
the north coast of Mindanao to Cagayan. Anything the enemy flew
or floated was his target. Fleischman with eight was to patrol the Leyte
Gulf area, with his main task to get any <kamikaze> before they

got to the ships. Greg himself took two flights, with Todman leading the second, to patrol and look for targets of opportunities around Ormoc on the east coast of Leyte. Each plane carried two five-hundred pound bombs. A weapons carrier took Greg, Todman, Belton, Banjo Ferguson, and Walters and the others the two miles from the bivouac area to the strip. It was a rough long ride through the mud and pot holes. No one had much to say. The sky glowered down at them. There was a feeling that this mission would be canceled like all the others and that this muddy wet dark world of combat would go on forever.

The truck dropped them off at the various revetments spread through the jungle. Donovan snatched Greg's chute from him with a belligerent motion and almost ran to the plane with it. His face was dark as the sky above it as he stood on the wing and waited for his pilot. Greg climbed into the cockpit feeling as if he had never been in one before. But his hands and those of Donovan moved automatically adjusting and arranging in the check-out procedure. "I've got her as neat as I can", Donovan said, as he dropped the straps of the Seton harness over Greg's shoulders. "But this goddamn climate. It's for carabao not airplanes". "We'll make out. Don't you worry, chief", Greg replied, wondering if he himself believed it. "Yeah. See you", Donovan said as he jumped off the wing. The expression was his trade-mark, his open sesame to good luck, and his prayer that pilot and plane would always return. At the prearranged time, Greg started the engine and taxied out. From the time the chocks were pulled until the plane was out of sight, he knew Donovan would keep his back to the strip. He wondered where the superstition had originated that it was bad luck for a crew chief to watch his plane take off on a combat mission. Yet long before the scheduled time for return, Donovan would be watching for every speck in the sky. Greg rumbled down the rough metal taxi strip, and one by one the seven members of his flight fell in behind him. The dark brown bombs hanging under each wing looked large and powerful. The pilots' heads looked ridiculously small. The control tower gave him immediate take-off permission, and the clean roar of the engine that took him off the rough strip spoke well of the skill of Donovan.

Greg's mission was the last to leave, and as he circled the ships off Tacloban he saw the clouds were dropping down again. To the west, the dark green hills of Leyte were lost in the clouds about halfway up their slopes. Underneath him the sea was a dark and muddied gray. Water splashed against his windshield as he led the flight in and out of showers. The metal strip they had taken off from was coal black against the green jungle around it. He possessed the fighter pilot's horror of bad weather and instrument flying, and he wondered, if the ceiling did drop, whether he and the other flights would be able to find their way back in this unfamiliar territory. He shivered in the warm cockpit. The overcast was solid above him. As far as he could see there was no hole to climb through it. They would have to go west through the narrow river valley that separated Leyte from Samar and hope that it didn't close in before they returned. Greg

pushed the radio button on his throttle. "Todman, let's try to go under this stuff. Stay in close and we'll go up the valley".

"Roger, Sweeney", Todman called back, and pulled his four in and slightly above Greg. Greg took the formation wide around three ~A-26 attack bombers that were headed north over the Gulf. He dropped down to five hundred feet, swinging a little north of the city of Tacloban, and punched into the opening that showed against the mountain. The valley was only a few hundred yards wide with just about room enough for a properly performed hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. It was only a fifteen-minute flight, but before it was through Greg felt himself developing a case of claustrophobia. The ceiling stayed solid above them at about eight hundred feet, and at times the sheer cliffs seemed about to close in. If the other pilots were worried, they did not show it. The formation remained perfect. When the sea was visible ahead of them, the relief was as great as if the sun had come out. He spread the flight out and led them across a point of land and then down the coast. Although they drew light ground fire they saw no signs of activity. Once Todman thought he had spotted a tank and went down to investigate while Greg covered him. "Somebody beat us to it"! Todman said over the radio as he came back up in formation. Visibility continued to be limited, and Greg was never able to get above a thousand feet. It was frustrating. His earphones were constantly full of the sounds of enemy contacts made by other flights. He thought once that he identified the somewhat hysterical voice of Fleischman claiming a kill. But Greg's area remained as placid as a Florida dawn. Finally, as time began to run out, he headed into Ormoc and glide-bombed a group of houses that Intelligence had thought might contain Japanese supplies. The low clouds made bombing difficult. There was not enough room to make the usual vertical bomb run. The accuracy was deplorable. One of Greg's bombs hung up, and he was miles from the target before he could get rid of it. Only one of the flight scored a direct hit and the rest blew up jungle. With their load of bombs gone, the planes moved swiftly and easily. Greg went up tight against the ceiling and led them back to their pass to home. Mercifully, it was still open. Like a man making a deep dive, Greg took full breath and plunged back into the valley. He was about to make a gas check on his flight when Todman's voice broke in: "Sweeneys! Three bogies. Twelve o'clock level". Greg's eyes flicked up from his instrument panel. He saw them, specks against the gray, but closing fast. They were headed straight for each other on a collision course. Friend or enemy? The same old question. And only a few seconds to answer it. "Zeros"! Todman said excitedly, and hopefully.

And then he thought Todman might be right. His mind flicked through the mental pictures he had from the hours of Aircraft Identification. He narrowed the shape down to two: either a Zero or a U&S& Navy type aircraft. If it were the enemy, tactically his position was correct. Japanese aircraft were strong on maneuverability,

American on speed and firepower. His present maximum altitude, up against the overcast, gave him the opportunity to exploit his advantages. But it also made him conspicuous to the enemy, if it was the enemy, and he hadn't been spotted already. But the closing aircraft showed no sign of deviating from their original course. In seconds, Greg made his decision. He pushed the radio button. "Sweeney Blue, hit the deck. Lots of throttle. Todman, you take the one on the left. I'll take the middle. Belton, the one on the right. If **h < if> they're Japs. Let's make sure first". Greg had the stick forward and the throttle up before he heard the two "Rogers". The planes, light with most of the gas burned out, responded beautifully. Greg's airspeed indicator was over 350 when he leveled off just above the trees. The opposing aircraft continued to come on. They appeared to be the enemy. Greg wished the Air Corps had continued to camouflage planes. There was, of course, no way for the other planes to get by them. It was a box. But they could turn and escape to the east. Greg pushed the radio button again. "Todman, drop your second element back. If any of us miss, they can pick up the pieces. Now let's make sure they're Japs".

Even as he said it, Greg knew they had found the enemy. The shapes were unmistakable and the Rising Suns were showing up, slightly brighter pinpoints in the gray gloom. Greg slapped his hand across the switches that turned on the guns and gun camera and gun sight. The circle with the dot in the center showed up yellow on the reflector glass in front of him. His hands shook. "Arm your guns, Sweeneys".

"They're Japs. They're Japs", came a high-pitched voice. "Greg to Sweeney Blue. One pass only. No turns. You'll bust your ass in this canyon. That's an order".

He moved the flights over against one wall. It gave them all a chance to make a high-speed climbing turn attack and a break-away that would not take them into the overcast or force a tight-turn recovery. If the turn was too tight, a barrel roll would bring them out. A hell of an altitude for a barrel roll, but it could be done.

Greg slammed his throttle to the fire wall and rammed up the ~RPM, and the engine responded as if it had been waiting. The clearly identifiable enemy continued on as if no one else were around. "They haven't seen us", Greg yelled to himself over the engine noise. "They haven't seen us". He hit the radio button. "Now, Sweeneys, now. Let's take 'em home". He hauled back on the stick and felt his cheeks sag. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched his wingman move out a bit and shoot up with him. Perfect, he thought.

With the rapid rate of closure, the approach from below, the side, and ahead, there would be only a moment when damage could be done. Just like shooting at a duck while performing a half-gainer from a diving board. He tightened his turn. His nose up. It was going to be dangerous. Eight aircraft in this small box. Please,

dear God, make my pilots good, he prayed. He took a lead on the enemy, using a distance of five of the radii in his circular sight and then added another. The enemy did not veer. It did not seem possible that they hadn't been spotted. Blind fools. Now!

Greg's fingers closed on the stick trigger. The plane rumbled and slowed. Six red lines etched their way into the gray and vanished. As if drawn by a wire the enemy flew into them. Greg tightened his turn until the plane shuddered. Luck was with him. His burst held for a second on the engine section of the plane. The Jap's propeller flew off in pieces. A large piece of engine cowling vanished. It was all Greg had time to see. His maneuvering for the shot had placed him near the overcast, almost inverted and heading up into the clouds. His speed was dropping rapidly. If he spun out now, he would join his opponent on the ground. Wingman, stay clear, he prayed. He pushed stick and rudder and entered the overcast on his back. He fought the panic of vertigo. He had no idea which was up and which was down. He held the controls where they had been. Sweat popped out over him and he felt the slick between his palm and the stick grip. His air speed dropped until he thought he would spin out.

Over the rattling of fenders, humming of tires and chattering of gears there was a charming melody of whispers and tiny giggles. Cool air moving slowly through the open or smashed-out side windows hinted of blooming roadside vegetation, and occasionally a faint fragrance of perfume swirled from the back seat. "Moriarty", my driver suddenly exclaimed with something so definite, so final in his tone

I once more repeated the absurdity, mustering all my latent powers of hypocrisy to sound convinced. We were coming to an intersection, turning right, chuffing to a stop. Forced to realize that this was the end of a very short line I scanned a road marker and discovered what the end of a slightly longer line would be for the old Mexican: Moriarty, New Mexico. "Gracias. Adios", I said, exhausting my Spanish vocabulary on my host and exchanging one of a scarcely-tapped store of smiles with my host's daughters. I waved with discretion and moderation to the vague golden faces fading through rising dust and the distortions of the back window glass. Then I saw the father's head slightly turn; gauche rainbow shapes replaced the poignant ovals of gold. ##

Autos whizzed past. White-shirted and conservatively-cravated drivers stared conspicuously toward the eastern horizon and past my supplicating and accusing gaze.

Suddenly a treble auto horn tootley-toot-tootled, and, thumbing hopefully, I saw emergent in windshield flash: red lips, streaming silk of blonde hair and- ah, trembling confusion of hope, apprehension, despair- the leering face of old Herry. "Mor-ee-air-teeeee", he shrieked, his white teeth grossly counterpointing those of the glittering blonde. Over the rapidly-diminishing outline of

a jump seat piled high with luggage Herry's black brushcut was just discernible, near, or enviably near that spot where- hidden- more delicately-textured, most beautifully tinted hair must still be streaming back in cool, oh cool wind sweetly perfumed with sagebrush and yucca flowers and engine fumes. Damn his luck. I would have foregone my romantic chances rather than leave a friend sweltering and dusty and- Well, at least I wouldn't have shouted back a taunt.

Still nursing anger I listlessly thumbed a car that was slowly approaching, its pre-war chrome nearly blinding me. It was stopping.

Just as I straightened up with my duffel bag, I heard: "Sahjunt Yoorick, meet Mrs& Major J& A& Roebuck". The voice

was that of Johnson, tail gunner off another crew. Squeezing a look between Johnson's fat jowls and the car frame a handsome and still darkhaired lady inquired "Y'all drahe"? I nodded. "Onleh one thiihng", Mrs& Roebuck continued. "Ahm goin nawth t'jawn mah husbun in Sante Fe, an y'all maht prefuh the suhthuhn rewt. But Corporal Johnson has alreadeh said it didn make no diffrunce t'hi-im". I said that it didn't make any difference to me either, as far as I knew. How far I knew will shortly become apparent. Let me pass over the trip to Sante Fe with something of the same speed which made Mrs& Roebuck "wonduh if the wahtahm speed limit" (35 m&p&h&) "is still in ee-faket". I let up on the accelerator, only to gradually reach again the 60 m&p&h& which would, I hoped, overhaul Herry and the blonde, and as there were cars whose drivers apparently had something more important to catch than had I, Mrs& Major Roebuck settled down to practicing on Corporal Johnson the kittenish wiles she would need when making her duty call on Colonel and Mrs& Somebody in Sante Fe. When Johnson ejaculated "Howsabout my buying us all a nice cold Co-cola, Ma'am"? Mrs& Roebuck smilingly declined and began suddenly to go on about her son, who was "onleh a little younguh than you bawhs". Johnson never would have believed she had a son that age. Mrs& Roebuck thought Johnson was a "sweet bawh t'lah lahk thet", but her Herman was getting to be a man, there was no getting around it. "Just befoh he left foh his academeh we wuh hevin dack-rihs on the vuhranduh, Major Roebuck an Ah, an Huhmun says 'May Ah hev one <too>'? just as p'lite an- an cohnfidunt, an Ah says 'Uh coahse you cain't', but he says 'Whah nawt, you ah hevin one'? an Ah coudn ansuh him an so Ah said 'Aw right, Ah gay-ess, an his fathuh didn uttuh one wohd an aftuh Huhmun was gone, the majuh laughed an tole me thet he an the bawh had been hevin an occasional drink t'gethuh f'ovuh a yeah, onleh an occasional one, but just the same it was behahn mah back, an Ah doan think <thet's> nahce at all, d'<you>'?"

"No, I don't", Johnson said. "I'm a good Baptist, and drinking **h" ##

Mrs& Roebuck very kindly let me drive through Sante Fe to a road which would, she said, lead us to Taos and then Raton and "eventshahleh" out of New Mexico. How lightly her "eventshah-leh" passed into the crannies where I was storing dialect material for some vaguely dreamed opus, and how the word would echo. And re-echo. Hardly had Mrs& Roebuck driven off when a rusty pick-up truck, father or grandfather of Senor "Moriarty's" Ford sedan, came screeching to a dust-swirling stop, and a brown face appeared, its nose threatened by shards of what had once been the side window. "Get in, buddies. Get in". The straight, black hair flopped in a vigorous nod, the slender nose plunged toward glass teeth and drew safely back. Johnson unwired the right hand door, whose window was, like the left one, merely loosely-taped fragments of glass, and Johnson wadded himself into a narrow seat made still more narrow by three cases of beer. "In back, buddy", the driver said to me. Quickly but carefully lowering my duffel bag over the low side-rack, I stepped on the running board; it flopped down, sprang back up and gouged my shin. The truck was hurtling forward. I seized the rack and made a western-style flying-mount just in time, one of my knees mercifully landing on my duffel bag- and merely wrecking my camera, I was to discover later- my other knee landing on the slivery truck floor boards and- but this is no medical report. I was again in motion and at a speed which belied the truck's similarity to Senor ~X's Ford turtle. Maybe I would beat old Herry to Siberia after all. Whatever satisfaction that might offer. Something pulled my leg. I drew back, drawing back my foot for a kick. But it was only Johnson reaching around the wire chicken fencing, which half covered the truck cab's glassless rear window. The way his red rubber lips were stretched across his pearly little teeth I thought he was only having a little joke, but, no, he wanted me to bend down from the roar of wind so he could roar something into my ear. "Wanna beer"?

"Hell, yes", I roared back between dusty lips. <Did> I want a beer? Did an anteater want ants? "Bueno, amigo. Gracias", I hollered, my first long swallow filling me with confidence and immediately doubling the size of my Spanish vocabulary.

At once my ears were drowned by a flow of what I took to be Spanish, but- the driver's white teeth flashing at me, the road wildly veering beyond his glistening hair, beyond his gesticulating bottle- it could have been the purest Oxford English I was half hearing; I wouldn't have known the difference. Johnson was trying to grab the wheel, though the swerve of the truck was throwing him away from it. White teeth suddenly vanishing, the driver slammed the side of his bottle against Johnson's ear. We were off the road, gleaming barbed wire pulling taut. I ducked just as the first strand broke somewhere down the line and came whipping over the sideboards. We were in a field, in a tight, screeching turn. Prairie dogs were popping up and popping down. When I fell on my back, I saw a vulture hovering.

Just as I got to my knees, there was again the sound of the fence stretching, and I had time only to start taking my kneeling posture seriously. This time no wire came whipping into the truck.

We were back on the road. I regained my squatting position behind the truck cab's rear window. Johnson's left hand was pressed against the side of his head, red cheeks whitening beneath his fingers.

"Tee-wah", the driver cackled, his black eyes glittering behind dull silver chicken fencing. "That was Tee-wah I was talking. You thought I was a Mexican, didn't you, buddy"?

I nodded. "Hell, that's all right, buddy", the Indian (I now guessed) said. "Drink your beer". Miraculously, the bottle was still in my hand, foam still geysering over my (luckily) waterproof watch. No sooner had I started drinking than the driver started zigzagging the truck. The beer foamed furiously. I drank furiously. A long time. Emptied the bottle. Teeth again flashing back at me, the driver released a deluge of Spanish in which "amigo" appeared every so often like an island in the stormy waves of surrounding sound. I bobbed my head each time it appeared. Suddenly the Spanish became an English in which only one word emerged with clarity and precision, "son of a bitch", sometimes hyphenated by vicious jabs of a beer bottle into Johnson's quivering ribs.

A big car was approaching, its chrome teeth grinning. Beyond it the gray road stretched a long, long way. The car was just about to us, its driver's fat, solemn face intent on the road ahead, on business, on a family in Sante Fe- on anything but an old pick-up truck in which two human beings desperately needed rescue. I tossed the bottle. High, so it would only bounce harmlessly but loudly off the car's steel roof. Too high. On unoccupied roadway the bottle shattered into a small amber flash. "Aye-yah-ah-ah"!

The Indian was again raising his bottle, but to my astonished relief- probably only a fraction of Johnson's- the bottle this time went to the Indian's lips. Another car was coming, a tiny, dark shape on a far hill. I started looking on the splintery truck bed for a piece of board, a dirt clod- anything I could throw and with better aim than I had thrown the beer bottle. We were slowing. In the ditch sand was white and soft-looking, only an occasional pebble discernible, faintly gleaming. But Johnson couldn't quickly unwire the truck door, and if I escaped, he might suffer. The car was approaching fast. On the truck bed there was nothing smaller than a piece of rusty machinery; with more time I could have loosened a small burr or cotter pin- Suddenly and not a second too soon I thought of the coins in my pocket. There was no time to pick out a penny; I got a coin between my thumb and forefinger, leaned my elbows in a very natural and casual manner on top of the truck cab and flipped my little missile. There was a blur just under

my focus of vision, a crash; the car's far windshield panel turned into a silver web with a dark hole in the center. I heard the screech of brakes behind me, an insane burst of laughter beneath me. Looking back I saw a gray-haired man getting out of his halted car and trying to read our license number. "S-s-sahjunt". Johnson's fat hand, another bottle were protruding from the truck cab, and that self-proclaimed Baptist teetotaler, had a bottle at his own lips. Two cars came over a crest, their chrome and glass flashing. The Indian's arm whipped sidewise- there was a flash of amber and froth, the crash of the bottle shattering against the side of the first car. Brakes shrieked behind us. I saw Johnson's bottle snatched from his hand, saw it go in a swirl of foam just behind the second car. This time there was no sound of brakes but the shrieking of women. I looked back at pale ovals framed in the elongated oval of the car's rear window. "Drink, you son of a bitch"! I quickly turned around and began to drink. But the Indian was jabbing another bottle toward Johnson.

