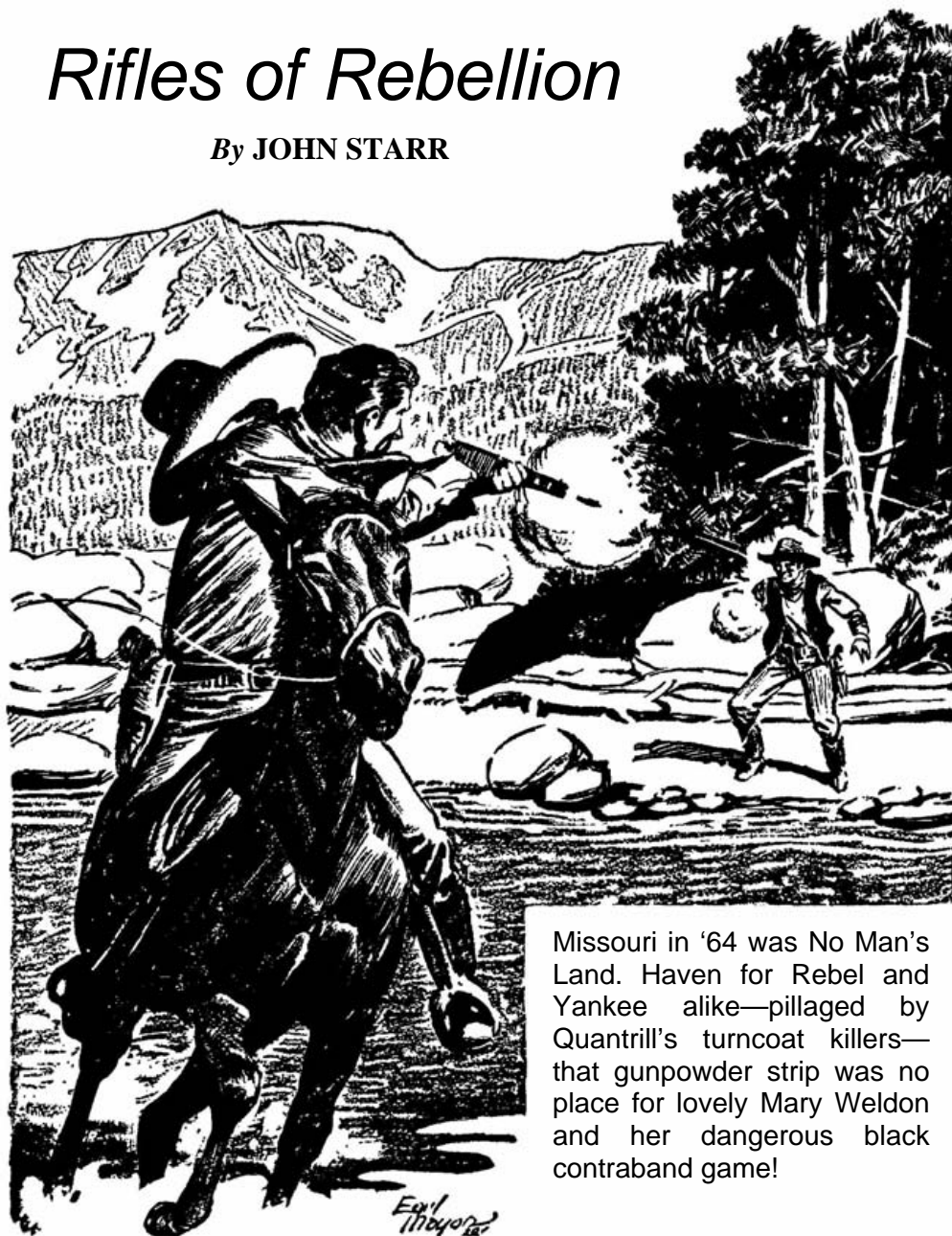


# Rifles of Rebellion

By JOHN STARR



Missouri in '64 was No Man's Land. Haven for Rebel and Yankee alike—pillaged by Quantrill's turncoat killers—that gunpowder strip was no place for lovely Mary Weldon and her dangerous black contraband game!

**F**ORT BENTON, MISSOURI! Within forty years it had experienced more contrasts of living than the oldest of the Eastern cities. The Fort had become a thriving town, with scores of boats waiting to discharge cargo, or carry back both the lucky and unfortunate to the States. The stream of wagon trains arriving from and departing for the mines seemed to be endless. Everyone appeared to have gold, and many were intent on spending and wasting it.

It was late spring in the year 1864. One of the river steamers had docked an hour before, and

longshoremen were busily unloading the valuable cargo. From the pilot house descended the debonair figure of Dandy Jim Jacques, crack pilot for Joseph La Barge, who owned many steamboats which plied the Missouri and Mississippi. The pilot was immaculately dressed from the crown of his soft gray hat to his polished boots of French calf. He was pulling on his kid gloves as he walked down the gangplank, when a nondescript figure suddenly rushed up, threw his arms about him and roughly started dancing him from side to side.

"What the devil? Hi, stop jiggling me! Who the

devil—dawggone! Lige! Old Lige Brant! You ornery looking hound!

"Damme, why don't you shave? You look more ferocious than any of Quantrill's guerrillas back home. Judas up a tree, but I'm glad to see you! A long drink and a long talk. . . . Have you made your everlasting fortune? Are you going down with me, Lige? I'm the lightning pilot, you know. Three hundred dollars every week, whether afloat or speared by a snag."

Brant's bearded face was divided by a grin of sheer joy as he seized his friend by the arm and hurried him by the line of moored steamboats to a vacant spot on the river bank. There he halted and pulled his friend down beside him and eagerly began asking countless questions. He anxiously inquired for the latest news of the war.

Jacques told him:

"Cotton, if it can get to England, is as valuable as gold is up here. England's simply got to jump in and help the South. Oh, don't draw any long faces. I know you're a sneaking old Yankee at heart even if you did come from my neck of the woods. Seems as if the fighting had been going on for a million years. But I've stuck to the river. It's an awful business, this thing of Americans killing off Americans."

