

“Great Minds Run—”

By Harold Ward

BEFORE the two men seated at the table stood the accused. Normally he might have been called good looking in a rough, rugged way. Just now there was a look of fear upon his face; great drops of sweat stood out upon his bronzed forehead as his eyes darted here and there as if seeking some means of escape from the baleful stare of the shapeless thing of cold clay which lay in a huddled heap on the floor just beyond his reach.

Move where he would, the glassy eyes followed him. The face of the dead man wore a sardonic, twisted grin as if in appreciation of the grim jest in which fate had given him the stellar role.

The young man shifted nervously, then turned suddenly to the older of the two men before him.

“So help me God! Guffin,” he declared, “Jim’s got me wrong. I’m willing to admit that there was no love lost between Cogswell and me. But as for killing him—you know yourself that I haven’t got it in me.”

He hesitated for a second, then seemed about to continue when the other interrupted him.

“That’s just what’s keepin’ me from harnessin’ the dawgs and takin’ you in, Brooks,” he drawled. “If it was Jim here that had been out with Cogswell, I’d know bloomin’ well who done the shootin’. But as for you, I’ve got you figured out as too cussed yellow to shoot a man and—”

The third man—he whom the others addressed as Jim—leaped to his feet, his eyes blazing. “Look here, Guffin,” he interrupted angrily, “Brooks and I agreed to let you sit in as judge and jury because we knew that you’re on the square and disinterested. For God’s sake, then, don’t form any opinions until you’ve heard the dope. I accused Brooks of killing Cogswell because I know—and he knows—that he had reasons. For that matter, so have I. But the mere fact that I was with you gives me a clean slate. But Brooks is guilty— guilty as the devil—and I’ll tell you why if you’ll listen.”

Guffin nodded.

“Fair enough,” he answered. “This is serious business and we want to get at the bottom of it if we can. Let’s hear what you’ve got to offer.”

Brooks shrugged his shoulders.

“Go ahead,” he said huskily. “Only tell—tell the truth, Jim—for the sake of our past friendship.”

The other snarled.

“Friendship hell! I’ll tell the truth fast enough,”

he answered. “And what I tell will put a rope around your neck, you skunk!” He turned to Guffin.

“As you’ve often heard us say,” he began, “the three of us—Brooks, here, poor Billy Cogswell yonder, and I—all came from the same little town out in Illinois. We were all about the same age and practically grew up together. In fact, we were pals until—well, until a certain girl stepped between us.

“When I say that she stepped between us I don’t mean to insinuate anything against the girl. She was innocent enough and she’s just as good as she is pretty. Only it happens that her father’s the president of the bank and the richest man in town, and we were all three of us as poor as Job’s turkey. Of course we went together in the same crowd, but when we got old enough to know that we were in love our eyes were also opened to the fact that none of us had money enough to marry her. We had sense enough to realize it, too; and we did what we thought was the right thing—we got together and talked the matter over like men.

“There was only one thing to do, Guffin. The fellow who won her had to make his pile and make it quick. The gold rush was on out here, and like all tenderfeet we imagined that the yellow stuff was laying here ready to be picked up by the first comer and that a fortune could be made in a day. All three of us decided to come north.

“Spite of the fact that we each wanted to beat the others, we were homesick kids when we arrived and it was only natural that we’d gravitate together. In fact we had to pool our money or we’d have starved to death the first season. We’ve been here ever since—too cussed poor most of the time to get away if we wanted to. The girl married a fellow in the bank and that sort of cemented us together, too. After that we hadn’t any desire to leave this country.

“There’s no need of my telling you how we drifted in with you and how we struck pay last year. Then we heard that her husband was dead and that she was free again and then the hell broke loose. We never showed it before you, but we got to hating each other more than ever after all these years, I guess that all three of us wrote to her.

“At any rate, when the last packet came in it brought a letter from her to Billy Cogswell—accepting him. He was going out next spring when the river opened up—going out to marry her. He bragged

about it to Brooks and me. There's been murder in my heart every day since—and if Brooks denies that he felt the same he's a liar.