I guided her to the divan, turned off the ~TV, faced her. She sat quietly, staring at me from the wide eyes. And what eyes they were. Big and dark, a melting, golden brown. Eyes like hot honey, eyes that sizzled. Plus flawless skin, smooth brow and cheeks, lips that looked as if you could get a shock from them. It was a disturbingly familiar face, too, but I couldn't remember where we had met.

I said, "Do we know each other, Miss"? "No, I remembered reading about you in the papers and that you lived here, and when it happened all I could think of was"- This time she stopped the rush of words herself. "I'm sorry. Shall I go on"? She smiled. It was her first smile. But worth waiting for. "Sure". I said. "But one word at a time, O&K&"? She was still hugging the stained coat around her, so I said, "Relax, let me take your things. Would you like a drink, or coffee"? "No, thanks". She stood up, pulled the coat from her shoulders and started to slide it off, then let out a high-pitched scream and I let out a low-pitched, wobbling sound like a muffler blowing out. She was wearing nothing beneath the coat. She jerked the coat back on and squeezed it around her again, but not soon enough. There had been a good second or two during which my muffler had been blowing out, and now I was certain I'd seen her somewhere before. ##

"I forgot"! she yelped. "Oh, do forgive me. I'm sorry"! "I forgive"- "That's what started all the trouble in the first place. Oh, dear, I'm all unstrung". "You and me both, dear. Haven't we **h haven't I seen you **h. I mean, surely we've"- "You may have seen me on ~TV", she said. "I've done several filmed commercials for"- Then it hit me. "ZING"! I cried. "Why, yes. And you recognized me"? "Yes, indeed. In fact, I was watching

you on that little seventeen-inch screen when you rang my bell. Man, you rang- it was in color, too, Miss, and **h Miss? What's your name, anyway? Ah, you were splendid". I sat by her on the divan. "Splendid. In a waterfall **h and all that". "That's the last one we did. That was a fun one". "I'll bet. It was fun for me, all right. I don't mean to pry, but do they hide the swimsuit with the bubbles? I mean: Is advertising honest? "It depends on who does it. I never wear anything at all. It wouldn't- wouldn't seem fair, somehow". "I couldn't agree with you more". "I really do have something important to tell you, Mr& Scott. About the murder".

"Murder? Oh, yeah", I said. "Tell me about the murder".

She told me. ZING was the creation of two men, Louis Thor and Bill Blake, partners in ZING!, Inc&. They'd peddled the soap virtually alone, and without much success, until about a year ago, when- with the addition of "~SX-21" to their secret formula and the inauguration of a high-powered advertising campaign- sales had soared practically into orbit. Their product had been endorsed by <Good Housekeeping,> the A&M&A&, and the <Veterinary Journal>, among other repositories of higher wisdom, and before much longer if you didn't have a cake of their soap in the john, even your best friends would think you didn't bathe.

My lovely caller- Joyce Holland was her name- had previously done three filmed commercials for ZING, and this evening, the fourth, a super production, had been filmed at the home of Louis Thor. The water in Thor's big swimming pool had been covered with a blanket of thick, foamy soapsuds- fashioned, of course, from ZING- Joyce had dived from the board into the pool, then swirled and cavorted in her luxurious "bath" while cameras rolled. The finished- and drastically cut- product would begin with a hazy longshot of Joyce entering the suds, then bursting above the pool's surface clad in layers of lavender lather, and I had a hunch this item was going to sell tons and tons of soap; even to clean men and boys. Joyce went on, "When we'd finished, Lou- Mr& Thor- asked me to stay a little longer. He wanted a few stills for magazine ads, he said. Everybody left and I stayed in the pool, then Lou came back alone and leaped into the pool too. And he didn't have any clothes on". "He didn't"! "Yes, he didn't. Did, I mean". She paused. "<Did> leap into the pool, and <didn't> have anything on. Anyway, it was evident what he had in mind".

"You got away, didn't you"? "Yes. He caught up with me once and grabbed me, but I was all covered with ZING- it's very slippery, you know". "I didn't know. I wouldn't have the stuff in the house. But I'm pleased to hear"- "So I just scooted out of his clutches. I swam like mad, got out of the pool, grabbed my robe, and ran to the car. The keys were still in it, and I was miles away before I remembered

that my clothes and purse and everything were still in the little cabana where I'd changed". She'd driven around for a while, Joyce said, then, thinking Louis Thor would have calmed down by that time, she'd gone back to his home on Bryn Mawr Drive, parked in front, and walked toward the pool. While several yards from it, still concealed by the shrubbery, she'd seen two men on her left at the pool's edge. She went on: "A man was holding onto Lou, holding him up. Maybe Lou was only unconscious, but right then I thought he must be dead. The man shoved him into the water, then ran past the cabana. There's a walk there that goes out to Quebec Drive. I was so scared **h well, I just ran to my car and came here".

"You know who the other man was"? "No, I never did see his face. I didn't get a good look at him at all, his back was to me, and I was so scared **h It was just somebody in a man's suit. But I'm sure the other one was Lou". What Joyce wanted me to do was go to Thor's house and "do whatever detectives do", and get her clothes- and handbag containing her identification. She realized I'd have to notify the police, but fervently hoped I could avoid mentioning her name. Her impact in the ZING commercials had led to her being considered for an excellent part in an upcoming ~TV series, <Underwater Western Eye,> a documentary-type show to be sponsored by Oatnut Grits. But if Joyce got involved in murder or salacious scandal, the role would probably go to the sponsor's wife, Mrs& Oatnut Grits. Or at least not to Joyce. "And I so want the part", she said. "The commercials have just been for money, there hasn't been any real incentive for me to do them, but in <Underwater Western Eye> I'd have a chance to <act>. I could show what I can <do>". ##

As far as I was concerned, she had already and had dandily shown what she could do. But I promised Joyce I would mention her name, if at all, only as a last resort. Seeming much relieved, she smiled one of those worth-waiting-for smiles, and I smiled all the way into the bedroom. There I got my Colt Special and shoulder harness, slipped my coat on, and went back into the front room. Joyce squirmed a little on the divan. "I'm starting to itch", she said.

"Itch"? "Yes, I'm still all covered with that soap. I was loaded with suds when I ran away, and I haven't had a chance to wash it off. Mmmm, it sure itches". "You might as well wait here while I'm gone, so you can use my shower if you'd like". "Oh, I'd love to". I showed her the shower and tub, and she said, smiling, "If you really don't mind, I think I'll get clean in the shower, then soak for a few minutes in your tub. That always relaxes me. Doesn't it you"? "Only when I do it". I shook my head. One of my virtues or vices is a sort of three-dimensional imagination complete with sound effects and glorious living color. "Soak **h as long as you want, Joyce. It'll probably be at least an hour or two before I can check back with you. So you'll have everything all to yourself, doggone **h"

I looked at my watch. Ten after nine. Time to go, I supposed.
"Well, goodbye", I said. "Goodbye. You'd better hurry".

"Oh, you can count on that". She smiled slightly.
Softly. Warmly. "Don't hurry <too> much. I'll be soaking
for **h at least half an hour". That was all she said.
But suddenly those hot-honey eyes seemed to have everything but swarms
of bees in them. However, when there's a job to be done, I'm
a monstrosity of grim determination, I like to think. I spun about
and clattered through the front room to the door. As I went out, I
could hear water pouring in the shower. Hot water. She wouldn't be
taking a cold shower. Hell, she couldn't. Bryn Mawr Drive
is only two or three miles from the Spartan, and it took me less than
five minutes to get there. But the scene was not the quiet, calm scene
I'd expected. Four cars were parked at the curb, and two of them
were police radio cars. Lights blazed in the big house and surrounding
grounds. I followed a shrubby-lined gravel path alongside the
house to the pool. Two uniformed officers, a couple of plain-clothesmen
I knew, and two other men stood on a gray cement area next to the
pool on my left. At the pool's far end was the little cabana Joyce
had mentioned, and on the water's surface floated scattered lavender
patches of limp-looking lather. A few yards beyond the group of men,
a man's nude body lay face down on a patch of thick green dichondra.

Lieutenant Rawlins, one of the plain-clothesmen, spotted
me and said, "Hi, Shell", and walked toward me. "How'd you
hear about this one"? I grinned, but ignored the question. He didn't
push it; Rawlins worked out of Central Homicide and we'd
been friends for years. He filled me in. A call to the police
had been placed from here a couple of minutes after nine p&m&, and the first police car had arrived two or three minutes after that-
10 minutes ago now. Present at the scene- in addition to the dead
man, who was indeed Louis Thor- had been Thor's partner Bill
Blake, and Antony Rose, an advertising agency executive who handled
the ZING account. Neither of them, I understood, had been present
at the filming session earlier. "What were they doing here"?
I asked Rawlins. "They were supposed to meet Thor
at nine p&m& for a conference concerning the ad campaign for their
soap, a new angle based on this ~SX-21 stuff". "Yeah,
I've heard more about ~SX-21 than space exploration lately.
What is the gunk"? "How would I know? It's a secret.
That was the new advertising angle- something about a Lloyd's
of London policy to insure the secrecy of the secret ingredient. Actually,
only two men know what the formula is, Blake and"- He
stopped and looked at Thor's body. I said, "O&K&,
so now only Blake knows. How's it strike you, foul or fair"?

"Can't say yet. Deputy coroner says it looks like he sucked
in a big pile of those thick suds and strangled on 'em. The ~PM
might show he drowned instead, but that's what the once-over-lightly

gives us. Accident, murder, suicide- take your pick".
"I'll pick murder. Anything else"? "According to Rose,
he arrived here a couple minutes before nine and spotted Thor in
the water, got a hooked pole from the pool-equipment locker and started
hauling him out.

Too many people think that the primary purpose of a higher education
is to help you make a living; this is not so, for education offers
all kinds of dividends, including how to pull the wool over a husband's
eyes while you are having an affair with his wife. If it were
not for an old professor who made me read the classics I would have
been stymied on what to do, and now I understand why they are classics;
those who wrote them knew people and what made people tick.

I worked for my Uncle (an Uncle by marriage so you will not think
this has a mild undercurrent of incest) who ran one of those antique
shops in New Orleans' Vieux Carre, the old French Quarter. The
arrangement I had with him was to work four hours a day. The rest
of the time I devoted to painting or to those other activities a young
and healthy man just out of college finds interesting. I had
a one-room studio which overlooked an ancient courtyard filled with
flowers and plants, blooming everlastingly in the southern sun. I had
come to New Orleans two years earlier after graduating college, partly
because I loved the city and partly because there was quite a noted
art colony there. When my Uncle offered me a part-time job which
would take care of my normal expenses and give me time to paint I accepted.

The arrangement turned out to be excellent. I loved the
city and I particularly loved the gaiety and spirit of Mardi Gras.
I had seen two of them and we would soon be in another city-wide,
joyous celebration with romance in the air; and, when you took a walk
you never knew what adventure or pair of sparkling eyes were waiting
around the next corner. The very faces of the people bore this expectation
of fun and pleasure. It was as if they could hardly wait to get
into their costumes, cover their faces with masks and go adventuring.

My Uncle and I were not too close socially because
of the difference in our ages. Sometimes I wondered vaguely what he
did about women for my Aunt, by blood, had died some years ago, but neither
of us said anything. One Monday morning I saw him approach the
store with a woman and introduce me to her as my new Aunt. They were
married over the week-end, though he was easily sixty and she could
not have been even thirty. She looked more like twenty-five or six.
It was really a May and December combination. My new Aunt
was perhaps three or four years older than I and it had been a long
time since I had seen as gorgeous a woman who oozed sex. There was
something about the contour of her face, her smile that was like New
Orleans sunshine, the way she held her head, the way she walked- there
was scarcely anything she did which did not fascinate me. Her legs
were the full, sexy kind, full bodied like a rare wine and just as
tantalizing to the appetite; the calf was magnificent, the ankle perfect.

You must forgive me if I seem to dwell too much on her physical aspects but I am an artist, accustomed to studying the physical body. The true artist is like one of those scientists who, from a single bone can reconstruct an animal's entire body. The artist looks at an ankle, a calf, a bosom and, in his mind's eye, the clothes drop away and he sees her as she really is. And that is the way I first saw her when my Uncle brought her into his antique store.

That she impressed me instantly was obvious; I was aware that when our eyes met we both quickly averted them. I thought I saw a faint surge of color rise to her neck and quickly suffuse her cheeks. True, she was my Aunt, married to an Uncle related to me only by marriage, but why she had married a man twice her age, and more, perhaps, I did not know or much care. She was standing with her back to the glass door. Her form was silhouetted and with the strong light I could see the outlines of her body, a body that an artist or anyone else would have admired. As it is in so many affairs of the heart, a man and a woman meet and something clicks. Something clicked in this instance, but I treated her circumspectly and I felt that she knew it, for we both kept our distance. When she appeared at the store to help out for a few hours even my looking at her was surreptitious lest my Uncle notice it. And then I became aware that she, too, glanced at me surreptitiously. I felt that her eyes were undressing me as if she were a painter and I a nude model. I dismissed these feelings as wishful thinking but I could not get it out of my head that we had a strong physical attraction for one another and we both feared to dwell on it because of our relationship. When our eyes met the air was filled with an unuttered message of "Me, too". You have probably experienced this. It is nothing you can put your fingers on but the air suddenly fills with a high charge of electricity. Why she married him I do not know. I myself was fond of him but what a young woman half his age saw in him was a mystery to me. He already had that slow pace that comes over the elderly, while she herself had all the signs of one who appreciates the joys of living. Perhaps, with my Uncle, she found a measure of economic security that she needed; or maybe she liked men old enough to be her father; some women with father fixations do. For several weeks we eyed one another almost like sparring partners, and then one day Uncle was slightly indisposed and stayed home; his bride opened the store. I was waiting in front of it when she showed up and told me of my Uncle's indisposition. Even as she was telling me about it I became aware of a give-away flush that suffused her neck and moved upwards to her cheeks, and subconsciously I realized that when she entered the store she did not switch on the lights. The cavernous depth, cluttered with antiques, echoed to her hard heels as she walked directly to the office in the rear and took the seat at his desk. She placed her palms, fingers outspread, on the desk in an odd gesture as if to say, "Now, what next"?

I was aware of a humid look in her eyes that told me the time was opportune. There was little likelihood of any customers

walking in at that hour. I was standing beside her, watching the outspread palms and wondering about the old horsehair sofa against the wall on which he sometimes napped. I bent and kissed the still pink neck and suddenly she jumped up, and her two arms encircled me in a bear-like crush. Her mouth, which had been so much in my thoughts, was warm and moist and tender. I heard her murmur, "We'd better lock the door". It did not take me long to slip the bolt securely and return to the rear and its couch. When we opened the door again for business and switched on the lights she said:

"He will not always be indisposed". "I know. I was thinking about that. How will we work it out"? "I don't know", she said. "You're the man. You figure it out. I've noticed the way you've been looking at me ever since we met".

"I guess we both felt it". I said. "I guess so", she said. "But now what"? Even as I said it I realized that an education can be invaluable. "I know what we can do", I said. "Tell him I made a pass at you". She raised a protesting hand with a startled air. "What are you trying to do? Get thrown out? If I even hint at it do you think it will matter that you are his nephew- and not even a blood nephew"?

"I don't want to be thrown out and I don't think I will. I think I have a way so we can carry on without his suspecting us". "By telling him you are making passes at me"? she said incredulously. "When I was in college", I grinned, "I remember a poem I had to read in my lit class. I don't even remember who wrote it but it was one of those 15th or 16th century poets. In those days poems often told a story in verse and those boys had some corks to tell; and now I think we can use the knowledge they passed on to us. Tomorrow Mardi Gras opens officially. A lot of people will roam the streets in costumes and masks, and having a ball. There will be romance and flirtation. If you tell him I made a pass at you he might think you misunderstood something I said or did, so instead of just telling him I made a pass, say I tried to date you and that you agreed so you could prove to him what a louse I really am. We made a rendezvous tomorrow evening at nine on some street near Lake Ponchartrain. And to prove what you tell him about me you suggest that he keep the date instead. You are both the same size. He could use your clothes for a costume and a heavy veil for a mask. When I show up he will know you are a good wife to have told him about it". "But you"- she began. "Don't worry about me. It will turn out all right". "I don't understand", she insisted. "Are you trying to cut your throat"?