Brant's face lengthened as he said:

"I'll be late in getting in, but I'm going. But you keep out. Stick to the river. God forbid we both went into battle and by accident shot each other."

"You old murderer! Ever I have the chance to git you at the end of a rifle I'll shoot some sense intuh you. England's got to kick in."

"If she does she'll buck into a rare bunch of trouble. Gold from up here is helping the North a heap."

Jacques said ruefully: "And I'm fool enough to carelessly pilot it down for the North to use."

"If the Union's busted into two pieces both chunks will be gobbled up by nations across the water. . . . Listen, Jacques, ever see the Weldons?"

"Yes. They're just the same. The old man is suspected of running niggers North, and some of the border ruffians have threatened to get him. He's gone into hiding in southern Missouri, or northern Arkansas—depends on what sheriff is chasing you. No one knows just where the State boundary line is. A God-forsaken place."

"You've visited them?" Brant asked.

"Meaning the Weldons, not the State boundary

lines? Yes. After every trip. Have just time for a short fling in St. Louis and pay them a brief visit. Then it's back to this damn river again and my blessed three hundred a week."

"And Mary?"

"A real handsome girl. You still set a heap by her?"

"Always did from the first time I saw her. I've made my pile, some twenty thousand. Got a mighty big surprise for you. I'm going back with you."

"Huhhah!" And in his exuberance Jacques snatched off Brant's ragged fur hat and flung it into the river. Then he added his own expensive head covering, and cried, "Let's have them think both of us are walking on the bottom of the river." He cast a pilot's eye at the hats. "Your hat sank right over a twenty-foot bar. Mine will clear the point by just twenty feet, if the current hasn't shifted."

Brant stared out over the turbid current, rolling by with the impetus of the Yellowstone's vast contributions. His voice was low, and he was embarrassed as he finally asked—

"She isn't bespoke, is she?"

JACQUES' merry mood vanished. His gaze shifted to watch the fleet of fleecy clouds blowing down from the North and the Blackfoot country. His voice was low and hesitant as he slowly answered.

"That's a mighty hard question, old-timer. I can say 'no' as far as any promise goes. But I wouldn't be your friend if I didn't 'low that I've grown to feel about Mary just as you do. At first I felt guilty, then just sort of meeching. Well, you know a man can't always pilot his own mind."

Brant nodded, his face sobering. He was quick to admit:

"Of course, she would see a mighty big difference between Dandy Jacques and just me. Any girl would. But I'm much obliged for your telling me so frank and honest."

"Hard-a-port!" cried Dandy Jim Jacques. "Don't let any wild horses run away with you, son. Nothing is settled. I've never asked her point-blank. But her old man must feel I love that scenery down there if I'm not after Mary, the times I go there. When we finish the sail down the river, if we do finish it, I'll take my fling in St. Louis, and in the meanwhile you'll have had a chance to learn who's what."

Brant said slowly: "That's mighty handsome of

you, Jim. But no woman ever can come between us and our old friendship."

"No, siree! Never! Let's go and eat."

Brant seized his arm, and led or shoved a way through the milling mass of men who jammed the riverfront. Returning exiles and adventuring pilgrims were afoot, ahorse and jammed into old overland coaches, which bore the marks of road agents' lead and red arrows. Long lines of wagon trains were impatiently waiting to be loaded with freight for the gold country.

"I'd rather fight Missouri River snags and cross-currents and shifting bars than to work my passage through such confusion," said Jacques, as his friend led him into an eating place and secured two seats at a table by the rear windows, which opened on the majestic river.

Two bearded mountain men, dressed in tanned skins and wearing fur hats and moccasins, were their immediate table companions. Jacques disliked the environment and suggested:

"I know a better place than this. You come along with me. No matter how big the crush, I'm served at once. French Pete's place. Told him I'd jettison all his supplies on the first bar if he ever kept me waiting two minutes after I'd given my name. That's the fun of being a lightning pilot."

His voice carried, and the trappers stared at him truculently. One hiccoughed grandly and remarked:

"Ye seem to be some sort of a simon-pure hellion. Yer ma know ye're out?" The man's nose was that of a hawk, and his eyes bored like gimlets.

Dandy Jacques stiffened, and a hand dropped carelessly to a waistcoat pocket where he carried a derringer of murderous caliber. Brant laid a restraining hand on his arm. Then he arose and snapped his fingers under the mountain man's nose. He growled:

"No acting up, ye old scound'el. This man's my friend, same as you are. He's La Barge's lightningest lightning pilot. He comes from where I used to live, southern Missouri. Jim, meet Long Thomas and his partner, Runty Bill. Boys, this is Dandy Jacques, who has a heap big river medicine."

The mountain men grunted and the tall one said with dignity:

"If he's friend of yers, Lige, he's welcome to this Elk lodge of Hy-yah-ah braves." With that he threw back his head and loudly sang in the tongue of the Teton Sioux a song of the Elk Society.

The short man remarked:

"Joe La Barge is a stout feller. Ye must 'mount to somethin' if ye suit Joe. But all them do-da fixin's! Ye look more gallus than a Dakohta squaw after she's got her winter stock of beads from the Government. What ye goin' to eat? Me 'n' this cripple alongside once et half a buf'ler inside of twelve hours out in the Big Horn country. Derved old fool says he won't ever eat ag'in till he can have 'nother side of buf'ler. He's drunk."

"Ain't 'nough whisky in the world to make me drunk. . . . *He taku wakan*—"

The song was violently interrupted by a hand clapped over the singer's mouth, and the short man was admonishing:

"Crazy drunk, ye ol' fool! Singin' a sacred song outside the lodge!" Then he amiably asked Jacques, "Yer river boat can go anywhere, I reckon."

"I am careful to give snags a wide berth," replied Jacques. "Boats trying to race me down the river also are a great danger. Gros Ventres fired on us at the Tobacco Garden, coming up this trip. If the annuities haven't been received by the river tribes before I start back they'll shoot at us considerable. Coming up I saw six dead miners, scalped and mangled, thirty miles below Fort Berthold. They'd gone down in a keel, and how they managed to get that far is beyond my figgering. And once I enter the State of Missouri there's always a fine chance of being shot up by guerrillas at the high wooded bank near Sibley, or at any other likely place. They're after the gold we're always taking down to the States, of course."