"Now let's get down to cases. Spring's nearly here. The thought of Billy getting her—Alice—wore our nerves to a frazzle. Brooks and Cogswell made it up yesterday to go hunting today. Brooks says that Cogswell shot himself accidentally—that he was some distance away when he heard the shot, and turning saw Billy fall. I ask you what happened to Cogswell's gun? Brooks says that it slid over the edge of a gully and that with the snow in its present condition he was afraid to go down and get it, and didn't think it important anyway."

"But you were there and helped carry the body in," Brooks interrupted excitedly. "You could see for yourself, Guffin, that I was a hundred yards away when he was killed. The tracks in the snow show that. The only tracks I made were when I ran up to him after the—the accident. You can't get away from that evidence. The footprints are in the snow yet. Examine them again if you want to. And look at the way he was killed—whole top of his head blown off. You know yourself that number eight shot wouldn't carry and make a wound like that at a hundred yards—"

Jim Kincaide stopped him.

"I'll explain all that in good time," he answered.

Then he turned to Guffin again. "Their guns were exactly alike, as you'll recall. Now listen to me carefully. Last night I couldn't sleep and got out of bed to find something to read. Being in my stocking feet I made no noise. Brooks was out here fooling with a gun. He acted startled but I paid no attention at the time. He told me that he, too, was unable to sleep and that he'd got up and decided to clean his gun.

"This morning I found this piece of wood in the woodbox.. See, it's round and smooth. Brooks, damn you, it was Billy's gun you had. You plugged up the barrel of Billy's gun—drove the plug in far enough so that it wouldn't be noticed.

"And when he pulled the trigger—evidently on that rabbit whose tracks we noticed near the body—the gun exploded and the breech-block blew off and took off the top of his head! Examine the wound and see if I'm not right, Guffin.

"Do you want any more evidence that Brooks is the murderer?"

He stopped short, a look of triumph on his face. For a second Brooks was too startled for utterance.

Then he straightened up, his countenance twisted into a look of hatred.

"You liar!" he shrieked. "*It was you who plugged the muzzle of the gun!* That's why you're so devilishly familiar with what happened!"

He leaped forward, his fists clinched, overturning the table.

Seizing a chair, he swung it above his head in an effort to fell the other.

Kincaide, surprised, leaped backward into the corner. As he did so his fingers came in contact with Brooks's gun standing where he had placed it after the accident. He seized it and brought it breast high.

"Get back, damn you!" he shrieked.

Guffin, his chair tipped over, leaped to his feet shouting at the two angry men. But they gave no heed. Already Kincaide had the weapon to his shoulder and was drawing a bead on the man he had accused. An instant later there was a dull, muffled roar.

The weapon dropped from Kincaide's nerveless hands, the barrel shattered. He dropped to the floor, blood splattering over the wall behind him from the ghastly wound made by the breech as it was hurled with terrific force by the explosion.

For an instant there was silence. Then Guffin turned to the man who stood, dazed, in the middle of the floor, the broken chair still in his grasp.

"Brooks," he said slowly, "you were right. It was Kincaide. He had planned to do both of you. And in the excitement he forgot that he fixed the other gun!"

Like a man in a trance, Brooks turned away from the two horrible things lying there upon the floor. Without a word he picked his mackinaw from the peg and pulled it on. Then, drawing his cap down over his ears he walked slowly out of doors.

For half an hour he dragged his snow-shoed feet through the soft, mushy snow until he reached the spot where a clot of blood upon the trampled whiteness showed where the earlier tragedy had occurred. Close by was a gully. Over the edge Brooks pushed his way, clinging here and there to an overhanging bush until the bottom was reached. After a short search he found the object of his quest—a shotgun, the barrel twisted and split, the breech gone. He picked it up and gazed at it with a faraway look in his eyes.

"Well, I'm damned!" he exclaimed. "They say that great minds run in the same channel. *That son-of-a-gun of a Kincaide fixed my gun to get me the same way I fixed Billy's gun to get him.* Wouldn't that get your goat?"

And throwing the gun across his shoulder, he commenced to climb up the side of the gully again.