"No", I chuckled, "I'm just beginning to collect dividends on my investment in education". As we expected, on the following day my Uncle was completely recovered and opened the store as usual at 10 in the morning. I felt that he looked at me coldly and appraisingly and seemed to be uncertain what his attitude towards

me should be, but he did not say one word which might indicate that he had been told of advances to his wife. I quit work at my usual hour as if this day was no different from other days. I heard subsequently that my Uncle and Aunt had dinner in a nearby restaurant in the French Quarter after which he went home to get into his costume to keep the date. Shortly before nine I drove my jalopy to the street facing the Lake and parked the car in shadows far enough away from the rendezvous corner but near enough to keep the corner in clear view. A few minutes later I saw my Uncle's car drive up and a woman's figure emerge and walk to the corner. I must say the figure was well made up. If it were not that I knew who it was I could have mistaken it for my Aunt so well did her clothes fit him. In one hand he gripped firmly a parasol though there had been no indication of rain. I suspected why he brought it along. In the half darkness I approached cautiously, making sure he did not see me. He was looking out on the dark waters of the Lake when I came upon him and without wasting words I smacked him hard across the face. "You cheap bitch"! I exclaimed. "You cheap, no good, two-timing bitch! You get a good, loyal husband- smack!- and you fall for a pass by his own nephew! You should- smack!- be ashamed of yourself. He had better write a postcard to Walter. He opened the myth book again and there (along the margin next to Robert Graves' imaginative interpretation of the creation of the Dactyls from Rhea's fingertips) were the names of four Munich bars and Meredith Wilder's address. The bars were marked as Walter had marked them in a small black book kept in a nearly secret drawer. The code, which had probably something to do with sex or some other interest, Nicolas was determined to find out and put to use. A card to Walter would get him an introduction to this Meredith, and that might be good for something. Nicolas called on his muse, a line came back: "<Squaresville, man, and all the> palazzos <are crummy> Palasts". That ought to draw a laugh, Nicolas reasoned, as he stored the line away on the wax tape that was his mind. And indeed, his postcard did draw from Walter a letter recommending his friend, the poet Nicolas Manas, to his friend Meredith Wilder. Five days later, on receiving it, Meredith sat drumming his dactyls on his writing table. Dammit! he inwardly cried. His hand was large and square and heavily tanned. The voice crying in him was the voice of guilt. His four weeks in Italy had turned into nearer three months. He had returned to the pension a week ago. Now, he was just in the late poems of Ho[^]lderlin and therefore had most of the nineteenth century before him- plus next semester's class preparation. He was determined to spend an industrious summer. Well, maybe Manas wouldn't call. Meredith's fingers slowed and stopped over a line before him: <Sie la[^]cheln, die Schwarzen Hexen>. The menace of Manas gradually faded as Meredith asked himself should he translate it, 'How the dark fates laughed'? or, more rhythmically, 'The swarthy witches are laughing'? And he missed the point that the swarthy witches might be laughing at him for hoping to escape Nicolas Manas. But Nicolas, too, was being interrupted, that morning. Not by the

11:00 sun which had spread a warmth around his spot of grass in the English Gardens and sent him off to sleep; but by a blond girl in a sweater and skirt who stood a few yards off and tenderly regarded him. Should she wake him? She didn't have the heart. Her heart, her maternal feeling, in fact her **h her being was too busy expressing itself, as quietly thrilled by this sight of her Nicolas curled asleep under a blanket, in a park like a scene from Poussin. She was just not able to break the spell. (Would she have been able to had she known that the blanket belonged to a young ballet dancer Nicolas had found his first night in one of Walter's marked bars? Nicolas: "Look, Nicolas doesn't go to bed with boys- no sex, see? So if all these beers was to get me in bed, man, you just spent a lot of money". Ballet dancer: Protests, tears, and "take what you want, Nicolas, I am a dancer, you are a poet, it is all beautiful". To this meek conjugation Nicolas had replied, "O&K& I can use this blanket. And when you get off this job tonight, well, you can gimme something to eat". And, as a matter of fact, Nicolas had slept in the park only part of one night, when he discovered that Munich's early mornings even in summer are laden with dew. He had always known how to find a bed, and on his own terms. He used the blanket for late morning naps when hosts of the night had gone off to jobs and proved reluctant to leave him in their small rooms with their few possessions. Mary Jane Lerner knew none of this.) Her Nicolas lay curled in the sun like a fawn, black hair falling over his eyes. She was telling herself that this might just be her reward at the end of a long meaningful search for truth. This was surely a reunion in art, it was all that poetry promised. That long night with Nicolas and marijuana in Venice had opened her eyes. His advice, his voice saying his poems, the fact that he had not so much as touched her- on the contrary, he had put his head back and she had stroked <his> hair- this was all new. Her eyes had opened, she had caught a glimpse of a new faith. The next day he was gone. Mary Jane might not be the most intelligent woman, but she was one of the most determined. Even so, it took her several days to force Walter to tell her Nicolas's whereabouts. Packing a small suitcase, informing her husband whom she found in Harry's Bar that she was taking a train to Germany to get away for a while, patting his arm, refusing a drink, getting on the train- all this had only taken her two hours. She had arrived this morning and come straight to the English Gardens. "Dear girl", Walter had finally said, "he writes me that he is sleeping in the English Gardens". "How like him"! Mary Jane had smilingly said. "His address", Walter added, "is that great foundling home, the American Express. And I will greatly appreciate it if you will not tell your husband **h". For the last half hour Mary Jane had criss-crossed half the length of the Gardens and, at last, come upon her knight. His presence there, asleep in the grass, confirmed all that Mary Jane believed it was in his power to teach her: freedom from the tedium of needs such as hotels, the meaning of nature, how to live, simply, with the angels. She set down her suitcase. Should she wake him? No. Smiling, she sat down on the suitcase and waited and watched. The sun grew hotter

as it approached the midday. Nicolas was dreaming he had his head pressed against the dashboard of a speeding car. He began sweating. In his dream he cried, "Slow down, for Chrissake"! He half woke and rolled over with his face in the cooler grass. His nose was tickled. He sneezed. He blew his nose expertly between his fingers. He spit. He half sat up and scratched at the hair on his forehead and then, more vigorously, between his legs. He belched, he stretched.

Mary Jane got up, quietly, and walked away. Twenty minutes later she was at the desk of the Gra^fin's pension, her tears dried, signing a hotel form and asking for a bath. Mary Jane belonged to a world acquainted with small attractive hotels and pensions in all the major and minor cities. She had retreated to this world. The Gra^fin, who was charmed by her, told her, "Your sister who was here two years ago has quite <dark> hair. Families are <very> interesting. Nevertheless, there is no bath. But a young American has a bath next to his room and I shall ask him if you might use it this once. And then we shall see **h". (The Gra^fin was partial to the word 'shall'.) Meredith was irritated when the Gra^fin knocked at his door and told him, "She is a great beauty! Shall we allow her not to have a bath? Actually, she is a sad beauty, I believe. You shall see her at dinner". Rather erotically he listened to the bath water running; when it stopped he began busily typing, sitting up in a virtuous way. Before dinner, he shaved for the second time that day. A thing he did not like doing, generally. Singing into the mirror and his interested eyes, he was pleased to note, when he stripped for his own bath, that he still had the best part of his Italian sun tan. He flexed his muscles for several minutes, got into the tub, and then grew self-conscious of splashing as he washed.

In the small gallery used as the guests' dining room, Meredith sat down at his place and, as always, began teasing the young waitress. He was asking had it been she who left the love note in his sheets (she also served as maid) when he saw the Gra^fin followed by a stately blond girl approaching his table. It would be literary license calculated to glamorize life to say that he, oh, dropped his napkin, so startled was he by Mary Jane's beauty. Yet he did drop his badinage with the ordinary country girl as much in deference to the Gra^fin as acknowledgement that here, indeed, was something special. Mary Jane had made very little effort. Above a dark green skirt she wore a pale green cashmere sweater with, as he soon perceived, no brassiere beneath. Her white blond hair was clean and brushed long straight down to her shoulders. Perhaps her eyes were larger and more of a summer blue for all they had seen and wept that day. She had touched her face, truly a noble and pure face, only with a lip salve which made her lips glisten but no redder than usual. The result was grace and modesty. As she was rather tired this evening, her simple "Thank you for the use of your bath"- when she sat down opposite him- spoken in a low voice, came across with coolnesses of intelligence and control. Meredith began falling in love. Soup: "Only

this

morning"; veal cutlets: "Oh, I couldn't possibly eat all this"!; wine: "Then you were typing poems this afternoon?"; fruit compote: "If you think I would understand it"; a smile. "What a beautiful room. Like **h <as if> it were built of books". Having opened the windows onto the terrace, lit the fire, translated the motto, Meredith grinned and took down a little triplet of books bound together in old calfskin. Opening these he brought out a schnapps bottle and small gold thimble-sized glasses hidden inside it. "I think the maids tipple in the afternoon".

"Those sweet girls? Oh **h you're joking. It tastes a little like poppyseed. What's its name? <Steinha^ger> **h" She whispered <Steinha^ger> to herself, several times, memorizing it. "Would you first read the poem aloud to me and then let me read it to myself"? Meredith's voice was always deep, with rough bass notes in it; in reading, on platforms, even in the large auditorium of the Y&M&H&A&, Poetry Center nights, his voice was intimate, thoughtful, and a trifle shy. His new poem, a love poem, told of a young husband leading his wife upstairs to the bedroom when the lights in the house have failed. The husband points the steps out with his flashlight: "<Its white stare filling her pale eyes To the blind brim with appetite, Bleaching her hands that grazed my thighs And sent us from the table in surprise To let the dishes soak all night,>" (Mary Jane asked herself if Meredith was blushing at this line, or was it the fire?) But he read on. In the bedroom before the husband and wife find their way to the bed, the lights go on: "<In dull domestic radiance I watch her staring face, still blind, Start wincing in obedience To dirty waters, counters, pots and pans, Waiting below stairs, in her mind>". Mary Jane took the page from him and began reading it, moving her lips with the words. "Oh, it's that myth, about Orpheus and **h What <is> her name? I can never pronounce it". She repeated "Eurydice". The third time rather urgently. But with her hand poem again. She raised her face and nodded, "It's sweet, and very sad". They discussed the way people never tell each other the things on their minds. They finished the small bottle of Steinha^ger>. She confessed she was unhappy, he asked was it her husband? She began to explain, "There was this poet, in Italy **h" He interrupted, "Please don't judge all poets". They smiled. At her door, two or three hours later, Mary Jane whispered, "Everyone is asleep". Kissing her he whispered, several times, "Eurydice". The third time rather urgently. But with her hand softly on his cheek for a last moment, she closed the door and he went back down the hall and into his bed excited, expectant, and finally faintly grinning with the feel of her hand against his mouth.

They were west of the Sabine, but only God knew where.

For three days, their stolid oxen had plodded up a blazing valley as flat and featureless as a dead sea. Molten glare singed their

eyelids an angry crimson; suffocating air sapped their strength and strained their nerves to snapping; dust choked their throats and lay like acid in their lungs. And the valley stretched endlessly out ahead, scorched and baked and writhing in its heat, until it vanished into the throbbing wall of fiery orange brown haze. Ben Prime extended his high-stepped stride until he could lay his goad across the noses of the oxen. "Hoa-whup"! he commanded from his raw throat, and felt the pain of movement in his cracked, black burned lips.

He removed his hat to let the trapped sweat cut rivulets through the dust film upon his gaunt face. He spat. The dust-thick saliva came from his mouth like balled cotton. He moved back to the wheel and stood there blowing, grasping the top of a spoke to still the trembling of his played-out limbs. The burning air dried his sweat-soaked clothes in salt-edged patches. He cleared his throat and wet his lips. As cheerfully as possible, he said, "Well, I guess we could all do with a little drink". He unlashed the dipper and drew water from a barrel. They could no longer afford the luxury of the canvas sweat bag that cooled it by evaporation. The water was warm and stale and had a brackish taste. But it was water. Thank the Lord, they still had water! He cleansed his mouth with a small quantity. He took a long but carefully controlled draught. He replenished the dipper and handed it to his young wife riding the hurricane deck. She took it grudgingly, her dark eyes baleful as they met his.

She drank and pushed back her gingham bonnet to wet a kerchief and wipe her face. She set the dipper on the edge of the deck, leaving it for him to stretch after it while she looked on scornfully. "What happens when there's no more water"? she asked smolderingly.

She was like charcoal, he thought- dark, opaque, explosive. Her thick hair was the color and texture of charcoal. Her temper sparked like charcoal when it first lights up. And all the time, she had the heat of hatred in her, like charcoal that is burning on its under side, but not visibly. A ripple ran through the muscles of his jaws, but he kept control upon his voice. "There must be some water under there". He tilted his homely face toward the dry bed of the river. "We can get it if we dig", he said patiently.

"And add fever to our troubles"? she scoffed. "Or do you want to see if I can stand fever, too"? "We can boil it", he said. Her chin sharpened. "We're lost and burning up already", she bit out tensely. "The tires are rattling on the wheels now. They'll roll off in another day. There was no valley like this on your map. You don't even know where we're headed".

"Hettie", he said as gently as he could, "we're still headed west. Somewhere, we'll hit a trail". "<Somewhere!>" she repeated. "Maybe in time to make a cross and dig our graves". His wide mouth compressed. In a way, he couldn't blame her. He had picked out this pathless trail, instead of

the common one, in a moment of romantic fancy, to give them privacy on their honeymoon. It had been a mistake, but anything would have been a mistake, as it turned out. It wasn't the roughness and crudity and discomfort of the trip that had frightened her. She had hated the whole idea before they started. Actually, she had hated him before she ever saw him. It had been five days too late before he learned that she'd gone through the wedding ceremony in a semitrance of laudanum, administered by her mother. The bitterness of their wedding night still ripped within him like an open wound. She had jumped away from his shy touch like a cat confronted by a sidewinder. He had left her inviolate, thinking familiarity would gentle her in time. But each mile westward, she had hated him the deeper. He stared at the dipper, turning it over and over in his wide, calloused hands. "I suppose", he muttered, "I can sell the outfit for enough to send you home to your folks, once we find a settlement".

"Don't try to be noble"! Her laugh was hard. "They wouldn't have sold me in the first place if there'd been food enough to go around". He winced. "Hettie, they didn't sell you", he said miserably. "They knew I was a good sharecrop farmer back in Carolina, but out West was a chance to build a real farm of our own. They thought it would be a chance for you to make a life out where nobody will be thought any better than the next except for just what's inside of them. Without money or property, what would you have had at Baton Rouge"? "I might have starved, but at least I wouldn't be fried to a crisp and soaked with dirt"!

He darkened under his heavy burn. His blue eyes sought the shimmering sea of haze ahead. To his puzzlement, there suddenly was no haze. The valley lay clear, and open to the eye, right up to the sharp-limbed line of gaunt, scoured hills that formed the horizon twenty miles ahead. ##

Then he noticed the clouds racing upon them- heavy, ominous, leaden clouds that formed even as they sliced over the crests of the surrounding hills. He had never seen clouds like them before, but he had the primitive feel of danger that gripped a man before a hurricane in Carolina. He hollered hoarsely, "Hang on"! and goaded the oxen as he yelled. He wanted to turn them, putting the wagon against the storm. Too late, he realized that in turning, he had wheeled them onto a patch of sandy ground, instead of atop a grade or ridge. He swung up over the wheel. "You had better get inside", he warned her. But she sat on in stubborn silence.

The clouds bulged downward and burst suddenly into a great black funnel. Frozen, they stared at it whirling down the valley, gouging and spitting out boulders and chunks of earth like a starving hound dog cracking marrowbones. The six-ton Conestoga began to whip and shake. Their world turned black. It was filled with dust

and wind and sound and violence. The heavens opened, pelting them with hail the size of walnuts. And then came the water- not rain, but solid sheets that sluiced down like water slopping from a bucket. Walls of water rushed down the slopes and filled the hollows like the crests of flash floods. Through the splash of the rising waters, they could hear the roar of the river as it raged through its canyon, gnashing big chunks out of the banks. The jetting, frothing surface of the river reached the level of the runoff. The dangerous current upon the prairie ceased, but the water stood and kept on rising. They cringed under sodden covers, listening to the waves slop against the bottom.

The cloudburst cut off abruptly. They were engulfed by the weird silence, broken only by the low, angry murmur of the river. Then the darkness thinned, and there was light again, and then bright sunlight. Beaten with fear and sound and wet and chill, they crawled to the hurricane deck and looked out haggardly at a world of water that reached clear to the surrounding hills. The water level was higher than their hubs. Only the heavy bones of the oxen kept them anchored.

There was no real sign of the river now, just a roiling, oily ribbon of liquid movement through muddy waters that reached everywhere. Clumps of brush rode down the ribbon. Now and then, the glistening side of a half-swamped object showed as it swept past.

The girl crawled out into the renewing warmth of the sunshine, hugging her shoulders and still trembling. Her face was pale but set and her dark eyes smoldered with blame for Ben. Out of compulsion to say something cheery, Ben Prime blurted, "Well, we were lucky to be on soft ground when the first floodheads hit. At least, the wheels dug in. The soaking will put life back in the wagon, too".

His wife didn't give a sign she'd heard. She was watching a tree ride wildly down that roiling current. Somebody was riding the tree. It raced closer and they could see a woman with white hair, sitting astride an upright branch. She did not call out. But as the tree passed, she lifted an arm in gesture of better luck and farewell. They watched the tree until it twisted sharply on a bend. It speared up into the air, then sinking back, the up-jutting branch turned slowly. The pale blob of the woman disappeared. "There's the one who's lucky"! the girl murmured harshly. Ben's eyes strained with the bitter hurt, his homely face slashed with gray and crimson. Then he took off his wet boots and dropped down into the water to talk with the beasts, needing their comfort more than they needed his. It was nearly sundown and he went to the back of the wagon, half-swimming his way, for he was not a tall man. He let down the tailgate and was knocked over by the sluice of water. He sputtered back to his feet and scrambled madly to pull his bags of seed grain forward. They were already swollen to bursting. Of all their worldly belongings, next to the oxen and his gun, the seed grain had been the most treasured. It was spoiled now for seed, and it would sour

and mold in three days if they failed to find a place and fuel to dry it. The oxen might as well enjoy it. He examined the water marks on the iron tires when the animals were finished. The waters lay muddy but placid, without a ripple of movement against the wheels; there was not a match-width of damp mark to show they were receding.

He doubted if a man could wade as far as the desolate, dry hills that rimmed the valley. A terrible, numbing sense of futility swept over him. He gripped the wheel hard to fight the despondency of defeat. Then he noticed that the dry wood of the wheels had swollen. The spokes were tight again, the iron tires gripped onto the wheels as if of one piece. Hope surged within him. He swung toward the front to give the news to Hettie, then stopped, barred from her by the vehemence of her blame and hate. Still, he felt better. A tight wagon meant so much. ##

He got a small fire started and put on bacon and coffee. He poured the water off the sourdough and off the flour, salvaging the chunky, watery messes for biscuits of a sort. Their jams and jellies had not suffered. He found a jar of preserved tomatoes and one of eggs that they had meant to save. Now he broke them open, hoping a good meal might lessen this depression crushing Hettie.

His long nose wiggled at the smells of frizzling bacon and heating java, but the fire was low, and he wanted to waste no time. He furlled the slashed sides of the canvas tarpaulins, leaving the ribs and wagon open. He looked thoughtfully at his wife's trunk, holding her meager treasures. He said hesitantly, "Hettie, I don't figure your things got wet too much. That's a good trunk. If you want to get them aired **h" She said without turning her head, "After that rain beating in atop the dust, there isn't a thing that won't be streaked". He drew a long breath and opened the trunk and hung out her clothes and spoilables upon the wagon ribs.