This bit of information, carelessly given, impressed the mountain men. The tall one sententiously remarked:

"Young feller, ye seem to have a hell of a job. Reckon ye earn yer salt. Have to keep on steerin', no matter what happens."

"Of course. That's my job. But the pilot house is sheathed with boiler plate and has iron plates to cover half the windows."

With a snort of disgust the mountain man remarked:

"An' I was s'posin' ye give the reds a square shake, shot for shot. Why, for what ye git in wages I'd float downstream, way to St. Louis, on a poplar log."

**L**ONG THOMAS startled Jacques by throwing back his head and bellowing:

"*Sunka micila yukan hinchan!*" Runty Bill followed, and roared in English:

"A wolf I consider myself, but the owls are hootin'!"

To Jacques he explained:

"Wolf song. Teton Sioux man used to sing it. Dead, or that danged old fool would never dare to sing it. Never see licker git him so quick. He's failin'. Ain't had more'n a measly quart since we drunk the first quart apiece this mornin'."

The singer nodded toward the door and said:

"My song's a wolf medicine song. See what it's fetched in." He spat disgustedly.

Jacques and Brant turned their heads and beheld what the mountain men had been quick to notice. A tall man, dressed in wolf skins, had entered the place. He carried a big leather bag slung over his shoulder. His gaze was wild, and he jerked his head from side to side in a peculiar manner. Thomas explained to Jacques:

"It's Tall Amos, the wolf hunter. Has a line of pizened meat miles back. Wolves gobble the bait an' die. He gits good money for the pelts."

"There's something alive in that bag," softly exclaimed Brant.

"Prob'ly a wolf cub."

Jacques eyed the new arrival curiously. A bartender leaned forward and motioned for the man to leave.

The wolfer bared his yellow teeth, snarled like a wolf and snapped at the bartender's hand. Jacques laughed at the bartender's sudden fear. But Brant and the mountain men smiled not at all. The wolfer swung himself upon the bar and fumbled with the thong which secured the mouth of the bag.

"What's the matter with those two men?" cried Jacques, as Long Thomas and Runty Bill as one leaped to the open windows and dived through headfirst to light on their hands and knees as easily as cats. Runty Bill yelled the warning:

"Tall one's *heyoka!* Come out of thar! He's crazy!"

The patrons of the place, more or less tightly hemmed in by the tables, were concentrating their attention on the intruder, whose eyes rolled and glared as if he were bereft of his senses. As he fumbled with the fastening of the big bag he exclaimed in a high-pitched voice:

"Old Amos never had no luck. Ye purty folks live warm 'n' dry. Ye don't have to run no wolf line an' skin the critters afore they can freeze. Ye

can eat an' guzzle hot whisky. So I've fetched something some of ye never saw."

He paused and grinned insanely at the gaping diners. Then he lowered his voice, as if being confidential, and in his wailing voice announced:

"Old Amos fetched ye a wolf!"

Some of the onlookers were afraid, but ashamed to confess it. Some were merely impatient. And some were angry. These last began calling out for the proprietor to oust the nuisance. But there was that in the wolfer's bearing that caused the drink servers hastily to quit the bar. The wolfer chuckled softly. With an abrupt transition he was snarling and showing his teeth. In a ferocious climax he yelled:

"Damn your hides! Ye live soft! Ye live warm! Old Amos lives hard an' sleeps cold. Ye know what's in this mess of rawhide? It's a wolf!" He paused for the effect to register.

"Kick it outdoors for the dawgs to chaw an' have a drink," advised a burly freighter.

"Kick it outdoors! Ha!" Then his voice deepened and he shouted, "Why, you poor damn coots, my wolf's mad! Gone mad! He bit me! Here! Some of you smarties kick him out doors!"

And with a flirt of his hands he upended the bag and dumped a gray wolf on the floor.

For a count of five the patrons of the place stared and made no move to escape. For the space of time the wolf dragged himself heavily, as if nailed to the floor, and his eyes were blazing green emeralds. The muzzle writhed and exposed the long fangs, a scratch from which would sentence a man to die from hydrophobia. With a shriek of mad merriment the wolfer kicked the beast with his moccasined foot and shouted:

"He bit me, damn him! I'm follerin' his trail! I'll take some comp'ny along with me!"

Jacques' eyes dilated. He was paralyzed with terror. The wolf slowly approached him. Brant, with businesslike precision, drew a gun and fired. The terrible beast whirled and snarled at the air, snapped at its own feet, and dropped dead on the rough floor. Jacques plunged in terror from his place and rushed for the door. The wolfer howled like the game he had poisoned, and with mouth open and teeth as deadly as those of the dead beast, crouched to pounce upon the horrified pilot. Brant leaped onto a table to avoid hitting his friend, and fired again. The wolfer gave a strangled yell and fell dead upon the floor. Then, bounding after his

half crazed friend, Brant caught him under the arms and half carried, half dragged him to the river bank. He ran back to the doorway of the eating house and called out:

"Some of you know me. I'm Lige Brant, fresh from the diggin's. To those who don't know me—you all bear witness I had to shoot that poor man to save my friend."

"It was God's mercy to him and all of us that you potted him," said the freighter in a weak voice. "I've seen men die of mad wolf bites. It ain't a pretty sight."

Hurrying back to where Jacques was sitting, his eyes still filled with terror, Brant sharply commanded:

"Kick out of that! There's no danger now. Get up on your feet."

"My God! If he'd had the run of the place!" faintly exclaimed Jacques.

"Then every man he bit or scratched, no matter how slight the wound, if it broke the skin, would have died as a mad dog. That poor man! Yet it was the greatest mercy one could show him."

"My legs are strings," weakly complained Jacques. "Help me back to the pilot house. I won't step ashore again. Mad wolves and mad men can scare me half to death any time. Ask anything you will for this bit of work you've done for me, Lige, and I'll grant it. You own all my money, my life. Both are yours for the asking."

"You're not yourself. You owe me nothing, old man. If ever I want a favor I'll ask it simply because I've always known I could ask it. This business has nothing to do with it."

"Ask anything under God's blue heavens and I'll gladly grant it if it's anything a human being can grant," vowed the lightning pilot.

ONCE the initial efforts of the Federal Government had eliminated all doubt as to where stood the States bordering the banks of the Ohio, the line of cleavage between the Federal and seceding States was clearly marked from the Atlantic to the Mississippi River. Beyond the latter, especially in southern Missouri and northern Arkansas, there was much confusion. This debatable terrain held a hybrid growth of sentiment, both for and against the Union.

Before hostilities began, a great many "Castles" of the Knights of the Golden Circle were being erected in Texas, and this, and similar forms of

secret organizations, spread rapidly. The avowed purpose of these various bodies was the destruction of the Republic's nationality. An empire based upon slavery was to be set up, with its center in Havana, and including Cuba and the richest provinces of Mexico. Its south to north diameter was to extend from the Isthmus of Darien to the southern border of Pennsylvania.

Missouri presented a double problem, consisting of the inevitable invasion from the South, and the hidden menace of the secret societies throughout the State. Whether these be Knights of the Golden Circle, Sons of Liberty, or American Knights, their purpose was identical.

At the opening of 1864 in Missouri no man was sure of the political complexion of his neighbor unless the two happened to be affiliated with the same secret society. Marauding bands of border ruffians rode and killed for booty. Fear constantly stalked the citizens of the river counties. Bands of irregulars from Kansas, claiming burning devotion to the cause of liberty, raided into Missouri and added to the lawlessness. Loyal to neither North or South, and unwilling to take a chance with death in fighting for or against the Union, scoundrels left burning buildings and a litter of dead in many of the outlying districts. Of all these bloody nightriders the name of Quantrill easily stood foremost.

In this disputed area, claimed by both Arkansas and Missouri, no taxes were paid, no sheriff's writs were recognized; nor could there be any compulsory participation in the death struggle.

Some of these conditions were new to Lige Brant, long absent from the country. His gold was safely housed in a St. Louis bank. After parting from Dandy Jacques in St. Louis he had traveled southwest and, in a roundabout way, came to the upper waters of Strawberry Creek, an affluent of the Black. Now that he had arrived he found his burning eagerness changing to a strange hesitation. It was based on fear and was fed with doubt. He was recalling the gallant figure of Jacques, lounging about the office of the Palmer House, and on intimate terms with men high in the councils of the Northern leaders; and yet a friend of those who were for the South.

He had spent but one hectic night with his friend, following him from hotel to barroom to gambling hall and marveling at his apparent indifference in winning or losing. He saw his friend

wager a month's salary on the turn of a card, and he heard him laugh when he lost. An elderly gambler, once a figure in respectable circles, dubbed the pilot Young Midas. The name followed him from waterfront to outlying mansions, with Jacques endeavoring to live up to it. Brant had endeavored to reason with his feverishly active friend, but the latter merely laughed and ordered more wine. In the stark gray of the morning he told Brant:

"This is my holiday. That damn river is lonely when you can't have an eye for anything except cross-currents, new bars, hidden snags, with Injuns ready to shower you with lead and arrows from every bluff. If Venus should walk along a sand point to go in swimming, I'd have to be watching in another direction to discover what new mischief the old river was developing. Now you heed my advice. I shall be here about ten days longer. What hay you have to make down on Strawberry Crick must be made in that time, Lige."

"Lawd, Jim! Who could stand a show against you? Your boots alone would catch almost any girl. But I'll be off Strawberry Crick before you show up."

"Polished boots never won a girl yet," Jacques had replied sleepily.

Now the journey was all but ended. A fourth of a mile away was the girl who had been in Brant's mind and heart throughout his long absence. He had traveled in an erratic course to escape bands of irregulars who were active between the Black and the Mississippi. A short distance west of the creek he had left his horse to graze in a grassy opening, and hungrily had forded the waist-deep waters. Then indecision and timidity assailed him. He dropped on the bank and dabbled his feet in the water. Suddenly he was seeing the unreasonableness of his expectations. The pleasing structure he had built up during his exile in the rugged gold country tumbled to nothingness. He could see the trim and gallant figure of his friend. He could not believe that any maiden would hesitate a moment in choosing between himself and Dandy Jacques.

**D**ESPITE his trepidation, the instinct of self-preservation kept half his mind on the alert. He knew that death struck unexpectedly in that disputed region. As indecision held him back he instinctively kept tabs on his surroundings. A squirrel came hurrying through the tops of the

stunted post oaks. Mechanically his hand went to his belt. Then he glimpsed something moving in the growth. He watched keenly until he beheld a funnel-shaped sunbonnet. His face burned red hot. He had helped to round up the desperate Plummer gang in Montana, but never in all his experiences had his heart raced so madly. He concentrated his gaze on the shallow stream. He did not hear the soft steps behind him until a drawling voice inquired:

"Howdy, stranger. Lost your way?"

He came to his feet, both hands outstretched, and stared hungrily at the comely and slightly freckled face under the bonnet.

Her voice was scarcely audible as she exclaimed:

"Lige Brant! Back from the mines!"

"Mary, you walk as sly as a Cherokee scout. . . . Yes, I'm back. Came down with Jim Jacques, La Barge's crack pilot. Lawd, but it's good to see you. Home folks, you know."

"I'm mortal glad to see you, Lige. You seemed awful young to go 'way up there to Montana. Where's Jim, just now?"

"Business keeps him in St. Louis for a bit. Mighty popular with the big bugs. A heap of them have traveled up and down the river with him. Banked on his nerve and skill for their very lives. Don't know anybody more important than a lightning pilot. Gits twelve hundred dollars a month! He's the handsomest man I ever saw. He's coming down here pretty soon."

**M**ARY seated herself on the bank and motioned for him to do likewise. She frowned slightly, and tilted her head as if listening. He asked:

"Anything the matter, Mary?"

"Two men stopping at our place. I came here to be shut of them."

Brant hurriedly drew on his boots, his dark eyes asking questions. She took account of his two revolvers; and in her slow, drawling, yet serious voice said:

"Don't you go to be too wild, Lige. Pap's always able to carry himself like a double hitch and a fighting dawg under the wagon. It ain't time for you to come tearing out of the wilderness. The strangers are Quantrill's men. Camping on the north side of the fence. And such a clutter of hand guns! Four to six in each belt."