Sulphur, oil, and copra make the kind of tinder any firebug dreams of. I suppose a Lascar sailor had sneaked a cigarette in the hold and touched off the blaze. Now, roaring up in great oily clouds of smoke and flames, the fierce heat quickly drove us to the stern where we huddled like suffocating sheep, not knowing what to do **h. The lifeboats were stuck fast. We couldn't budge them. I heard a cry from a stoker as a pillar of flame leaped from a hatch and tongued the man's bare back. He sprinted to the rail and leaped overboard into the shark-infested waters. One especially bad detonation shook Lifeboat No& 3 which trembled violently in the davits. Brassnose yelled: "Come on, Sommers, Max **h <step on it, we got a chance now>. Heave on those ropes; the boat's come unstuck".

We pulled and swore and yanked and wept, scraping our hands until they bled profusely. The <Bonaventure> was quivering and lurching like an old spavined mare. Her stern was down and a sharp list helped

us to cut loose the lifeboat which dropped heavily into the water.

Brassnose, Max and I leaped into the sea and swam to the boat. "Let's get away fast", said Brassnose, shaking water from his mop of bleached hair. "That tub is going to explode all at once".

Then the <Bonaventure> seemed to disintegrate with a roar of live steam, geysers of sparks and flames, and a dense cloud of black-and-orange smoke. Dimly, we heard the voices of men in mortal agony but we couldn't go back into that inferno. Already our leaky lifeboat was filled with five inches of water. "Sommers, you bale while we row", Brassnose commanded. As best as I could determine, we were some 700 miles west of New Guinea, in the Bismark Archipelago. Three days previously, we had steamed past barren Rennell Island in the distance. Now we peered anxiously for any speck of land in the Pacific, for this interminable bailing would have to stop soon. There were gigantic blisters and rope burns on our hands; our muscles were hot wires of pain. Brassnose was strangely silent. The big man with the whitened hair murmured something: his words sounded as if they were in the Manu tongue, which I recognized, having studied the dialect in my Anthropology /6, class at the University of Chicago. He then said something which struck a chord in my memory. "God help us if we're near the island of Eromonga. We'd be in real trouble then. I'd rather keep bailing-or sink". I was puzzled by the remark, then I recalled the voice of mild Professor Howard Griggs three years ago in a university lecture on primitive societies. He had been speaking of this archipelago: "Even when the islands were under German mandate before World War /1,, Europeans gave Eromonga a wide berth. The place is inhabited by several hundred warlike women who are anachronisms of the Twentieth Century- stone age amazons who live in an all-female, matriarchal society which is self-sufficient".

I remembered, too, the jesting voice of a classmate, Bobby Pauson: "But how do they reproduce, Dr& Griggs? I'm sure that males have something to do with that process"! There had been classroom guffaws which quickly subsided as Professor Griggs said dryly: "I see your point, Pauson. Of course, males play a role there, but believe me when I say you wouldn't enjoy yourself one bit on Eromonga. Indeed, you wouldn't live long, for the females either drive the men they've seized from neighboring islands back to their boats after exploiting them for amatory purposes, or they destroy them by revolting but ingenious methods. In fact, one important aspect of their very religion is the annihilation of men". "I think I know what you mean, Brassnose", I said. "I know something about Eromonga. Let's hope we come to a safer place".

But we didn't. Three hours later, while we were bailing desperately, a dot of land came into view. Foster Lukuklu Frayne made a sign over his heart with his two linked thumbs: I recognized it as an ancient Manu gesture intended to propitiate the Devil. A

half-hour passed; we had drifted closer. In a voice so frightened as to seem not his own, the big bo'sun's mate quavered: "<Tchalo!> It <is> Eromonga- look hard, you can see with your naked eye the wooden scaffolding on the cliff". I squinted at the looming shoreline. There <was> a wooden tower or derrick there, something like a ski jump; it was perhaps 80 feet high and had been artfully constructed of logs. A fine example of engineering in a primitive society. "What is the scaffolding for, Brassnose"?

He made a sound of despair deep in his throat. It was embarrassing to see strapping, blonde Brassnose comport himself like a child who talks about bogeymen. "Aaa-ee! It is their <tultul>, the 'jumping platform' of death. It is the last of the three tests of manhood which the women impose, to discover if a male is worthy of survival there. Often, I heard my uncles and cousins speak of it when I was a small boy growing up in Rabaul. They had never seen a <tultul> but they had heard about it from <their> fathers".

Our lifeboat was filling rapidly and despite what I had heard of the inhabitants of Eromonga, I was glad to see a long and graceful outrigger manned by three bronzed girls glide out of a lagoon into the open sea and toward our craft. I expected Brassnose- as a man with a strain of Melanesian in his blood- to speak to them. But he had turned a sickly green and appeared tongue-tied or panicked.

So, I mustered my few words of the Manu dialect and said, "We greet you in peace. In <ngandlu>. My friends and I come from a ship which was destroyed by fire. We are thirsty and hungry; our sore and burned hands and arms need attention". The girl in the prow of the outrigger turned a smile like a beacon on me. I noted that her full breasts were bare and that she wore a garland of red pandanus fruit in her blue-black hair. She said, "My name is Songau and these girls are Ponkob and Piwen. You are welcome to Eromonga. My people await you on the shore. You shall have food, water and rest". Thirty minutes later, the outrigger grated on sand and other girls, waiting on shore, rushed forward to pull it up on the beach and make it fast with vine ropes to a large boulder. I saw a dozen or so other outriggers moored there. I looked. All my rosy visions of rest and even pleasure on this island vanished at the sight. There was a mound of bleached human bones and skulls at the base of the big wooden derrick. Some had been there for years; others still had whitened shreds of decayed flesh sticking to them.

There was one object which sickened yet fascinated me. This was also a corpse- a male, judging from the coral arm bands, the tribal scars still discernible on the maggoty face, the painted bone of the warrior caste which still pierced the septum of the rotting nose.

The body may have been two or three weeks' dead. I looked with revulsion at the legs. They were shattered. Many small bones protruded crazily from the shreds of flesh. The man must have leaped to

his death from the topmost rung of the <tultul>. As if divining my thoughts, the girl Songau smiled warmly and said in the casual tone an American woman might use in describing her rose garden:

"This is our <tultul>, a jumping platform, <maku>. Later, you shall know it better. Is it not well-made? Our old one blew down in a storm at the time of the <pokeneu> festival fifteen moons ago. It took thirty of our women almost six moons to build this one, which is higher and stronger than the old one. We are very proud of it". "You have every right to be", I replied gravely in the Manu dialect, but my attention was fixed on Brassnose, the biggest and strongest of us. He looked as if he was going to keel over. I felt a queasiness in my own stomach but it wouldn't do to show these girls that we were afraid. Not so soon, anyway. I clapped the big man with the bleached hair on his shoulder and said heartily, hoping it would make an impression on the women: "This one is the <maku> Frayne. He speaks your language too, for he is the grandson of a chieftain on Tau'i who made much magic and was strong and cunning. The <maku> Frayne has inherited this strength from his grandfather".

This was the worst thing I could have said. Brassnose turned a stricken face toward me and said brokenly, "Sommers, you meddling Yank, you're a fool! They despise males who brag of their strength; they destroy such men with their damned tests. You've ruined me, blast you"! At first, I thought he was out of his head, talking wildly like this. But a glance at Songau and the other women confirmed what Brassnose had blurted out. The women's faces had hardened after my statement. At a nod from Songau, four lithe and muscular girls darted to Frayne's side and seized him by the arms. The man was an ox and he put up a creditable struggle; but four Eromonga women are more than a match for the strongest male that ever lived. Besides, terror had sapped some of Frayne's vitality and will. My last impression as they led him off to a stockade was of his pale face. In the Manu tongue, "eromonga" means manhood- a quality which the women derisively toasted in weekly feasts at which great quantities of a brew like <kava> were imbibed. In the hut to which I was assigned- Max had his own quarters- my food was brought to me by a wrinkled crone with bare drooping breasts who seemed to enjoy conversing with me in rudimentary phrases.

Her name was L'Turu and she told me many things. For an anthropologist, loquacious old L'Turu was a mine of information. Though I had a great dread of the island and felt I would never leave it alive, I eagerly wrote down everything she told me about its women. (Her account was later confirmed by the Scobee-Frazier Expedition from the University of Manitoba in 1951.) From L'Turu, I heard that until about 1850 the people of this island- which was about the size of Guam or smaller- had been of both sexes, and that the normal family life of Melanesian tribes was observed here with minor variations. But in the middle of the last century an island woman named "Karipo" seized a spear in the heat of an

inter-tribal

battle and rallied the women after their men had fled. Miraculously, Karipo and her women had succeeded in driving a hundred invaders from the isle of Pamasu back to their war canoes, after considerable loss of life on both sides. Karipo was something of a politician as well as a militarist. She quickly exploited the exalted position she now occupied, by harassing the disorganized males and even putting many of them to death. Within a decade or less, few men were left and a feminist society had sprung up. "Karipo was great goddess, told our mothers that men were not necessary except to father children", the crone told me. "All men went away from here. Those who stayed had to pass tests. Few passed". She cackled with mirth, showing the stumps of betel-stained teeth. "Karipo's women then named this place 'Eromonga'- manhood- for just the strongest men could stay here. Come, I show you". The old woman arose stiffly and led me to a clearing where a small hut stood. In the shade of a palm tree in front of the squalid dwelling I saw four figures in a semi-circle on the ground.

"I guess he spent the morning getting himself all organized, then headed for home. Maybe to beat up on his squaw". Benson looked up and saw Ramey's long head tilt forward to rub his chin on the stiff edge of the overall bib. Ramey reached out with the tire iron and dislodged a chunk of mud that was caked on the spare tire rack.

"I'd like to know just which it is that those guys don't understand, the liquor or automobiles". Somehow the thought of a simple man bewildered by things no one had ever really helped him understand moved the driver. For a moment his hatred toward drunken or careless drivers softened. Maybe the Indian wasn't too much at fault, Ramey thought. Maybe he was only doing the best he knew how, like any of us. Anyway, he doesn't deserve to lie there in the sun and be stared at. "Ever see yourself spread out on the pavement, Benny"? he said to his partner. "You mean dream"?

"Not exactly. Just see it". Benson grinned and flipped a rock with his thumb like a marble. "Nope, just you, all the time- sometimes I think it's the only way I'll ever get a decent partner". Ramey smiled but he thought to himself, I always see me too. Never Benny. Whenever he saw someone lying in the dirt, Ramey wondered what the person had been thinking and he would try out thoughts in his own mind. Then he would realize they were really things that only he himself could think. With this realization, sometimes, he saw himself as he looked down. "You seen him yet"? Benson said, referring to the Indian. "He wasn't in the car", Ramey said. "You didn't go clear around", Benson said. "If you want to see something, he's back on the other side by the trunk of the car". "Too long a waiting line", Ramey answered, pretending to joke. A few minutes later the insurance man, a road checker, drove up in the gray coupe with license plates on it from a far-away state. It was a trick they used to try

and conceal their identity when they followed trucks to check their speed.

Sometimes they just parked at the side of the road and used radar on the trucks as they passed. All the drivers knew about the plates and they also knew about the big floppy straw hat with shredded edges, the kind natives in travel ads wear when they are out joyfully chopping cane. Horsely, an agent on the east end, wore the hat, trying to look like a tourist. It had always seemed strange to Ramey that to disguise himself as a tourist, an ex-truck driver like Horsely would merely pick something outlandish and put it on his head. The insurance man informed them that he had talked to Crumley who was all right and that he would watch the men's personal effects until they towed the rig back to town. He chatted with Ramey and Benson for a minute or so in the meager shade of the trailer. Every so often the diminishing sound of a car came under the trailer as it slowed down for the wreck then speeded up again as it got clear. When they were ready to leave, Benson and Ramey walked back around the rear of the trailer. "There's a body you won't mind looking at", Benson said and they stopped. She had driven up with her husband in a convertible with Eastern license plates, although the two drivers knew nothing at the moment about that. She wore shorts and a loose terry-cloth shirt. Slender and tanned, her dark brown hair was drawn straight back, simply. "What outfit does she drive for"? Benson said. Seeing her caused a lurch in Ramey, a recognition. She might have been someone he had once loved. He had never seen her before, but now he thought of the manner in which he and Benson went in and out of the cities, at each end of their run. The truck routes, the industrial areas with walls grimed with diesel smoke passed briefly through his mind- back alleys were their access to a city and they could never stay. How would you ever see her again? The feeling subsided, it was only a small yearning. Their work was lonely.

"What's she doing in this bunch"? Benson said, and Ramey wondered how close their thoughts might have been. The girl looked around at the countryside. Her glance swung past the trailer where the two drivers were standing. It made only a tiny bump over the two men like a tire over a piece of gravel then moved on. She began to watch a blonde-haired man, also in shorts, standing right at the rear of the wrecked car in the one spot that most of the crowd had detoured slightly. What had caught his attention was obscured by the car itself, so that neither the girl nor the truck drivers could see, but Benson knew what it was. The girl took a couple of steps toward the man in shorts when Benson, in that barefoot courtliness Ramey could never decide was real, said, "You don't want to go around there, Ma'am". The girl stopped but did not turn her head or acknowledge that someone had spoken to her. The man stood near the bent levi-clad body of the Indian who lay face down almost under the car. The two drivers moved closer. "What does he want, a spoon"? Benson said to Ramey. One tiny detail in a happening can clog the memory and stick like meat in a crooked tooth, while the rest

of the occurrence will go hazy and uncertain. With Ramey it was a dusty work shoe that was half-off the Indian's foot that he would always remember. The laces were broken at the bottom of the eyelets but there was still a bow knot at the top. The slightest twitch would have parted the shoe entirely from the foot, yet the toes were still inside. The two men in overalls stood just behind the blonde-headed man. He wore tennis shorts and a white sweater with a red ~V at the neck, the sleeves pushed above the elbows. He turned and looked at them with clear blue eyes, immaculate eyes. He was very tanned-big hands might have torn him from a Coca-Cola poster. "He's dead, isn't he"? the man said. He turned and bent over the body of the Indian. There was nothing in particular on the man's face. It was simply a matter of curiosity, a natural right to examine.

"What's this"? the man said, backing up a step, still looking down. His words were mostly to himself. "Don't". There was a gentle concern in Benson's voice. Ramey looked down and saw the white sneaker at the bottom of the man's tanned leg cautiously nudge a bit of folded, blood-flecked substance lying by itself on the pavement. "But what is it"? the man said with a tone of impatience. <But what is it?> The man had spoken only once. Ramey heard the words again inside, weakened, the way moving water sounds through a grove of trees, until he was not sure whether it was sound or light-headedness pressing in his ears.

The sneaker reached out once more to tap against the mass and Ramey's vision darkened except for an unreasonable clarity of the man's leg. Ramey saw sunlight touch the curly blonde hairs on the brown skin. He stared at the shining, shining circles of hairs and heard the voice of his partner through trees, "Don't do that, fella. Them's brains". The man seemed to sink a little as Ramey brought the tire iron down on his shoulder and it seemed that the blonde head was turning as he hit the man again, with his fist. Ramey swung and caught the man just to the left of his mouth. It was a straight, solid, once-in-a-lifetime shot; he laid all four knuckles in between the man's cheekbone and his chin. Ramey's fist and the air expelled from the man's collapsing cheek made a hollow pop in the air like cupped hands clapping together. The man took two short steps backward then sat down heavily on the pavement. Ramey heard a cry from the girl and felt a slight pain somewhere in his hand. As he watched the man sit suddenly, a detached part of his mind observed how very difficult it was, really, to knock a man off his feet. He hadn't done it this time and he would never again hit anyone so hard. With a thoughtful look, the man sat on the pavement, legs straight out in front of him. His arms hung like empty shirt sleeves, and his mouth was slightly open. After what seemed several seconds, the open mouth grew dark inside then blood began to ooze from it. The man brought one hand up slowly and the fingers fumbled across his face until he touched his mouth. He moaned and pulled the hand away. Even yet there was no realization in his eyes. Ramey could hear the crowd coming up rapidly behind him and the questioning voices coming over his

shoulder had no identity or importance to him. He did not look around.

"What happened"? someone said. "He's hurt"!

A woman's voice said, and then he heard a sort of wail from the man's wife. The man on the ground began to move; one of his hands flattened out on the pavement and supported him. Blood dripped down the front of his sweater, soaking into a dark streak of dirt that ran diagonally across the white wool on his shoulder, as though the bright ~V woven into the neckline had melted, running a darker color.

The girl kneeled by her husband with one arm at his back.

"Can you hear, can you talk to me"? she begged. An incoherent, puzzled sound came from the red mouth. The girl looked around quickly at several of the people. None of the crowd had stepped forward to help. Then she saw Ramey and her face was misshapen with bewilderment.

"Why did you do it- why did you hit him"? she said, her voice rising. Ramey said nothing. A shine in her eyes suddenly became tears and she turned back to her husband again. Behind Ramey feet scraped beneath sharp questioning whispers. No one seemed to know for sure what had happened, nor was there any purpose or responsibility in the muttering feet and urgent voices behind the driver, beyond finding out. Ramey looked around and caught sight of his partner near the front end of the wrecked truck talking to the patrolman. Benson moved his arms, gesturing with an unfamiliar vigor and talking rapidly. Ramey caught a glimpse of the insurance man. Some of the ruddiness was gone from his face and he stared at Ramey. It's all over now, the driver thought as he saw the patrolman turn and walk rapidly down along the trailer toward them. Ramey watched him coming with a vision as clean as the glare on the metal sides of the trailer. He saw the dark sweat spots flip in and out of sight under the patrolman's swinging arms and in the leather holster that swaggered and rolled at the side of his stocky body, the sun left a smoky shine on the narrow strip of blue metal that ran between the horned handles of his pistol. "All right, step back"! the patrolman said to no one in particular as he pushed between the fat man in the baseball cap and a young boy in levis. He walked straight up to the man sitting on the ground and bent over to look at him. "You all right"?

"Mough- it's my mough", the man said, trying to talk without moving his lips. His brown face looked gray from dirt streaks where his hand had come off the dusty pavement and rubbed across it.

Then he calmly and carefully slugged the remaining five shots into the venomous head- caught in the wicker back of the chair, the eyes dead on him as the life finally went out of the brute. The body continued to lash, but now Keith used the legs of the chair to fork the loathsome, bloody mass out of the bungalow. He slammed the door and listened as his servants ran up, alarmed at the sound of the shots. He heard their chattering, and then the sounds of hacking as they dismembered the snake right on the porch with wood axes. It was only then

that he turned to look at Penny. She was sitting on the edge of the bed again, back in the same position where the snake had found her. The fear had not entirely gone from her face, but there were some other emotions now, crowding into her eyes and the lines of her mouth.