"Come to trouble your pap?" Lige asked.

"Would I be here if the Weldons were in for a wring? They ain't wearing any war paint yet. Quantrill may come any time with the rest of his outfit. Whole band is working north to Clay County. Pap, being a Jeff Davis man, stands all right with them so far. But being for Abe Lincoln, myself, I dusted out before my tongue talked me into any sort of trouble."

"Shucks, Mary! I hope your pap won't have any truck with that trash. They talk about Quantrill way up above Fort Benton. He and his men ain't either for North or South. Just plumb hellfire—when the odds are on their side. How they treat you?"

"Very polite."

"Mary, I don't believe it. You look and act scared."

"I came here to get clear of them," she whispered. "I'm mighty glad to find you—Listen!" Her eyes widened with fear as she turned her head. Then she drew a deep breath of relief as she recognized the sound to be that of men singing. "Feared for a second they'd jumped him," she murmured. "Just singing, or think they be. They're at the rum. I wish they'd go."

"Your pap ought to be safe even with that breed, being for the South," Lige encouraged.

"Oh, pap's sound on the goose to their way of thinking. But it happens I ain't."

"You talk mysteries," impatiently accused Brant. "If I'm your friend and can be trusted, why don't you tell things?"

"I'd trust you anywhere, any time. But I don't want to mix you up in my troubles. But if that scum should go prowling around, and should find out a certain secret, they'd never believe pap is a Jeff Davis man. Lige, I haven't asked how you fit in with all this terrible war. But no matter where you stand I know I can always trust you."

"To the hilt, Mary! I'm North. But if you was the rankest rebel that ever lived you could trust me with your every thought. What is it?"

Glancing warily about, and then talking in a low whisper, Mary told him:

"I have three runaway negroes near here. They managed to git this far from way down in lower Arkansas. If the bushwhackers happen upon 'em, they'll kill 'em. If they opine pap knows anything about it, they'll kill him. They'd believe our place is an underground station for getting blacks inside the Union lines."

Lige was worried.

"How come you did that, girl, with your pap being South?"

"All our family has strong wills. Pap and me get along by agreeing not to try to change each other's notions. If ma had lived she'd been for the North. But I'm worried. If the bushwhackers go to mooning around much they may find the blacks. If that happens—" She left the sentence uncompleted.

"Stop fretting. Ain't I here? I've fought it out with Injuns and outlaws. If they find the blacks I'll say they're mine."

"They'd never believe it. They'd have to know you've been out the country for a long time. It would be your death sentence."

Brant scowled heavily and his voice was very serious as he said:

"Our tribe never was much for bragging. But I'm not wearing these guns just to balance myself."

"But you'd have no chance!" she insisted. "They never give a man a chance. That's why they're what they are. And each man is a dead shot. I want you to pull out—now."

"My going won't unscramble any trouble that's threatening your cabin," Brant replied. "Scarcely can expect me to pull out and leave you here to suffer if they happen upon the niggers and learn you was hiding them. And why are you playing old Beecher's game, anyway? The Government has freed the slaves. Let the Government finish the job."

"But the bulk of them are not free. And they're worse off than ever before. So I hoed in, in my small way. Please go now, Lige."

He smiled grimly and said:

"Of course. And leave you alone to face these devils. Where's the hideout?"

Mary hesitated, tilted her pretty head and listened, and then leaned close to him and whispered:

"In the old ha'nted fish camp on Tuggle Crick, straight west a quarter of a mile. Only the poor creatures don't know it's ha'nted."

"Why, I crossed it! Passed within a rod of the camp."

**B**RANT was more concerned than he cared to admit. Even if the strip of country where they were sitting were free soil the plight of a colored man would be pitiable if found by any Southern band of irregulars. Especially was the hatred of Quantrill and his men most venomous, now that the

hopes of the seceding States were on the wane. As he listened to the bandits singing an old song he recalled the merciless raiders' proclivity for drinking with a cabin dweller, and singing lustily, and then concluding by cutting their host's throat.

"Each of them has four or more revolvers and a rifle," whispered the girl.

"And neither of them can shoot only about so many guns at one time." Brant came to his feet and added, "I reckoned when I come here that I had something to say to you, Mary. Something important—to me. But it must wait till your company's gone. I'll pick up the blacks and work them north until I can strike free soil. That means wherever Federal troops have control. I ought to get them to the head of the Tuggle before dark. I'll be at your cabin tomorrow morning."

A shrill whistle pierced the quiet of the growth. The girl's eyes filled with fear. There followed the baying of dogs.

"What's ailing you?" quickly asked Brant. "Only your pap's bear dawgs, letting out a few hoots."

"Can't you tell the voice of our dawgs?" she whispered. Then she added, "I was forgetting. We didn't have this pack when you went to the mountains. Hark! Those are not our dawgs that you hear. Must be a parcel of man trackers that the guerrillas fetched along and left tied in the bush. Hear them! They seem to be following my trail!"

"The crick's only waist deep. Wade upstream, keeping under this bank. You can be home and in a dry gown before the two men get back. Off with your shoes."

"But you, Lige?" Mary anxiously asked as she pulled off her rough footgear.

He picked her up, gently lowered her into the placid stream and assured her:

"I'll stick along here till you round the first bend. Then I'll be off for the fish camp. They won't bother me along of any niggers even if they run into me."

"They'd kill you for being a stranger even if there wasn't a black man in the state."

"Bet four bits against a million dollars in Reb paper money that they can't make me turn a hair. Had several run-ins with the Plummer gang along Alder Crick. Get along, so's I can be off."

THE girl breasted the sluggish current rapidly, keeping close to the bank. At the bend she

looked back. Lige had crossed to the west bank and was signaling for her to go on. She was soon out of sight, but Brant did not elect to withdraw farther from the stream. He did step into the growth to conceal himself, but when he beheld dogs, instead of men, he emerged again. Three of the animals were huge and looked to be ferocious. These were the killers. The fourth was a hound, the pilot. He came to a halt where the girl had taken to the water and then began nosing up and down the bank. Then he jumped into the stream to try the other bank. The big dogs followed.

"The miserable brutes, to set those devils on a trail," thought Brant. "Or to leave them unleashed, to go where they will."

He was further infuriated by hearing rough voices profanely calling out encouragement to the dogs. Drawing a revolver, he fired three shots very rapidly, and each bullet ended the career of a big beast. A chorus of terrible oaths greeted this outburst of fire, and two men came pounding along the creek path. Retiring to cover, Brant reloaded his weapon and waited to treat the guerrillas as he had the four-footed brutes. On second thought he changed his mind, for if he opened fire, and one escaped, it would mean a night raid and death to the Weldons. Crouching low, Brant watched the two men as they emerged from the growth, a short distance above where the dogs had attempted to cross.

"But where be the pups? Why be they so mighty quiet? That pistol shootin' couldn't been agin them."

"It was close enough to be meant for us," said one. "Mebbe that handsome gal did the poppin'. Took my eye the minute I see her. Mighty likely lookin' piece of calico."

"T'other folks may be thinkin' the same way," gruffly reminded the other.

"Then forgit it, till the chief comes up. I'm cap'n of this outfit till then. You feel uppity?" The fellow glared savagely at his follower, who made no reply.

Brant realized the situation was vastly more serious than any attempt of conducting fugitives to the Union line could be. He called out:

"Walk along the bank. Your dogs are in the crick."

"Where be you? Who be you? Wherever you are, you're a liar."

The last was prompted by the hound crawling



on his belly to his master. The other man advanced to the edge of the bank, glanced up and downstream, then cried:

"The dawgs be dead! I can see them in the ripples downstream!"

"Don't you folks like to have your man-eaters killed?" jeered Brant.

"Step out an' show yerself, ye lowdown yaller houn'," roared the infuriated owner of the pack.

"Come over and get me," challenged Brant.

"We'll do that little trick."

His companion quickly vanished. They fired blindly into the bush. Brant remained behind a sheltering oak until they had emptied their guns. Then he retreated. It was not his plan to leave any dead men on the bank of the creek to excite the wrath of Quantrill when he came. In falling back he did not attempt much stealth. He invited pursuit because he remembered the "likely lookin' piece of calico." For some minutes he listened without hearing anything from the bushwhackers. Then sounded the voice of a man. He was cursing the horses as he hurried them downstream. Once the two men were in the saddle they splashed across the creek to comb the country.

**B**RANT bowed his head and ran swiftly for a quarter of a mile to the opening where he had left his horse. This was close to Tuggle Creek and the fish camp which he had passed a few hours back. He made direct for the camp, a dilapidated shanty which was almost entirely concealed by vines and bushes. Before the door, he found a huge negro armed with an upraised cudgel.

Reining in, Brant hurriedly explained:

"I'm for the North. Abe Lincoln. Men are hunting for you. I killed their dogs. Young missy sent me. Push on up the crick."

The hunted ones had heard the gunfire, and now they were hearing the burst of profanity on the stranger's back trail. The huge negro was convinced that the white man was friendly. He called softly. Two negroes timidly thrust their heads from cover, their eyes round with terror. Their leader spoke to them in a patois that Brant did not understand. The two leaped into the shallow stream and scrambled up the west bank. The giant followed, clinging to Brant's stirrup. When the growth along the west bank prevented this proximity he walked behind the horse. Brant motioned him to come alongside, and said:

"The men behind are on horses. They soon will be up with us. I'll lead them farther west if I can. Take your friends and hurry upstream, keeping to this crick. I've shot their big dogs. Only a hound left. They're after me. They don't know you're here."

The negro jerked his head in understanding, and sped forward after his companions. Brant turned at right angles, taking pains to leave a broad trail. Spurring across an opening, he halted in the shelter of some scrub pine and watched to make sure he still was being pursued. He glimpsed the hound running up the creek path, and then saw the horsemen taking the same course. He groaned. He had given Mary Weldon a promise. He had assured her he would save her black proteges, and it was maddening to think of the poor creatures being run down and massacred.

He galloped furiously back to the Tuggle, intent on making good his word to the girl. Reaching the creek trail, he wheeled his mount and raced north. A tangle of logs at a wide bend caused him to slow down, and while thus cautiously maneuvering he glimpsed the two horsemen in single file ahead. Brant raised his gun and swung it down to knock the rearmost man from the saddle when his gesture was halted by an unexpected denouement.

Three pair of dusky arms shot from the thick cherry bushes to draw the two man-hunters from their saddles and into the growth. It was done so quickly that neither man could make any outcry. Brant lifted his horse into a gallop and raced along the path. He pulled up suddenly, dismounted and drove his horse ahead of him, with both knife and gun ready. The bushes just ahead of him violently parted and the head and shoulders of the black Hercules appeared. He was bleeding from a scalp wound, but his big white teeth were exposed in a wide grin.

"White man boss, yassir. Yo' lookum—daid." And he held up two fingers to indicate that the bushwhackers had been exterminated.

**D**AZED by the unexpected conclusion of the affair, Brant cautiously entered the growth. He had advanced by a few yards, when he came to a small area where the bushes had been trampled. One sweeping glance at the small area was sufficient. With a shudder Brant turned back and beckoned the fugitives to follow him. He ordered the leader to secure the dead men's weapons, and to

use the knives in digging shallow graves for the slain. He threw the guns into the creek and rode downstream a short distance while this gruesome work was being completed. Finally the tall black joined him, and with much bobbing of the head announced that the interment was finished. Brant went back and scattered dry leaves and twigs over the two mounds.

Then, gathering the blacks around him, Brant, indicating with his finger in the dust of the path, pointed out the route north they should travel. When he told them he would travel with them until dark, their joy could not be restrained. Afraid to shout and sing, they expressed their emotion by dancing.

They walked on each side of and behind his horse as he rode up the creek path. At sunset he halted and directed them to press on during the night, but to remain in hiding during the daytime. After they had departed he picketed his horse, laid down on his blanket and slept until an hour before sunrise.