But her hands were calm, now. <She's got guts,> thought Keith. <She's got more guts than any other woman in the world>.

"Keith", said Penny, "Keith, you were wonderful. I don't suppose a wife should be grateful to her husband for saving her life, but I am. Thank you, Keith". He smiled at her sincerity. And for the hundredth time that week, he was startled at her beauty. Strange. Seven years they'd been married. He knew her mind pretty well, by now, its quick perceptions and sympathies, its painful insistence on truth and directness, its capacity for love almost too deep for a man to reciprocate, even in part. But her beauty always surprised him anew. "I realize that this is hardly the time to say it, Penny", said Keith. "But knowing you, I know that you're glad to be alive, and grateful- and sorry because I killed the snake, even though I had to. Isn't that so"? Penny lowered her eyes. "Yes", she said, almost in a whisper, as if admitting to a crime. "The snake was beautiful, wasn't it"? asked Keith, his voice getting harsher in spite of himself, as he struggled to control his growing anger. "It was a king cobra, the largest you ever saw, and it deserved to live out its life in the jungle, didn't it? <DIDN'T IT?>"

Penny did not answer. Now, she just sat there looking at him, without an expression except concern for him. "We're all God's creatures, aren't we"? Keith was snarling now. "All of us- every goddam roach and worm and killer in that jungle. You love this village and these stinking brown people because they're God's creatures, too. And you love Ahmiri, that black bastard of a servant even a little more, because he's a beautiful man. And he loves you because you're a beautiful woman. We're all God's creatures, <aren't we, Penny?> All of us, that is, except me. You hate me, you hate my guts, because I like to hunt. You actually hate me- and we both know it- because I killed that filthy snake. **h Well, why don't you say something"? Penny would not rise to his mood.

"There isn't anything left to say, is there, Keith"?

She softly let herself into the bed, and took her regular side, away from the door, where she slept better because Keith was between her and the invader. He knew she was not sulking, not even angry at him. Just as he knew that she had stopped loving him. The Brahmaputra has its headwaters in the tableland of the world, the towering white headwalls of the Himalayas that are unknown to man as any other space on the planet. For a brief period each year, the rays of the sun are warm enough to melt some of the snows piled a mile deep

at the base of the headwalls, and then the pinnacles glisten in the daytime at high noon, and billions of gallons of water begin their slow seepage under the glaciers and across the rockstrewn hanging valleys on their long, meandering journey to the sea- running east past the sky-carving massifs of Gurla Mandhata and Kemchenjunga, then turning south and curling down through the jungles of Assam, past the Khasi Hills, and into Bengal, past Sirinjani and Madaripur, until the hard water of the melting snows mingles with the soft drainage of fields and at length fans out to meld with the teeming salt depths of the Bay of Bengal. Keith Sterling had looked down on the Brahmaputra more times than he could remember, during the war days when he flew over the Hump of the world, thinking it high adventure in those times before man was guiding himself through outer space. But Keith looked down more than up. He thought of the jungles below him, and of the wild, strange, untracked beauty there and he promised himself that someday he would return, on foot perhaps, to hunt in this last corner of the world where man is sometimes himself the hunted, and animals the lords. At first it had been just a romantic dream of his, the same as the idea of finishing Oxford after the war. But "after the war" was a luxury of a phrase he did not permit himself. Wing Commanders in the ~RAF do not imply survival in the future either in their orders or in their attitudes, to their men or to themselves. And Keith's record of kills made him a man to listen to- a man paradoxically, who might even survive. He became a fighter pilot after the stint over the Hump in the big crates. The ~RAF was Britain's weapon of attrition, and flying a fighter plane was the way her sons could serve her best at this point in the war. He knew how to shoot down Nazis. And he knew that the men talked about him behind his back, saying that he was one up on everybody else- including the pilot of the plane with the swastika on it- because he was chemically incapable of fear. That was true, but only half the truth. The other half he didn't like to recognize, even to himself. He enjoyed the killing. Not defending England, or being an ace, or fighting for humanity. He enjoyed killing. And he would have enjoyed it just as much if he had been a Nazi. Nowadays, we talk as though the blitz were just a short skirmish. The Nazis bombed Britain, so the ~RAF retaliated and shot them all down. Not quite. It was a war of nerves, of stamina, of dogged endurance in which the stupid insistence of the British on their right to their own country became ultimately an unsurmountable obstacle to the Nazis, who were better organized and technically superior. It took a long time before the British tipped the balance. Keith learned too much about air combat, and air killing, to be risked. They grounded him (over his protests- not including his true reason for wanting to fly) and put him in the Command offices. That was where he met Penny. He was aware of her as a frightfully good-looking American ~WAC, a second lieutenant assigned to do the paper work, (regardless of how important <she> might have thought she was) in the Command offices, but that was all. Penny knew him better, on her part. He had a war reputation, but this was the kind of man women like even without medals.

They don't go for bull-like muscle, as a rule. He had strength in his six-foot frame, but it was like the tensile steel in a rapier. He was on the thin side, with big hands, and the kind of wrists that give away the power in forearm and bicep. His hair was black, already greying at the temples in the classic beauty-idiom, the only one permitted to a man. The pretty little twittering ~WACS said he had the look of eagles- and Penny, hating the cliché, had to admit that in this case it applied. Keith <was> an eagle. Penny and Keith had no romance. No dates or hand-holding. But they met in one searing moment that gave them to one another instantly.

The Command offices were in the border country, up north, where the radar systems centralized their intelligence reports, and the fighters were dispatched to harry the enemy. The Nazis knew this, of course, and while their chief quarry was the industrial centers, they let a few drop every time they went over, hoping for a lucky hit. This time, they had been lucky. The Command post was underground, and well camouflaged. But there hadn't been enough time to build it for keeps. There was a measure of protection in its concrete walls and ceiling, but the engineers who hastily installed it were well aware that concrete is not much better than prayer, if as efficacious, when a direct hit comes along. This one was actually more of a "near miss". The bomb plunged into the ground near the Post, but not precisely into the Command room itself. There was a shattering, cracking sound as the concrete started to buckle, the air filled with dust and flying debris, and everyone in the room- men and women hit the floor and used the desks as turtlebacks, as ordered. That is, everyone but Keith and Penny. They stood there, just the two of them, in the rocking, shattering blast. Keith was on his feet because he didn't care at all about life any more: Penny on her feet, proudly, because she cared too much. The bomb was a solitary one. The blast damaged, but did not destroy the room. Keith's eyes met Penny's as they stood there in this strange marriage of destruction. And, as the others began to crawl out from beneath the desks and tend to those wounded, and mark the several killed, he climbed across the debris to Penny and took her hand in his. The chaplain married them, on the next day. After the war, Penny had wanted Keith at least to visit her home with her. She came from Ohio, from what she called a "small farm" of two hundred acres, as indeed it was to farmer-type farmers. But to Keith's London-bred mind, such acreage sounded rather invincible. It wasn't that, however, which decided them not to go to America. Keith told Penny about his dream to return to India and Burma. He stressed the wild beauty of the mountains, and the jungles. He didn't tell her the truth he now freely admitted to himself. He couldn't stop killing. That was his true love, not Penny. The terrible power of a gun, the thing that blasted the soul out of a living body, man or beast, was one he never wanted to lose. And in the hunting land, this hunger was considered to be a noble thing. When they got to Shillong, in Assam, he was happy. This is a paradise for hunters. This was the land of the sladang, the great water buffalo with horns forty inches across the

spread. The great black leopards. The sambur buck, the jungle stag that is even more noble than the Scottish elk. He even hunted elephant, although the Asian elephant is not quite as ferocious as his African cousin. But there are big rogues in both countries. These were the ones Keith sought out- the loners, the ones who killed for the joy of it, like himself. He and Penny would go out on tame elephants, raised from babyhood in the <keddah>. And while he was ever alert for game, and most particularly a tiger, Penny marvelled at the Eden they were traversing. They came upon cheetal deer at woodland pools. Peacocks strutted across their path, preening. There were fantastic flowers without perfume, and gaudy birds without song. Mouse deer played around the feet of the elephants, or fled when the mighty legs thrashed too close. Wild boar watched their progress with little pig eyes, and grunted derision when they didn't consider such game worthy of a shot from the .404's.

Now, the next morning, they were anchored at The Elbow and the boat was riding directly over the underwater ledge where the green water turned to deepest blue and the cliff dropped straight down 600 fathoms, with the weighted line beside it; and Robinson Roy, who had gone down this line ten minutes before to set a new depth record for the free dive, was already back on the surface. He and his safety man, Herr Schaffner, swam up to the boarding ladder together. The German courteously indicated that Robinson should mount first. Robinson clambered heavily into the boat, sat down, and stripped off his triple-tank assembly. He was frowning. He took his mask from his forehead and threw it, unexpectedly, across the deck. "Temper, temper", Mrs& Forsythe said, laughing uneasily. A phony blonde hanging onto a bygone youth and beauty, but irreparably stringy in the neck, she was already working on her second gin and tonic, though it was not yet ten A&M& "I loused it", Rob said, with a savage note in his voice. "All I have to do to set the record is to go on down. So instead I come up". "Was it my equipment"? the German asked. "Was it something went bad with the breathing"?

"The equipment was fine", Rob stated, standing up. He was a huge young man of twenty-four, clothed in muscle, immensely strong, with a habitual gentleness and diffidence of manner that was submerged under his present agitation. He stared stonily at the floor. "I was down to 275. I've been that far half a dozen times. I don't get it why this time I should pull such a stupid trick".

"Well, I get it", Artie said, still on the ladder. "You are a big muscle-bound ape and you got this idea about setting a record. And you also got this little spark in your bird-brain that tells you to turn around before you drown yourself. So you turn around".

"No, it wasn't that", Rob said. A note of awe came into his voice. "When I came up, damnit, <I thought I was going down>. I came up maybe fifty feet before I knew what was happening".

"Pressure-happy", Artie said, and climbed in.

"That's right", Robinson said. "I was expecting it, sure. But when it happens to you like that, I tell you, and you're a hundred feet from where you thought you were- well, it makes you think. You don't head back down again. Not me, anyway. Not right away". He had his voice under control again: no one became aware that he was terrified by what had just happened to him. Waddell, the newspaperman, was a fellow in his middle forties, with a graying crewcut, heavy-framed glasses, and a large jaw padded with fat. Now he was going to show how much he knew. "Our boy didn't chicken out, no sir. He ran into the rapture of the depths. Nitrogen narcosis. It makes the diver feel drunk". "Well, that's the only way to be", Mrs& Forsythe said, and gave her brassy laugh. "Maybe not, if you're 200 feet under water", Artie said.

"Anyway", Waddell went on. "it's nothing to fool with. It can kill you. Personally, I don't blame him for giving up the dive, much as I regret losing the story". "Nobody's giving anything up", Robinson said. He stood there, towering over them all: gentle, mighty, determined, the moving force in the group; and yet like a child among adults. "You think I got you and Artie and Herr Schaffner all the way out here just for the boat ride? I'm going down again". "That's my boy"! Mr& Forsythe exclaimed. "Rob's not going to give up as easy as all that". He was a florid, puffy man in his early sixties, very natty in his yachting cap, striped jacket and white flannels. He went to Key West every fall and winter and was the only man in town who did not know that his title of "Commodore" was never used without irony. Old Commodore Forsythe, who had once lost a fifty-dollar bet on whether he could get both motors started and turn on the running lights without accidentally turning on something else first. Now it did not occur to him even to wonder whether it was wise for Robinson to dive again: Rob was his boy, the kid he had rescued from the streets, the object of his pride. "Why", he went on, "when Rob asked me if he could make his dive on this trip, I didn't think twice about it. I've helped him along ever since he was a youngster hanging around his brother's tackle shop. Hell, I gave him the first decent job he ever had, six, seven- how many years ago was it, Rob"?

"Seven years ago, Commodore", Rob said impassively. He was thinking, big deal: skipper on his drunken fishing parties for seven years and no better off than when I started. "Excuse me", he said abruptly. He went down the steps to the galley and sleeping quarters; went into the forward stateroom and locked the door behind him.

"When you gotta go, you gotta go", Mrs& Forsythe said.

Waddell muttered something about taking a look around and climbed up to the flying bridge. He was disturbed by what had happened on the dive and by what he remembered of a conversation he had had the night before with the German, who had come out of the head while he

was fixing himself a drink in the galley. "Hi there, Schaffner", he had said. "Can I make you one"? "No thank you very much", Schaffner had answered in his accented English. "I do not drink so much, thank you". Waddell had looked the man over, trying to size him up. He was in his early forties, rather short and very compactly built, and with a manner that was reserved and stiff despite his efforts to adapt himself to American ways. His open face seemed to promise a sort of innocence, until one looked into his eyes, which had no warmth in them but only alert intelligence. Waddell had heard that he had been a commando in Rommel's Afrika Corps, and he said to himself: I'd hate to run into him in the desert on a dark night. Aloud he had said, making conversation:

"Rob tells me he's using your Atlantis equipment on the dive".

"Yes", Herr Schaffner had said. "He's one hell of a decent boy. I like that kid". "I agree, yes".

"And if the dive goes ~OK he has the exclusive import rights to your line for this country, is that right"? "Well, no", Herr Schaffner said. Waddell turned to face him. "No"? he asked. "But that's what he told me. Why, that's his main reason for making the dive". Schaffner looked at him, altogether without guile, and shrugged his shoulders, making a little spreading gesture with his two hands. "What do you mean"? Waddell asked, frowning. "Please let me explain", the German said earnestly, his face still devoid of deceit. "I have in Europe a gross business of seven million dollars the year. Now I wish to enter the American market, where the competition is very strong. I must have a powerful representative here, a firm with a national distribution and ten, twenty thousand dollars to advertise my products. With all respect to a fine young man, Mr& Roy is not able to provide these necessities". Waddell was not an eminently moral person, but he did not like what he had just heard. "Did you tell him all this"? he asked. "Perhaps not in so many words", the German said. "But surely you have misunderstood Mr& Roy. Never, never did I offer him the exclusive rights. We spoke of the need for advertising, and I agreed that the deep dive would be most useful for publicity. He was most eager to make the dive; of course, I was willing. But there was no definite agreement about business arrangements". "Well, damn", Waddell said. There was the end of his front-page feature story, with byline. He started out the door. "One moment"! Herr Schaffner said. "You intend to speak with Mr& Roy"? "What else"? Waddell asked. "If you will pardon, I think it would be better if not. Mr& Roy is determined to make this dive. Whatever you tell him he will dive. I know this from my talks with him".

"Well, let's let him make up his own mind, ~OK"? Waddell said. "On the basis of the facts". "You will make him unhappy and anxious", the German said. "At 200, 300, 400 feet

under the water, when he must be paying very much attention, he will be thinking about what you are telling him. It is not good, Mr& Waddell: you will do him great harm". There was no doubt that Herr Schaffner meant every word of what he said. Waddell came back from the door and sat on a bunk. "I am an honest man", the German said with fervor. "I will give Mr& Roy his due for this dive. I will make him distributor for all of Florida- a big market. All tourists come to Florida. This will help him to get out of his little tackle shop. Yes! But there is no use causing him to worry at this time". The German's words worked on the newspaperman like a reprieve from an odious duty. He took a big swig of his drink. It would be a colossal shame to throw away a story like this. "I think maybe you're right, Schaffner", he said. "He has the distributorship for Florida, you say"? "Yes", the German said. "At least for South Florida". "By God", Waddell said, "we don't want to upset the boy at this time of all times. I guess you're right". He sloshed his drink around and drained it in a few large gulps. The story was shaping up nicely in his mind: the young pioneer, as of old, altruistically braving the unknown; the rewards prompt and juicy in modern big-business America. "Join me in another"? he had asked. "Thank you", the German had said courteously. "I do not drink so much".
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Now, in that same cabin, Robinson fell to his knees beside a bunk. Fear and relief mingled in his churning emotions. He pressed his palms together and addressed himself to the patron saint of divers in a hurried and anxious whisper. "Blessed Saint Nicholas, I thank thee for getting me out of that mess and sending me up instead of down when I was bewildered. And when I make the dive again"- He paused; crossed himself; said a Hail Mary, slowly and with understanding. Folding between his hands the cross that hung from his neck, he took his appeal direct to Headquarters. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, Star of the Sea, stay Thou with me on this next dive. Make it come off all right. Let me set the record this time, and let me get back ~OK, so the German will give me the exclusive. And make my life different and better from this time on. Amen".

He crossed himself again and rose. He felt a good deal less shaky. As he reached for the door there was a knock on it and when he opened he found Artie, who came in and sat down on a bunk. Artie had picked up a snorkle and was twirling it on his forefinger. He waited awhile before he said, "Roy, you know your decompression table, don't you"? "You know I know it", Robinson answered warily. "You came straight up from 275 without a stop", Artie said. "Well, I was a little bit confused. Anyway, I wasn't down long enough to matter. You don't see me stretched out on the deck, do you"? "You know what they say about two deep dives in one day", Artie went on, still twirling the snorkle and studying it intently. "I don't think you should go down again".

EARLY that day Matsuo saw a marine. The enemy came looming around a bend in the trail and Matsuo took a hasty shot, then fled without knowing the result, ran until breath was a pain in his chest and his legs were rubbery. As his feet slowed, he felt ashamed of the panic and resolved to make a stand. He crossed the next meadow and climbed a tree where the jungle trail resumed. In the leafiest part of the tree, straddling a broad horizontal limb, he could see over the meadow. For

a while he was content to let events develop in their good time. He had no doubt the marine was the lead scout of a column, and while his shot had probably bred indecision, they would soon come hunting. His superiors had emphasized that marines tortured others for the sheer pleasure. Yesterday; today; tomorrow: no surrender. His remembering the self-dictate brought no peace- only a faint chill of doubt. He murmured to himself, with firmness: "No surrender". It was best to die fighting the marines. His superiors had also preached this, saying it was the way for eternal honor.

What if the marines never came? His comrades were all dead. He had no rice. Then it would be a choice between starvation and suicide.