The return journey was made in record time. He was well satisfied with what he had accomplished. Quantrill had lost two men, and the blacks were no longer a menace to the Weldons. There was nothing between him and a serious talk with the Weldon maid. He galloped up the east bank of the creek and reined in before the large log house. This was flanked on the south side by a vegetable garden. A few head of cattle grazed close by, mute testimony to Weldon's fear of raiders.

Mary Weldon fairly flew from the doorway; and Brant rejoiced over her eagerness to greet him. But she touched a finger to her lips and lifted her brows and, in a voice that carried, she announced:

"We always are glad to meet anyone whose heart is for the right. Doubly so when he's an old friend."

"It's fine to be seeing you, Miss Weldon," Brant replied awkwardly. And he glanced furtively about, wondering at the change in her manner.

An almost imperceptible movement of her head warned him against what he would find inside. For a moment she allowed her gaze to stray to a splendid black horse, grazing a few rods east of the cabin. Brant viewed the animal and envied the owner.

But the girl now was making for the doorway and beckoning him to follow. He strolled a few feet behind her, his thumbs hooked in his belt. He came

to a halt in the doorway and stood motionless until his eyes were relieved of the sun glare. He found himself confronting a slim, dark-faced man whose deep-set eyes bored into him. Brant advanced brusquely and shook hands with Weldon, who he believed was striving to conceal some strong emotion. Weldon, whose back was to the stranger, winked as he said:

"I'm always keen to see anyone who's sound. I was telling my friend, Cap'n Black, that you are a friend of ours and a great friend of Dandy Jacques. Meet Cap'n Black. Cap'n, this is young Brant—Lige Brant. He's the young man I was speaking of. Missouri born and bred. Been up north digging gold for some time. Great friend of Dandy Jacques, smartest pilot on the Missouri."

Black shook hands quickly, eyed Brant sharply, and said:

"We know Jacques is all right. How do you do, sir? You're doing your part for the cause, I hope."

THE atmosphere was heavy with danger. Brant was quick to sense that much, but he could not understand why he should feel that way. Over the guest's shoulder he beheld Mary Weldon's eyes dilating with a terrible fear. Hedging for time, Brant fenced.

"I'm just back from hunting gold in the Rocky Mountains. Up in Montana. Came down on one of Captain La Barge's steamboats. Jim Jacques is an old friend. I'm trying to find myself after a long absence."

"The work at hand should be plain," said Black. "A young man like you can go far, if he walks in the right direction. I am here, expecting to meet your friend, Jacques."

"I recently left him in St. Louis. He takes a week or two of city life so he may have something to remember when he's on the lonely reaches of the Upper Missouri."

"The young fool! The harvest is ripe, and he stays in town to play. See here"—now his tone was mandatory—"you came down with Jacques. You know what was the most important item in that boat's cargo?"

"Certainly. Two hundred thousand dollars worth of gold dust in one shipment. No knowing how much the miners brought down in their packs. Probably several hundred thousand. We were loaded to the guards, and nearly every man had made it rich."

With a deep intake of breath Captain Black slowly said:

"Hundreds of thousands in clean dust and nuggets!"

"Last season the *Luella* brought down a million and a quarter on one trip."

"God! We were asleep! How could you know that? You were in the mines?"

"Jacques told me. But it was commonly known at Fort Benton."

"Many holdups, up there?" asked Black.

"Until the Plummer gang was run down and many were lynched, yes. Men had harder work getting their gold out of the country than they had in finding it."

"Plummer was a fool!" muttered Black.

"Too sure of himself. He was sheriff of two counties, while by law he could be sheriff of only one. His road agents were appointed deputy sheriffs to protect what they planned to steal."

"That was smart," said Black.

"They were all hanged," cheerfully added Brant. "Plummer offered several hundred thousand in dust if they'd let him go." Black said incredulously, "And they refused?"

"Plummer's dead. Lynched. But there's been a rare scramble for his wealth since he was hanged."

"Damnation! Don't keep yapping that word. Are you sure Jacques is coming down here?"

With a side glance at the girl Brant replied:

"I'm positive of it. He may arrive at any moment."

Weldon glanced at Black, and asked Brant, "By any chance did you see two horsemen near here when you came along? Some of the men here quit in a hurry."

"No. I saw several travelers on the way down. I recall no two men in particular. I saw none near this place."

"Each of them would have a belt full of weapons," supplemented Black.

"I think every man I saw was armed, but none so heavily as that. Friends of yours, Cap'n?"

With a quick flash of his teeth, Black replied:

"That depends on how well they have done their duty. . . . I own a plantation in southern Arkansas. They were chasing some runaway slaves of mine."

"I did not see them," repeated Brant. "But I heard gunfire in the west when nearing this place."

"The men the captain mentions were here three days. Had some dogs with them," Weldon

explained.

Black stepped to the doorway and whistled shrilly. From the surrounding cover more than a score of men stepped into view. Each man was heavily armed, ridiculously so, Brant thought. The captain waved his hand and the men vanished. Wheeling about, he said:

"For the good of the cause I must ask you to remain here until Jacques arrives."

"When and where did you meet my friend?" Brant asked curiously.

"In St. Louis. I was off duty, playing a bit. Drank too much. He saved me from being robbed, and worse. If he vouches for you, it's all right. The same goes for Weldon."

"The Weldons are old friends of mine. I used to live here. Now I come to pay them a short visit. But who are you, a stranger in this neighborhood, to tell me how long I shall stay? Or give orders to the Weldons?"

Thrusting his face close to Brant's the man replied:

"If you must know, I am Quantrill."

Although his face remained calm, Brant felt ice in his heart. Yet he managed to keep his voice even as he replied:

"I certainly shall remain here as long as it pleases you, sir."

NEXT morning the guerrilla leader and Brant ate breakfast with the Weldons. Quantrill's men bivouacked in the open beyond the stump fence, but were little in evidence so far as one could observe from the house. If not for the smoke of the small cooking fires, none in the vicinity of the clearing would have suspected their presence.

Brant knew Quantrill was a cattle thief, blackmailer, slave driver, kidnapper, and many times a murderer. He was the embodiment of all evil, and would be loyal to no friend, to no cause, except as it served his own convenience. Yet, in that little clearing, he was an autocrat. What also added to Brant's smoldering rage was the monster's steady gaze directed at Mary Weldon. The icy sparkle of his eyes was reptilian.