Whichever the way, he would rot in this vast choking green, his wife never to receive an urn of his ashes. He sighed and leaned for a moment against the trunk. His fingers touched the bone handle of a knife. The knife, an ammunition pouch, and a half-filled bottle of purified water hung on his belt. Besides the belt he wore a loin cloth. As he looked up from picking at a leg ulcer, he saw a marine in the jungle across the clearing. Gloom receded. The marine came to the edge of the green jungle mist and stayed, as though debating whether to brave the sunlight. His fatigues made a streak of almost phosphorescent green in the mist. "Come out, come out in the meadow", Matsuo said under his breath. The man leaned against a tree and wiped a sleeve across his face. A signal? Matsuo lifted his rifle, easing the sling under his left upper arm for steadiness. Fresh on his mind were events of the past day when his whole regiment was destroyed in the hills. They had fought from caves, and the marines resorted to burning them out. Even now, like a ringing in his ears, he heard the <woooooosh> of flame-throwers squirting great orange billows. A wave of flame rippling through their cave had reached Nagamo, his friend, and with a shriek the man bolted through the entrance, then slowed to the jerky walk of a puppet, his uniform blazing. The marines let him advance. When he sank on his knees, they had allowed him to char without administering the stroke of mercy. Matsuo had faked death and was pitched on a stack of corpses, both the burned and the unburned, the latter decomposing rapidly under the tropical sun. The callous marines had laughed at each other's retching, while stacking bodies. Matsuo repeatedly choked down his own nausea. At nightfall he had been able to sneak down a hillside and into the jungle, reeking of death. Apprehensively he peered

to the left, to the right into the leafy, vine-crisscrossed maze. He decided that the marines must be deploying around the meadow, with the one left to distract him. He strained his hearing. Cautious feet stepping on leafmold; faint creaking of belts and slings; whispers: he heard none of these. Only the hum of insects and the distant fluttering call of a bird. Because he couldn't hear them, he was more convinced they were there. A spectacle occurred across the meadow: the lone marine took a seat on the ground; leaning sideways on a tree trunk, he embraced it. Humiliation made Matsuo tremble. While his comrades cocked the trap, that one behaved as if it was some dull maneuver. Taking aim at the man's face, Matsuo squeezed the trigger up to the point of discharge, and then he changed his mind. He wanted the arrogant marine to know fear, and so he aimed above the head. The shot reverberated in diminishing whiplashes of sound. Hush followed. Like a mischievous boy expecting punishment, Matsuo awaited reaction from the jungle. How stupid to give his position away. The jungle did not retort. The sitter remained seated hugging the tree. Before long the atmosphere reverted to its old normalcy, and insects hummed and birds occasionally called. Matsuo puzzled and grew anxious over the complete passiveness, concluding that he was the butt of a devilish joke. Five or so minutes later the marine abruptly pulled up and stepped into sunlight, immediately throwing his hands over his eyes. He went into a whirling dance, a sort of blind chasing of the tail. It ended when he tumbled; but jumping right up, he staggered in no particular direction. He wore no head cover of any kind and, more odd, had no visible weapon. With a sudden decisiveness he lurched in Matsuo's direction, crossing the meadow in a zigzagging gallop. When he got closer to the tree, Matsuo noted the wild look on his face. The pockets of his jacket bulged. Hand grenades. the bobbing head was a poor target, so Matsuo shot him in the upper trunk. The marine spun, clapping a hand high on his chest, and dived forward. In the hush that followed the echoes, Matsuo was tense. They could come on him now without difficulty. Gradually he reached a conclusion. The marine was alone, for they were impatient people and by now would have vied to knock him from the tree. Down the tree he scrambled and knelt at the edge of foliage. The marine was sprawled some thirty yards away, one arm extended. Matsuo jumped when the hidden arm flopped out. Reflex?

Rifle leveled on the man, he made a rush. Heat, in the sunlight, pressed in like an invisible crowd. He squatted by the head, gently placing the rifle on the ground. With a snakestrike motion he grasped the hair, and, twisting, pulled the marine over on his back. He was bearded. The bullet had penetrated in the area of the right collarbone; around the hole, blood glistened in a little patch. Maintaining his clutch on the hair, Matsuo watched the closed eyes while rummaging in the jacket pockets. In one: a package of cigarettes and a tinplated lighter, both sticky from the man's bleeding. In the other: a wristwatch with broken crystal wrapped in a dirty handkerchief. One by one he tossed the objects aside. He didn't smoke and could not light

fires with a flintless lighter; he had no use any longer for exact time, even had the watch been running. Then there was no saying how many times the marine had blown his nose on the handkerchief.

Too bad the marine had no water. From its holder he took his own canteen. The cap was stuck and made a thin rusty squeaking as he applied pressure. The marine's eyes opened, squeezed shut, then opened squinted in the glare. So, alive. Matsuo put the bottle to his own lips. The marine reached up a hand. Matsuo shook his head. "None for you". The marine blinked, soon dropping his hand. Not only had he no canteen, but he lacked even the belt to hang one on. "You came well equipped to die". Some odor made him lean over the man. He sniffed and recognized it. <Sake>. So that had been his difficulty. Drunk on <sake>, he must have wandered off from his bivouac. The marine tried to roll on his right side, and moaned. When he rolled on the left side, propping on his left elbow, Matsuo seized his hair and pulled him back over. "Be a good turtle".

Awkwardly with one hand Matsuo got the cap back on the water bottle. The smell of <sake> had freshened yesterday's events in his thoughts. In the caves, with other supplies, they had kept cases of <sake>. The marine shut his eyes. "Are you a thrower of flame, marine"? Matsuo took the small knife from its scabbard and laid it on the ground, out of the marine's reach and away from their shadows. He waited in his squat, gripping the hair. Every so often he turned the knife. Its blade was dazzling in the intense sunlight. The sun was noon high and Matsuo perspired until his body was dripping. Wet also were the marine's fatigues and the face had an oily film. The man had thrown the left hand over his eyes. Now and again he murmured something that ended in a giggle. He must have saturated himself in the drink, for the bullet not to shock him out of his drunken haze. Matsuo shook his head. Strange. At last he reached for the knife. Even the bone handle scorched, and he retrieved the marine's handkerchief to wrap it. First he barely touched the blade on the hand which shaded the eyes. The marine yelled and flung the hand away. With a firm grip on the man's hair Matsuo applied the blade flat on a cheek. A shrill yelp, kicked legs, and groping hands that circled Matsuo's wrist. Matsuo wrenched free and burned the hands into retreat; burned the other cheek; burned each hand when they came groping again. The marine commenced to weep and it blighted the sense of enjoyment. Matsuo stood up. "A small measure of payment, marine". He dropped the knife in its scabbard, hung the rifle behind a shoulder. The marine, hands on cheeks, rolled by his unwounded side onto his stomach. He ceased weeping. Matsuo walked toward his tree, once glancing back. The marine was still. He would soon die. As Matsuo climbed by using the vines and kicking his feet against the trunk, a mood of gloom immersed him like a jungle shadow. What now? In the jungle, birds were mute, while insects preserved only the monotony of living. Someone called. It was the marine: head lifted, he strained and called. Then he astonished Matsuo by pushing and dragging himself until he sat. He

cupped his mouth and yelled. Matsuo hustled the rifle off his shoulder. Once and for all he'd finish this marine who would not die. He aimed, but listened. It sounded as if the man were calling him: "Hey, Japanese **h hey there, Japanese". The man tilted back his head and went through the pantomime of drinking from a container. He performed the act twice more, and the begging in his tone grew more distinct.

<"Sake"?> Matsuo called. The marine nodded vigorously. Matsuo laughed, slung the rifle. The marine was a winehead. His superiors had said that all marines were depraved.

The marine slumped forward into a bow like a priest before an idol. Remembering his own thirst, Matsuo took out his water bottle. One swallow was all he would have; he was very thirsty, but he must observe water discipline. His years of campaigning had taught him the value of water discipline. He began to uncap the bottle, the rusty cap squealing on its threads. Popping upright, the marine waved both hands and shouted. Of course it was water he really craved; down in the broil of the sun he was becoming dried out. The marine shouted for it until it seemed that his voice had to crack. Matsuo shook his head. He had no water for an enemy. And when this was gone, he hadn't even a little bitter tablet to purify other water if he were to discover some stagnant jungle pool. He capped the bottle and replaced it. After all, he had less reason to desire it than the marine. Before much longer the marine quieted down. His head slumped. The upper part of his packet had stained dark. "Marine. There is nothing for you", Matsuo said. "Your superiors will certainly beat you for your desertion, besides the dishonor of it. I've nothing for you". From the convulsive quivers of the man's shoulders it was plain he had resumed the weeping. He reminded Matsuo of a similar thing he had witnessed in China. In China it was a baby sitting on a railroad platform, smudged, blood-specked, with the village burning about him and shells exploding.

CHAIRS SCRAPED BACK and customers hastily vacated their tables as the tall young buffalo hunter pushed open the swing doors and walked towards the bar. Only Blue Throat and his gang stayed where they were. Blue Throat was slumped with his back against the bar, elbows supporting his massive frame. He leered at the stranger as the distance between them closed. "Since when did they allow beardless kids into the saloon bars of this town, boys"? he asked. "Seems to me I don't remember altering any law about that".

He straightened up, alert now as the buffalo hunter came closer. "Stay right here where you are, kid", he called. "I don't aim to have minors breathing down my neck when I'm a-drinking":

The stranger ignored him. He didn't stop till he was within three feet of Blue Throat and by that time the gang leader's right hand was on the butt of his revolver. "I'm Billy Tilghman", said the stranger, "and I've come for Pat Conyers' body".

"And what makes you think you're going to get it, pretty boy"? "Because I'm asking. Most of the time I get what I ask for". Blue Throat winked at his six cronies. "The kid has no manners, boys. Shall we teach him some"? His gun was half drawn when he asked the question, but the weapon never left its holster. Tilghman's clenched fist swept over in a terrific right cross and clipped the big gunfighter on the side of his chin. His head snapped round and he reeled back, crashing into the table where his buddies were sprawling. Tilghman leapt on to him, dragged him upright and hit him again, this time sending him careening against the bar. A bullet gouged into the bar top an inch from Tilghman's stomach as Blue Throat's henchmen started shooting. Tilghman flung himself aside, dropped on one knee and pulled his own gun.

The Colt roared twice and two men dropped, writhing. A third shot doused the light. Somewhere at the far end of the room a voice yelled, "You all right, Billy"? "Yes, George, but I ain't got poor old Pat's body yet. And I aim to have it". He fired again, and somewhere in the gloom a man screamed. Another took off his gun belt and flung his weapons to the floor. "OK, Tilghman, I'm quitting". "And me", said another Blue Throat henchman. Somebody brought a light. Tilghman and his partner, George Rust, herded the men into a corner. "And now", said Tilghman with deadly calm, "I'll repeat what I said. I've come for Pat Conyers' body". In two minutes the body of Tilghman's former comrade, who had been killed by Blue Throat in a gambling brawl the previous night, was carried into the town's funeral parlor to be prepared for decent burial. Blue Throat, nursing an aching jaw and a colossal dose of wounded pride, rode out of town with the survivors of the fight. "That critter will be back tomorrow", predicted George Rust, "and he'll bring fifty of his kind back with him. Blue Throat won't stand for this. He'll shoot up the town". The prediction was correct. The Reverend James Doran had scarcely completed Pat Conyers' last rites on Boot Hill in the township of Petrie, when shots were heard in the distance.

"Amen", said the Reverend Doran, grabbing his rifle propped up against a tombstone, "and now my brethren, it would seem that our presence is required elsewhere". Billy Tilghman and his comrades rode off to the battle. Blue Throat, who had ruled the town with his six-shooter for the last six months, certainly had no intention of relinquishing his profitable dictatorship. It was essential that he should restore his formidable reputation as a rip-roaring, ruthless gun-slinger, and this was the time-honored Wild West method of doing it. He rode in at the head of sixty trigger-happy and liquor-crazed desperadoes and took over a livery barn at the entrance to Main Street. The entire length of the street could be raked with rifle fire from this barn. Any posse riding down the street to demand Blue Throat's surrender would be wiped out with one deadly burst of fire. The law-abiding citizens of Petrie had gathered

inside Kaster's Store, halfway down the street. Several were firing into the barn when Billy Tilghman arrived. He sized up the situation and shook his head. "If Blue Throat has his way he'll keep us all cooped up in here for days", he said. "There's only one thing to move him fast, and we have it right here in this very store". He called the store owner and together they went into the stockroom. Billy returned with six sticks of dynamite. "I'm gonna drop these into Blue Throat's lap", he announced, "and I'd like every gun to be firing into that barn while I get near enough to toss 'em through the window". He slipped outside, hugging the walls of buildings and dodging into doorways. Blue Throat's men spotted him and a hail of bullets splintered the store fronts and board walk as he passed. Fifty yards away from the barn he dodged inside a barber's shop and came out at the back. Here he couldn't be seen by Blue Throat and his gang. All he had to do was light the fuses of the dynamite sticks, run to within ten yards of an open window in the barn and hurl the sticks through. Billy Tilghman did just that. Within seconds the big barn was blasted into smoking splinters, with every outlaw either dead or injured inside. It was the abrupt end of Blue Throat's dictatorship in Petrie. Though only slightly injured himself the big hoodlum never returned to those parts. To Tilghman the incident was just one of a long list of hair-raising, smash-'em-down adventures on the side of the law which started in 1872 when he was only eighteen years old, and did not end till fifty years later when he was shot dead after warning a drunk to be quiet. Of all the rip-roaring two-fisted tough boys of the Old West, "Uncle Billy Tilghman" stands out head and shoulders. He was the lawman who survived more gunfights than any other famous gun-slinging character in the book. He saw the most action, beat up more badmen with his bare fists, broke up the most gangs and sent more murderers to the gallows than any other U&S& marshal who lived before or after him. For fifty years his guns and ham-like fists shot holes through and battered the daylights out of the enemies of law and order in the frontier towns of the West. The deeds of countless western bandits and outlaws have been glorified almost to the point of hero-worship, but because Billy Tilghman remained strictly on the side of the law throughout his action-packed career, his achievements and the appalling risks he took while taming the West have remained almost unsung. Citizens took the view that a lawman was expected to risk his life on the odd occasion anyway, but this fighting fury of a man risked it regularly over a period of half a century. He came within an ace of being riddled with bullets during his long fight with the Doolin gang which terrorized Oklahoma in the 1890's. Led by Bill Doolin, these mobsters specialized in train robberies but as a sideline they looted stores and robbed banks, making liberal use of their guns. Bill Doolin's ambition, it appeared, was to carve out his name with bullets alongside those of Jesse James and Billy the Kid, and Bill Tilghman had sworn he would stop him. Tilghman knew that some ranchers were hand-in-glove with the Doolin gang. They bought rustled cattle from the outlaw, kept him supplied with guns and ammunition, harbored his men in their

houses. Billy decided to set an example by arresting one of the ranchers, named Ed Dunn, who lived at Rock Fort. On a bitterly cold day in January, 1895, accompanied only by Neal Brown as his deputy, Tilghman left the township of Guthrie and headed for Rock Fort and Dunn's ranch. It was snowing hard when they got there and they saw no horses outside. The only evidence of occupation came from the chimney, which was belching out thick smoke. The two lawmen halted their wagon about twenty yards from the door. "Wait here, Neal", said Tilghman. "If I don't come out within half an hour ride back to town and bring out a posse". Leaving his rifle in the wagon, Tilghman walked up to the door and hammered on it. There was no reply so he shoved it open with his foot and stepped inside. Directly opposite the door was a roaring log fire, a welcome sight on that bitterly cold day. Seated near it with his back to the door was the rancher, Ed Dunn. "Hello, Ed", said Tilghman. The rancher grunted an acknowledgement but didn't move. Tilghman closed the door behind him and walked towards the fire. Suddenly he saw something which made his big heart give a sickening lurch and caused the hairs to bristle on the back of his neck. Along each side of the room were six tiered bunks, each one screened off with a curtain.

And projecting wickedly through these curtains were the gleaming muzzles of six rifles, all trained on Billy Tilghman. The fighting marshal had walked right into a trap and at any moment six slugs might slam into his hide. Thinking fast, Tilghman never hesitated for one instant. He walked right up to the fire as though blissfully unaware of the guns covering him. The men behind them were Bill Doolin and five of his gang- every man a killer. "Cold day", said Tilghman, placing his hands behind him and casually presenting his backside to the fire. "Just dropped in to ask where Jed Hawkins lives. Can't seem to locate landmarks in this snow".

The rancher was trembling. He wouldn't look Tilghman in the face. "Follow the river for five miles", he said hoarsely. "Jed's homestead is on the south bank". Resisting the overwhelming temptation to fling himself out of that bristling death-trap, Tilghman deliberately engaged the nervous rancher in trivial conversation for a good ten minutes. All that time rifle barrels were pointing unwaveringly at his head and body. One false move on his part and he would be a dead man. "Well", he announced, "Guess I'll be going now, Ed, and thanks for the warmup". He strolled back to the door, whistling softly, hands still clasped behind him. He left the house and almost certain death without even increasing his pace and wondered by what remarkable stroke of Providence he had been allowed to come out alive. But he knew well enough that those guns would still be trained on his back as he walked towards the wagon. If he showed signs of collecting his rifle and going back with his deputy to the ranch he would be shot down instantly. Leisurely he climbed on to the wagon next to Neal Brown. "Don't say or do anything", he said softly. "Just get out of here without it looking as though we're in a hurry. That place is crawling with Bill

Doolin and his gang". Even as he spoke those words Billy Tilghman's life hung on a thread. Back in the house a hoodlum named Red Buck, sore because Billy had been allowed to leave unscathed, jumped from a bunk and swore he was going after him to kill him right then. "You'll stay right here", commanded Bill Doolin, covering Red with his rifle. "Billy Tilghman is too good a man to shoot in the back. We'll let him go". But the fighting marshal's fifty-year run of immunity from violent death came to a full and final stop one night in a street at Cromwell, Oklahoma, where he had been sent to clean up the gambling and vice rackets. Wiley Lynn, a self-styled prohibition officer, had hit town the previous day and had been drinking ever since. That night he reeled out of Ma Murphy's dance hall and proceeded to disturb the peace by shooting off his revolver.

FOR SEVERAL MONTHS now, Jack Carter, a big overgrown boy of fifteen with a fuzzy, pimpled face and greenish catlike eyes with a lot of red in them, had been haunted by a dream, a vision, of a Woman. This Woman had no distinct shape or size and no particular face, but she radiated warmth, a sweet warmth; she would talk to him in a soothing voice about things his mother would have said were not nice and put her hands on him and kiss him passionately. When she would do these things, he would turn blind for an instant and become sick at his stomach. Then he would run to the toilet behind the house. Sometimes he did this three or four times a day, for this Woman was almost always with him. He would feel ashamed each time and wonder whether his mother and father knew- thinking they might see it in his eyes or smell it on him. But they never said anything, so he figured it was all right.

And so when Miss Langford came to teach at the one-room Chestnut school, where Jack was a pupil in the eighth grade, the Woman of Jack's mind assumed the teacher's face and figure. He could not keep his eyes off her when at school; when he went home at night, he took her with him in his mind, and she did the things the anonymous Woman used to do, and he did the thing afterwards each time as he used to do. When he awoke in the mornings, she was in his mind and he could hardly wait to get to school to be near her in the flesh.

Miss Langford (her first name was Evelyn) was an attractive girl. Tall, blonde, blue-eyes, fair, buxom without being heavy, she cut a fine figure of budding womanhood as she swished among the pupils in her fresh, starched summer dress. Something was beginning to stir and come alive in her, too (it may have been there for a good while, since she was twenty now; but if it had been, it had been smothered until now by fear): you could tell it by the way she watched the older, bigger boys, like Jack. She would look at Jack, with that hidden something in her eyes, and Jack would see the Woman and become breathless and a little sick. School began in August, the hottest part of the year, and for the first few days Miss Langford was very lenient with the children, letting them play a lot and the new ones sort of get acquainted with one another. The first two or three days they went home early. All, that is, except Jack. He hung around

the schoolhouse, watching through a window from outside while Miss Langford straightened desks and put the room in order. Once (this was on the third day of school) she kneeled down to pick up some books where they'd dropped on the floor and Jack looked up her dress-at the bare expanse of incredibly white leg. He thought for a moment his heart had stopped beating. About that time Miss Langford straightened up and looked out the window directly at him, he thought, although probably she didn't even see him. He jumped back, ducked and ran, crouching, down the hill away from the school. He didn't look back and he ran until he was out of sight of the schoolhouse and out of breath; then he slowed to a walk. The vision became even stronger now. "I'll get her yet",

he muttered to himself. "I've got to get her". That night he dreamed a dream violent with passion, in which he and the Woman, now the teacher, did everything except engage in the act (and this probably only because he had never engaged in the act in reality), and when he awoke the next morning his heart was afire. He ate little that morning, and his mother became concerned, inasmuch as he usually ate heartily. "What's the matter, honey"? she said, with the solicitude of a middle-aged woman for her only child. "Aren't you hungry"? "No, I'm not hungry", he said, pushing back the bacon and eggs. Outside it was already hot at 7:30 A&M, and it was getting hot in the kitchen. He felt a little sick at his stomach. "Are you sick"? "No", he said.

"I'll be all right. I guess it's this hot weather".

"Don't you play hard today then. And if you get sick, ask the teacher to let you come home early. Daddy left the car for me, and I'm going to town this afternoon". "O& K, I won't play hard", he promised. Just then Charles Lever yelled, "Hey, Jack", from the quarry road which ran behind the Carter house, and Jack grabbed the lunch from the table and darted out the kitchen door, yelling "Good-bye, Mom" over his shoulder. "Whaddya say, boy"? Charles said, grinning, showing his huge yellow teeth. Charles, also fifteen, was tall and skinny, scraggly, with straight black hair like an Indian's and sharp brown eyes. He considered himself handsome and seemed to think all the girls were after him.

"You know what I done last night"? Charles said as they picked their way over the rocky road which led up the hill away from the Dixie Highway, through a corn field and a patch of woods to the school. Jack knew of course that the tale to be unfolded would involve a girl and probably be dirty, because girls were Charles' only apparent interest. But Jack always derived vicarious sensual thrills from Charles' revelations (even when he suspected his friend of exaggeration or invention), so he usually invited them, as he did now. "No. What"? "I got Margaret Rider in one of them old box cars down there by the quarry". A nude imaginary picture of Miss Langford flashed across Jack's mind. His heart beat faster. "Hell you say"? he said, lapsing into the profanity he often used when away from his parents and especially when he was with Charles. "How'd you do it"? "Hell, I jist

got on top of-" "No, I mean how'd you get <her> to do it"? "Hell, I jist ask her". "Jist like that"? "Hell, yes. She's been hangin' around me a lot here lately, and I figgered I might as well's try it. Besides I heard her old uncle that stays there has been doin' it".

"I never heard that". "It's all over Branchville. If you'd get out of your back yard once in a while you might even get her your ownself". "I might try it one of these days", Jack said wonderingly, thinking of Miss Langford. ##

WHEN

THEY reached the school, a gang of boys and girls were already there playing "crack the whip" in front of the schoolhouse. Miss Langford, in a fresh white dress and low-heeled white sandals, without socks, was out there with them, trying to get them inside. "Time for books", she yelled, jingling a little five-and-dime store bell in her right hand. "Let's go inside". "Oh, come on Miss Langford, play with us just onct", one of the little girls begged, smiling wistfully. "No, not now", said the teacher. "Maybe at dinner time. Come inside now". The children grudgingly stopped playing then and straggled into the schoolhouse.

Jack watched Miss Langford all morning. He could think of nothing else save his mental image of her nude figure and what Charles had said that morning about Margaret Rider. Occasionally he would look across the aisle at Margaret, fourteen and demure in a fresh green organdy dress, sitting in the sixth-grade row, and he could hardly believe she would do what Charles had said she did. At noontime, remembering what the teacher had said about maybe playing with the kids, Jack stayed close to the schoolhouse while all the other big boys, except Charles, went off out the road to play ball. "Why ain't you playin' ball"? he asked Charles suspiciously as they sat in the well-house shade, watching the girls congregate in front of the schoolhouse. "Miss Langford, come out and play with us like you promised", several of the little girls called. "I'd druther stay here and watch the girls", Charles grinned. "Maybe some of 'em will fall down and we'll see up their dress". "Maybe", Jack said idly, watching for Miss Langford. Presently she came out of the schoolhouse. When she appeared, two or three of the little girls jumped up and down, yelling, "Goody, goody".

"Let's play with 'em", Jack said, rising from where he sat on the ground and dusting off his overall pants. "O&K&" Charles rose also, and the two of them moved over to join the girls. They played crack the whip a few minutes without mishap. Then when Miss Langford was on the end of the line of girls, Jack, in the middle of the line, gave an extra hard pull and the young teacher sprawled backwards, sitting down hard, her dress flying over her head. While she was struggling to get her skirt down and get on her feet again, Jack ran over, offered her his hand and said, "Gosh,

I'm sorry, Miss Langford. I didn't mean to pull so hard".

"That's all right", she said, tossing her head back to get the hair out of her eyes. "It was my fault". With one hand she held her skirt down while she took Jack's extended hand with the other. When her hand touched his, fire went through Jack and he felt weak, but he managed somehow to get her on her feet. He thought she gave him that look with the hidden something in it as he let her hand go. "Thank you", she said, dusting herself off. "Will you play with us again, Miss Langford"? one of the little girls said. "No more today. Maybe some other day".

"Oh, shucks", the girl said. "I don't believe I'll play any more neither". "Me neither", others said, and soon the game broke up, the children going off in pairs, in larger groups and alone. Jack walked off alone out the road in the searing midday sun, past Robert Allen's three-room, tarpapered house, toward the field where the other boys were playing ball, thinking of what he would do in order to make Miss Langford have him stay in after school- because this was the day he had decided when he thought he saw the look in her eyes. When he came back to the schoolhouse, his mind was made up. He simply would not work his arithmetic problems when the teacher held his class. That should do it, he thought, because Miss Langford had said she was going to be strict about school work. He had considered throwing erasers or flipping paperwads at someone or pulling the hair of the girl sitting in front of him, but he couldn't take a chance on either of these possibilities: the teacher probably would make him stand face-to-wall in a corner instead of stay in after school. The only drawback now to the plan he'd decided on was that someone else might fail to do his work, too, and the teacher would have that person stay late along with Jack. "But I've got to take a chance on it", he told himself desperately.

To his surprise his plan worked perfectly. "All right, if you can't do your arithmetic during school hours you can do it after school it out", Miss Langford said firmly, not smiling. "You will stay here thirty minutes after the others go home this afternoon and work your problems". And so when the others stampeded out that afternoon

Jack remained docilely in his seat near a window, looking out in what he hoped was a pitiable manner, while the other kids laughed and yelled in at him and made faces as they dispersed, going home. He scarcely saw them. His heart was pounding like a mighty dynamo and he was trying to think, his mind seeming to scream at him like a hurt or frightened child, "How will I do it?"

On the fringe of the amused throng of white onlookers stood a young woman of remarkable beauty and poise. She munched little ginger cakes called mulatto's belly and kept her green, somewhat hypnotic eyes fixed on a light-colored male who was prancing wildly with a 5-foot king snake wrapped around his bronze neck. The youth with

the snake had a natural pride and joy of life which appealed to the woman. Lithe and muscular, he had well-molded features, and his light color told of the European ancestors who had been intimate with the slave women of his family. The haughty white girl turned to a distinguished, hawk-faced man standing at her side and murmured: "Look at your watch, Col& Garvier. It is almost time for and calinda to begin". Col& Henri Garvier was one of New Orleans' most important and enlightened slave owners. He chuckled and gave the signal for the dance to start. The slaves ran gaily to the center of Congo Square and gathered around a sweaty youth they called Johnny No-Name. Johnny vigorously pounded two bleached steer bones against the gourd which served as his drum. He showed his gleaming tusks of teeth and bellowed incoherently, his brass earrings jangling discordantly as he shook and trembled in ecstasy. The drummer flogged the gourd with frantic intensity as the dancers began the calinda, a sensual gyration which had long been a favorite of voodoo practitioners and their disciples in the Louisiana slave compounds. The dance was of Haitian origin. The white girl with the penetrating green eyes sipped the lemonade handed to her by a handsome man of about 30, who had coppery skin and beetling eyebrows. He was possessive in his manner and, though a slave, obviously was educated after a fashion and imitated the manners of his owners. He proudly wore the blue livery of her house, for the girl was Madame Delphine Lalaurie, wife of the prominent surgeon, Dr& Louis Lalaurie, who bore one of the South's oldest and most cherished names. Delphine was a pace-setter in high society. She was a top horsewoman and one of the city's most gracious hostesses. Although New Orleans was not to learn of it for a spell, she also was a sadist, a nymphomaniac and unobtrusively mad- the perpetrator of some of the worst crimes against humanity ever committed on American soil. Madame Lalaurie gestured with her riding crop toward the 20-year-old youth who was stomping and writhing with the king snake still draped over his bare shoulders. The slender, handsome fellow was called Dandy Brandon by the other slaves. He was gifted with animal magnetism and a potent allure for women of any race. But Dandy had had little experience with girls on his master's plantation in Bayou St& John. Shy, actually, he avoided feminine overtures and seemed truly ignorant of the girls' desires when they sought to make liaisons with him in the open fields, in carriages and in boathouses. This young slave was therefore quite unprepared when Delphine Lalaurie signaled that she wanted him to draw near. The woman eyed the youth with the avidity a coin collector might display toward a rare doubloon which is not yet in his collection. "What is your name, boy? Come a bit closer. I won't bite, you know". He gaped at Madame Lalaurie and sniffed the Paris perfume which emanated from her. Then he smiled shyly. "My name is Dandy Brandon, missy. I belong to Master Alexander Prieur". She said with intense feeling: "Come near, let me feel your arms. You look quite strong and healthy to me, Dandy". Mrs& Lalaurie impatiently propelled the slave toward her waiting carriage. Lifting her skirts, she climbed

in, never relinquishing her grip on his arm. The woman seemed utterly unafraid of the snake which coiled on the floor in a torpor.

Once inside the luxuriously-upholstered landau, she drew the curtains and proceeded to give the startled youth the kind of physical examination usually reserved for army inductees. Satisfied at last, and after a few amorous gambits on her part which convinced Delphine that Dandy was capable of learning new arts, she opened the window and called to her liveried driver. This was the big man with the proprietary air and the beetling, shaggy eyebrows. "Aristide! I

want you

to find <Monsieur> Prieur at once and give him this money for the boy's purchase. There's \$600 in gold in this chamois sack. If the old fool argues about the price, tell him I shall order my husband not to treat him as a patient any longer. Prieur has gout and depends on Louis' pills and bleedings. Besides, he owns 300 slaves.

One

less shouldn't matter to him". Aristide Devol, the sardonic manservant who had been brought in chains years before from his native Sierra Leone, smiled thinly and touched his well-brushed beaver hat. His bold eyes raked the woman, and a perceptive spectator might sense that there was more to their relationship than that of slave to owner. "Another youth, Madame"? the coachman said softly.

"This one is a tender chicken, <oui?> Such delicate beauty, such fine flesh. It will rip and shred easily for Madame".

"Be quiet, Devol! You are forgetting your place". The tall coachman walked off briskly in search of Alexander Prieur. Delphine Lalaurie took the reins in her gloved hands and drove Dandy Brandon- cowering in the back seat of the carriage- to her mansion at 677 Perdido Street. Dr& Louis Lalaurie stood on the veranda at the head of the driveway and watched his carriage as it approached the pillared mansion. Dandy, curiosity overcoming his apprehensions, peered out at the doctor from the window of the vehicle. He saw a pint-sized man with a graying spade beard and an unusually large head. Dr& Lalaurie wore a maroon smoking jacket, and his myopic eyes were blurry and glistened behind thick octagonal lenses. He was about 50 years old. "Another young man, my dear? Really, you are most indiscreet to drive him here yourself", he said, frowning with displeasure. Delphine presented her cheek for a kiss, and the physician pecked it like a timid rooster. "Dandy is to be our house guest, Louis. I want the room in the attic prepared for him He is a most unusual lad, quite precocious in many ways. He deserves a better life than just rotting away on the Prieur plantation".

"Quite so, my dear. His room will be ready shortly".

The physician led the horses to the stable after a cursory glance at the cringing slave. Had Dandy been older or wiser, instinct might have warned him that he would be well advised to flee from the Lalauries' tender care if he valued his life. But he liked the smell of Delphine's perfume. Besides, her endearments and caresses

in the carriage had been new and stirring experiences to the simple youth. Also, he was weary of plantation drudgery and monotony.

So Dandy Brandon trustingly entered the house with Delphine Lalaurie and trudged up the rear steps to the attic room which was to be his new home. Airless and dingy though it was, the attic represented luxury to a slave who had led a wretched life with six brothers and sisters and assorted relatives in a shanty at Bayou St& John.

He bounced exuberantly on the sagging bed and was even more delighted when Madame Lalaurie- after closing the door- showed the slave that the bed was designed for something other than slumber.

It was just as well that the ignorant Dandy enjoyed himself to the hilt that first evening, for the room was to become his prison cell. When he finally left the sinister mansion on Perdido Street, he was carried out in a coroner's basket. ##

JUST six weeks after

Dandy Brandon's arrival at the mansion, the little surgeon and his svelte young wife gave their annual open house and ball, to which only New Orleans' oldest and wealthiest families were invited.

A stringed orchestra played softly behind the potted palms, and Delphine circulated graciously among her guests, chatting airily of the forthcoming races, the latest fashions from Paris, and Louisiana politics.

Suddenly there was a commotion upstairs, a despairing boyish shriek, and the strains of the waltz faltered and died as the musicians and guests gaped at an apparition descending the marble staircase.

It was Dandy Brandon, clad only in a bloody loincloth, emaciated and quaking as if the devil were breathing hard on him. The lad's once superb body was a mass of scars and welts. His pinched face showed the ravages of malnutrition. Feebly he pointed an accusing finger at Madame Lalaurie and shouted: "Evil woman! You did this **h you like to hurt **h to beat people **h I want **h to go home". These were the last words he ever uttered. Convulsively, he spat up some blood and collapsed into the arms of Senator Gaston Berche, crimsoning the frilly shirt and waistcoat the politician wore. Dr& Louis Lalaurie examined the inert form of the slave on the parquet dance floor and pronounced him dead. The ball broke up in confusion. Guests stared with horror at Madame Lalaurie and made speedy departures. Delphine stood like stone, her eyes alive with hate as she looked down at the sheeted corpse. But at the coroner's inquest Delphine told a forthright story. "I saw the boy Dandy at the Congo Square festivities and felt sorry for him. It was our hope to educate him and to give him his freedom when the right time came, for he was a bright and friendly youth who

seemed worthy of our interest. After I paid <Monsieur> Prieur for Dandy, I brought him home, but he was ill at ease and ran away the same night. How he returned in such a ghastly condition, or why, I cannot say. Dr& Lalaurie and I didn't even know he was in the house until the night of our ball when he came down the stairs".

She daubed at her swimming eyes with a lacy handkerchief and said with obvious emotion: "That poor boy! He must have fallen in with evil companions, for he was a simple youth and quite trusting and inexperienced. Ruffians must have robbed and beaten him before bringing him back to our house to die. Such a pitiful end"! Though the slave's dying words about the woman troubled the coroner's panel, Dandy's accusation was adjudged an aberration by the jury and disregarded. The Lalauries were at the top rung of the social ladder, and even a jury didn't feel privileged to doubt the veracity of so illustrious a lady. Moreover, runaway slaves frequently got into serious trouble in New Orleans' dives. So the verdict was "death at the hands of a person or persons unknown", and the elite of the city, accepting Delphine's testimony, welcomed her and the doctor back into the fold. Once again life went its serene way- soirees, fox hunts, balls and dinners. The excitement over Brandon's bizarre death abated and Madame Lalaurie's stock soared when she resumed her self-imposed chores of visiting the poor and bringing cakes and comfort to destitute patients in the county hospital. Then, on July 2, there occurred another incident which set tongues to wagging at a furious clip. Mrs& Victor Dominique, socially prominent and a neighbor of the Lalauries, chanced to glance out of her parlor window at dusk one evening and beheld an amazing sight. The manservant Devol and his mistress, Delphine Lalaurie, were pursuing a young girl- an octroon of cameo-like beauty- across the front lawn of the Lalaurie mansion. The girl was not more than 16. She was nude to the waist and her tumbled abundance of black hair did not conceal the knife slashes on her back. The bleeding girl was tiring fast; the coachman and Delphine were gaining on her as she raced down Perdido Street. The fugitive cried out in an oddly sibilant voice: "Help me, somebody! They have pulled out all my teeth and now she will carve out my tongue with her hacksaw! "Bastards", he would say, "all I did was put a beat to that Vivaldi stuff, and the first chair clobbered me"! Since then, and since the pure grain had gotten him divorced from every decent- and even <in>decent- group from Greenwich Village to the Embarcadero, he had become a sucker-rolling freight-jumper. "There ain't nothin' faster, or lonelier, or more direct than a cannonball freight when you wanna go someplace", Feathertop would say. "The accommodations may not be the poshest, but man! there ain't nobody askin' for your ticket stub, neither". He had been conning the freights for a long, long time now. Ever since the hooch, and the trouble with the Quartet, and Midge and the child. Ever since all that. It had been a very long time that had no form and no end.

He was- as he told himself in the vernacular of a trade no longer his own- riding the dark train out. Out and out and never to return again. Till one day the last freight had been jumped, the last pint had been killed, the last beat had been rapped. That was the day it ended. ##

THE FREIGHT CAR WAS COLD, early in the morning.

He was pressed far back into the corner of the car on his hay sacks, the rattling and tinning of the wheels on the rails almost covering the sound of his ocarina. He held his elbows away from his body, and the little sweet potato trilled neatly and sweetly as he tickled its tune-belly. The train slowed at a road crossing, and the big door slid open; at first gratingly, caught by grains of corn- then with a clash into its slot. The boy lifted the girl by the waist and set her on the lip of the floor. She pulled her legs up under her, to rise, her full peasant skirt drawing up her thighs, and Feathertop's music <pffft>-ed away.

"Now that is a very nice, a very nice", he murmured to himself, back in his corner. A little thing, but the right twist for the action that counted. Hot, that was the word, hot! Hair like a morning-frightened sparrow's wings, with the sun shining down over them. A poet, yet! His thoughts for the swanlike neck, the full, high breasts, the slim waist, and the long legs were less than poetic, however. <Zingggg-O!>

Then the boy straight-armed himself up, twisting at the last moment so he landed sitting. He was less to see, but Feathertop took him in, too, just to keep the records straight. Curly hair, high cheekbones, wide gnomelike mouth, a pair of drummer's blocky hands, and a body that said well, maybe I can wrestle you for ten minutes- but then I'm finished. "We made it, Cappy", the chick said. "Yeah, seems so, don't it", the boy laughed, hugging her close. "<Ah>-ah"! Feathertop interrupted, standing up, brushing the pig offal from his dirty pants. "None of that. We run a respectable house here". They whirled and saw him, standing there dim in the slatted light from the boarded freight wall. He was big, and filthy, and his toes stuck out of the flapping tops of his shoes. He held the black plastic kazoo lightly.

"Come sit", said Feathertop, motioning them toward him. "That crap is softer over here". The girl smiled, and started forward. The boy yanked her back hard, tugging her off her feet, and gathered her into the crook of his arm. "Now stay with me, Kitty", he snapped irritably. "I vowed to take care of you- and that's what I'm gonna do. We don't know this guy".

"Oooo, square bit", Feathertop screwed his face up. This guy was strictly from Outsville. But <no>where! "What is with this <vow> jazz"? Feathertop inquired, lounging against

the freight's vibrating wall. "We- we eloped", Cappy said. His head came up and he said it defiantly. "Well, congratulations". Feathertop made an elaborate motion with his hand. These two were going to be easy pickins. They couldn't have much dough, but then <none> of the freight-bums Feathertop rolled had much. And besides, the chick had a little something the others didn't have. <That> was gonna be fun collecting! But not just yet. Feathertop was a connoisseur. He liked to savor his meat before he tasted it. "Come sit", he repeated, motioning to the piled hay bags, over the pig leavings. "I'm just a poor ex-jazz man, name of- uh- Boyd Smith". He grinned at them wolfishly.

"That ain't your name, Mister", the boy accused. "And you know- you're <right"!> Feathertop aimed a finger at him. "Oh, <come> on, Cappy", the girl chided. "He's okay. He's a nice guy". She started to move toward the hay bags, dragging the reluctant Cappy behind her. Feathertop watched the smooth scissoring of her slim, trim legs as she walked to the bags, and tucked them beneath her, smoothing the skirt out in a wide circle. He cleared his throat; it had been a long, hot while since he'd seen anything as nice as this within grabbin' distance. He had it all doped, of course. Slug the kid, grab his dough- at least enough to get to Philadelphia- and then have a rockin' ball with the doll. Hmm- diddle! "Where'd you come from, Mr&- uh- Mr& Smith"? Kitty inquired politely. "Where from"? he mused. "Out. I been riding train for a ways now". They lapsed into silence, and the freight wallowed up a hill, scooted down the other side, shaking and clanking to itself.

After a while, Kitty murmured something to Cappy, and he held her close, answering, "We'll just have to wait till we pull into Philly, honey". "What's the matter, she wanna go the bathroom"? Ernie found it immensely funny. The boy scowled at him, and the girl looked shocked. "No! Certainly not, I mean, <no> that isn't what I said"! she snapped at him. "I only said I was hungry. We haven't had anything to eat all day". Joviality suffused Feathertop Ernie Cargill's voice as he reached behind him, pulling out a battered carpet bag, with leather handles. "Whyn't ya say so, fellow travelers! Why, we got dinner right here. C'mon, buddy, help me set up the kitchen and we'll have food in a minute or two". Cappy looked wary, but he moved off the floorboards and followed the dirty ex-musician to the center of the refuse-littered boxcar. Ernie crouched and opened the carpet bag. He took out a small packet filled with bits of charcoal, a deep pot of thin metal, some sheets of newspaper, a book of matches and a wrinkled and many-times folded piece of tin foil with holes in it. He put the charcoal in the pot, lit the paper with the matches, and carefully stretched the tin foil across the top of the pot.

"A charcoal pit, man", he said, indicating the slightly-smoking

makeshift brazier. "Fan it", he told Cappy, handing him a sheet of newspaper. "Yeah, but what're we gonna eat? Charcoal"? "Fella", Ernie waggled a dirty finger at the younger man, "you try my ever-lovin' patience". He reached once more into the carpet bag and brought up a package of wieners.

"Hot dogs, man. Not the greatest, but they stick to your belly insides". He ripped down the cellophane carefully, and laid three dogs on the tin foil. Almost immediately they began to sizzle. He looked up and grinned. "A Kroger's self-serve", he explained. "I self served". ##

WHEN THEY HAD LICKED the last of the wieners' taste from their fingers, they settled back, and Cappy offered Ernie a cigarette. <Nice kid>, Ernie thought, <too bad>. "How come you're riding the rods, kids like you"? Ernie asked. Cappy looked down at his wide hands, and did not reply. But surprisingly, Kitty's face came up and she said, "My father. He didn't want us to get married. So we ran away".

"Why didn't he want you to get hitched"? This time even she did not answer. She looked down at her hands, too. After a few seconds, she said, "Dad didn't like Cappy. It was my fault". Cappy's head came around sharply. "Your fault, hell! It was all my fault. If I'd been careful it never woulda"- he stopped abruptly. Ernie's eyebrows went up. "What's the matter"? The girl still did not raise her eyes, but she added simply, "I'm pregnant". Cappy raged at himself. "Oh he was stupid, her old man! You never heard nothin' like it: Kitty's gonna go have an abortion, and Kitty's gonna go away to a convent, and Kitty's this and Kitty's that **h like he was nuts or somethin', y'know"? Ernie nodded. This was a slightly different matter. He remembered Midge, and the child. But that had been a time before all this, a time he didn't think about. A time before the white lightning and the bumming had turned him inside out. But these kids weren't like him. <Oh crap!> he thought, <Pull out of it, old son. These are just another couple of characters to roll. What they got, you get. Now forget all this other>. "Wanna drink"? Ernie offered, taking the pint of sweet lucy from his jacket pocket. "Yeah. Now that you offer". The answer came from the open door of the boxcar. From the man who had leaped in from the high bank outside, as the train had slowed on the grade. Ernie stared at the man. He was big. Real big, with shoulders out to here, and hair all over him like a grizzly. <Road gang>, Ernie thought. "You gonna give me a drink, fella"? the big man asked again, taking a step into the boxcar. Ernie hesitated a moment. This character could break him in half. "Sure", he said, and lifted the pint to his own lips. He guzzled down three-quarters of the strong home-blend and proffered the remainder. The man stalked toward them, his big boots heavy

on the wooden flooring. He took the bottle with undue belligerence, and making sucking noises with his thick lips, drained it completely.

He threw his head back, closed his eyes, and belched ferociously. He belched again, and opening his eyes, threw the bottle out the open door. "Well, now", he said, and reached into his pocket. "I didn't know I was gonna have company in this car".

"We're going to Philadelphia", Kitty said, pulling her skirt down around her legs all the more. "No, I don't think so", said the big man, and it was the final clincher for Ernie. He had suspected this guy was trouble, and now he was sure of it.

"Maybe you and me will, girly, but these two ain't goin' nowhere".

He advanced on them, and abruptly there was a shocked electricity in the car. Ernie was screaming inside himself: <No, damn you, you ain't gonna take my meal ticket away from me!>

The newcomer stalked toward them, and Kitty shied back, her hand to her mouth. Her scream split up the silence of the car, accompanied by the rattling of the freight, and then Cappy came off the floor, his legs driving him hard. The kid hit the bigger man with an audible thwump! and carried him backward in a footballer's tackle. They went down in a heap and for a long minute there was nothing to see but flailing arms and legs. The kid showed for an instant, and his arm was cocked back. The fist went down into the pile of flesh, and Ernie heard the bigger man's deeper voice go, "Aaawww"!

Then they were tumbling again, and the big man reached into the same pocket he had gone for earlier, and came up with a vicious switchblade.

He held the knife aloft an instant- an instant enough to press the stud. The blade came out with a <snick!> He fisted the knife overhand, and drew back to plunge it into the kid's throat.

Kitty screamed insanely and her face was white. She grabbed at Feathertop's sleeve and shrieked, "Help him! Help him! Do something"!

They neither liked nor disliked the Old Man. To them he could have been the broken bell in the church tower which rang before and after Mass, and at noon, and at six each evening- its tone, repetitive, monotonous, never breaking the boredom of the streets. The Old Man was unimportant. Yet if he were not there, they would have missed him, as they would have missed the sounds of bees buzzing against the screen door in early June; or the smell of thick tomato paste- the ripe smell that was both sweet and sour- rising up from aluminum trays wrapped in fly-dotted cheesecloth. Or the surging whirling sounds of bats at night, when their black bodies dived into the blackness above and below the amber street lights. Or the bay of female

dogs in heat. They never called him by name, although he had one. Filippo Rossi, that's what he was called in the old country; but here he was just <Signore> or the Old Man. But this was not unusual, because youth in these quarters was always pushed at a distance from its elders. Youth obeyed when commanded. It went to church on Sunday and one Saturday a month went to confession. But youth asked nothing of its parents- not a touch of the hand or a kiss given in passing. The only thing unusual about the Old Man had long since happened. But the past was dead here as the present was dead. Once the Old Man had had a wife. And once she, too, ignored him. With a tiny fur-piece wrapped around her shoulders, she wiggled her satin-covered buttocks down the street before him and didn't stop. In one hand she clutched a hundred dollar bill and in the other a straw suitcase. The way she strutted down the street, the Old Man would have been blind not to have noticed both. Without looking at him, without looking at anything except Drexel Street directly in front of her, she climbed up into one of those orange streetcars, rode away in it, and never came back. "But she shouldn't have come here in the first place", the women had said. "No, no. Not that one. She thought she was bigger than we are because she came from Torino". "Eh, Torino! She gave herself fancy airs! Just because she had a part on the stage in the old country, she thought she could carry her head higher than ours". They had slapped their thighs. "It's not for making pretty speeches about Dante those actresses get paid so good". "Henh"! Calloused fingers, caressed only by the smoothness of polished rosaries, had swayed excitedly beneath puckered chins where tiny black hairs sprouted, never to be tweezed away. Mauve-colored mouths that had never known anything sweeter than the taste of new wine and the passion of man's tongue had not smiled, but had condemned again and again. "<Puttana>"!

But if the Old Man even thought about his wife now, nobody cared a fig. It was enough for people to know that at one time he had looked down the street at the fleshy suppleness of a woman he had consumed- watching her become thinner and thinner in the distance, as thin as the seams on her stockings, and still thinner. His voice had not commanded her to stop. It had not questioned why. The women said they had seen him wave an exhausted farewell; but he might have been shooing away the fleas that hopped from his yellow dog onto him. (He was never without that dog.) And his eyes- those miniature sundials of variegated yellow- had not altered their expression or direction. The Old Man's very soul could have left him and flown down that street, but he wouldn't have had anyone know it.

Perhaps he had known then where that hundred dollar bill had come from and where it was taking his wife. But when he called for his withered, wrinkled sister Rose to care for him and the children, had he guessed that all he would remember of his woman was the memory of her climbing into that streetcar? There seemed to be a contemptuous purpose in the way he sat there with his eyes glued to Drexel Street and his back in opposition to the church behind him. For all

he saw or cared to see, this could have been a town in Italy, not the outskirts of Philadelphia. It could have been Bari or Chieti for the way it smelled. What did it matter to him that the park at the foot of Ash Road stretched beneath elevated trains that roared from the stucco station into the city's center at half-hour intervals? Or that the tiny creek spun its silent course toward the Schuylkill?

This place was hatred to him, just as hatred was his only companion in his aloneness. To him they were one and the same. Sameness for the Old Man was framed in by a wall of ginkgo trees which divided these quarters from the city. Sameness lined the streets with two-story houses the color of ash. It slashed the sloping manure-scented lawns with concrete steps which climbed upward to white wooden porches. It swayed with the wicker swings and screeched with the rusted hinges of screen doors. Even the stable-garage, which housed nothing now but the scent of rot, had a lawn before it. And the coffee shop on Drexel Street, where the men spent their evenings and Sundays playing cards, had a rose hedge beneath its window. The hedge reeked of coffee dregs thrown against it. Only one house on the street had no lawn before it. It squatted low and square upon the sidewalk with a heavy iron grating supporting a glass facade. That was Bartoli's shop. Above it, from a second-story showroom, wooden angels surveyed the neighborhood. Did the Old Man remember them there?

Yet everywhere else sameness was stucco and wood in square blocks-like fortresses perched against the slant of the hill, rising with the hill to the top where the church was and beyond that to the cemetery. Only paved alleyways tunneled through the walls of those fortresses into the mysterious core of intimacy behind the houses where backyards owned no fences, where one man's property blended with the next to form courtyards in which no one knew privacy. Love and hatred and fear were one here, shaded only by fig trees and grape vines. And the forked tongue of gossip licked its sinister way from back porch to back porch. The Old Man silently fed upon these streets. They kept him alive, waiting. Waiting for what and for whom, only he could tell and would not. It was as though he had made a pact with the devil himself, but it was not yet time to pay the price. He was holding out for something. He was determined to hold out.

#2#

The Old

Man's son threw himself down, belly first, upon a concrete step, taking in the coolness of it, and dreaming of the day he would be rich. At fifteen he didn't care that he had no mother, that he couldn't remember her face or her touch; neither did he care that Aunt Rose provided for him. He was named Pompeii as a tribute to his heritage, and he couldn't have cared less about that either. To him life was a restless boredom that began with the rising sun and ended only with sleep. When he would be a man, he would be a rich man. He would not be like the "rich Americans" who lived in white-columned

houses on the other side of the park. He would not ride the eight-thirty local to the city each morning. He would not carry a brief case. Nor would he work at all. He would square his shoulders and carry a cane before each step. He would sit inside the coffee shop and pound a gloved fist upon the table and a girl would hear him and come running, bowing with her running, calling out in her bowing, "At your service". He would order her to bring coffee, and would take from his vest pocket a thin black pipe which he would stuff- he would not remove his gloves- and light and smoke. He could do that when he would be a man. "Hey, Laura"! he called to his sister on the porch above the steps. She was only ten months older than he. "Laura, what would you say if I smoked a pipe"? Laura did not answer him. She leaned unconcerned against the broken porch fence, brushing and drying her wet, gilded hair in the sun. One lithe leg straddled the railing and swung loosely before the creaking, torn pales. Her tanned foot, whose arch swept high and white, pointed artfully toward tapering toes- toes like fingers, whose tips glowed white. All the while she sat there, her sinewy arms swirled before her chest. Her face showed no sign of having heard Pompeii. It was a face that had lost its childlike softness and was beginning to fold within its fragile features a harshness that belied the lyric lines of its contours. The eyes, blue and always somewhat downcast, possessed a sullen quality. Even though the boy could not see them, he knew they were clouded by distance. He was never sure they fully took him in. Pompeii called again, "Laura"! But the only answer that reached him was the screeching of the porch rail from her leg moving against it. "She's in a mood", he thought "There's not a month she doesn't get herself in a mood". Well, what did that matter when the sun was shining and there were dreams to dream about? And as for his pipe, if he wanted to smoke one, nobody would stop him. Not even Laura. Suddenly he was interrupted in his daydreaming by a warm wetness lapping against his chin, and his eyes opened wide and long at the sight of a goat's claret tongue, feasting against the salt taste of him. Above the tongue, an aged yellow eye, sallow and time-cast, encrusted within a sphere of marbleized pink skin, stared unfalteringly at him. "Christ sake, goat, git"! But the goat would not. "You're boiling milk, ain't you"? soothing it with his hand, knowing the whiskered jowls and the swollen smoothness of teats that wrinkled expectantly to his touch. Pompeii rolled over. His head undulated gradually, covering space, to come straining beneath the taut belly within the warmth of those teats. With his mouth opened wide, he squirted the warm white milk against the roof of his mouth and his tongue savored the light, earthy taste of it. The boy's fingers and mouth operated with the skilled unity of a bagpipe player, pressing and pulling, delighting in what he did. Above him slid the evasive shadow of a storm cloud. Its form was a heavy figure in a fluttering soutane. But the boy could see only the goat's belly. The Old Man near the corner let the shadow pass over him, sensing something portentous in it. He knew it was there, knew also what it was about, but he wouldn't raise a finger except to smooth his yellow dog's back. There would

be time enough, perhaps the Old Man reassured himself, to pay the devil his due. Time enough to give up his soul. In the meantime, six sandals, stained an ocher, the same color as Pompeii's shaved hair, edged up close to him. The clapping they made on the concrete interrupted him in the ecstatic pleasure he knew, so that he quickly released his hold on the goat and pretended to be examining its haunches for ticks. He knew at a glance that the biggest sandals belonged to Niobe, the neatest ones to Concetta, and the laced ones to Romeo, Concetta's idiot brother. Pompeii expected Romeo's small body to sink closer and closer to the ground. He expected Concetta's thin hand to reach down to grasp the boy, and her shrill, impetuous voice to sound against the rotundity of his disfigured flesh that was never sure of hearing anything.