After the meal was finished Brant was more closely cross-examined. He got the impression that Quantrill intended to migrate to the gold fields of Montana. The amount of gold brought down on the steamers seemed to interest Quantrill greatly. In this connection he sought minute information as to

wooded banks along the lower part of the river. He also was deeply interested in the various overland routes.

"Jacques can tell you about the river traffic better than I can. I went up overland and have made the trip down but once," said Brant.

Quantrill nodded, staring steadily at the speaker. Brant doubted if his words had been heard. He believed that Quantrill's objective senses were submerged beneath rapidly forming plans for taking a rich toll from the mines, or the river craft. Brant ventured upon a recital of Henry Plummer's activities, but Quantrill cut him short.

"That man was a fool. Had his lap full of gold, and got himself hanged." With that he came to his feet as if moved by steel springs and, with a parting, staring glance at the girl, swaggered outdoors.

Red of face, Mary whispered:

"The negroes?"

Brant briefly related what had happened, speaking under his breath. Instantly Mary was alert against a new danger. She glanced from the window and beheld Quantrill crossing through the line of stumps to join his men. Turning back, she surprised Brant by demanding:

"Give me your guns!"

"If it comes to that, I can handle them better than you can, Mary."

"No, no! Hand them over. Quick! They must be cleaned. He's gone to send men in search of the missing men. You mentioned hearing gunfire in the west. I'm afraid. No, you must not come with me. Sit in the doorway, where he can see you. Take the two guns behind the door for your belt. I must work fast."

Brant caught something of her fear. He handed over his weapons and secured Weldon's two guns and took his place in the doorway. The place had become a trap. One might enter, but none could depart without Quantrill's permission. The man's bloody whimsies almost induced Brant to believe he was insane. No one knew, not even the members of the band, what terrible deed the erratic, but always deadly, mind would next urge. For the first time in his life Brant sensed the deadening feeling of utter helplessness. He heard the guerrillas laughing and talking as they made their breakfast of Weldon's plump turkeys.

SUDDENLY he felt a pair of hands fumbling with his belt. He breathed in tremendous relief as he found them small and slim. Nor did he look over his shoulder as he felt the borrowed guns being removed and his own weapons being replaced. He heard the little sigh of relief as the exchange was finished. Without turning his head, and scarcely moving his lips, he murmured:

"The bravest girl in the whole United States—and the wisest."

He was sitting there, indolently resting his elbows on his knees, when a sudden commotion broke out in the guerrilla camp. At first he believed the ruffians were about to be attacked, and his heart beat high. Then one of the bearded men hoarsely shouted:

"Ben's found somethin'! It's somethin' mighty 'portant!"

Quantrill ordered his followers to be silent. The clearing became a stage set for rare drama. All in the cabin now heard it, a repetition of a shrill, ululating cry. Very soon the staccato hoof beats of a galloping horse fell on the ear. Then a rider tore by the door of the cabin and raced straight for the camp. He began to speak loud and excitedly, but was quickly checked by his commander, and Mary and Brant could not hear the rest of what he said.

The recital ended, and there was a deep silence, until it was broken by Quantrill's trembling voice. Almost overcome by rage, his voice became falsetto in timber when he commanded his men to keep in camp. Then he stalked back to the cabin, Weldon walking before him, and a big, ragged-haired fellow at his heels. Weldon's face was ghastly with fear. He called out to his daughter and Brant:

"A terrible crime has been done within a short distance of this cabin!"

"Close that yawp!" snarled Quantrill. "I'll do the talking. I may have to do some killing here." His eyes were feral as he glared over Weldon's shoulder at Brant, still sitting in the doorway.

Coming to a halt, his hands resting on two of the four guns in his belt, he demanded of Brant:

"Have any notion what one of my scouts has found?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. How could I know?"

"Don't you question me, damn you! My scout found two of my men, *dead*. Half buried. Been killed within twenty-four hours."

"But I have killed no one. I had nothing to do with their death," protested Brant.

"But you said you heard gunfire in the west."

"I repeat it. I heard guns fired. But if I'd been up to any killing I wouldn't likely have mentioned it."

Quantrill reached forward his left hand, his right gripping a gun, and yanked Brant's weapons from the belt. Without turning his head he called out:

"Here, Hockensmith."

**T**HE big man took the guns as they were passed over his leader's shoulder. Quantrill barked:

"See if those guns have been fired recently."

Then did Brant appreciate the foresight of the girl. He awaited the man's verdict without betraying any concern. After a brief, yet thorough examination, Hockensmith gruffly reported:

"Mighty clean, Chief."

Without relaxing his watchfulness, Quantrill took the guns. He raised the hammers a notch, twirled the cylinders, and inserted a twisted piece of paper in the muzzles; but he was forced to confirm his subordinate's verdict.

Yet he was lusting to wreak vengeance on some mortal for the loss of his men. He was staring like a demon at Brant, undecided whether to hand back the guns, or use them on the owner, when the rider who had brought the news came running up the path, calling out:

"I forgot to say, Cap'n, that the boys wasn't shot. Just sorter pulled to pieces. They had their heads bashed in."

"Why didn't you report that in the first place?" demanded Quantrill. But his gaze wavered as he glanced around the clearing. "What mortal thing could manhandle such stout men to death?" he cried, without addressing any individual in particular.

Wheeling on the quaking Weldon, he fiercely demanded:

"What do you know about such devil's work? Ever hear of a man being killed in these parts as those men were killed?"

"No, siree! Nor anywhere else. Never in all my born days!"

Quantrill surveyed him with contempt, and snarled:

"It's plain you never could do it."

He switched his gaze to Brant, who appeared to be deeply interested, but in no degree perturbed. Quantrill handed back the guns, and savagely said:

"I'd give a thousand dollars to know how those men died. I know you couldn't have done it, Brant. You'd use your guns. . . . Hockensmith, did you fetch back the boys' weapons?"

"Not a gun or a knife to be fetched."

Quantrill was enraged because he felt nonplused. Anything he did not understand was a potential peril. He swept his gaze along the edge of the clearing, and announced:

"Blood calls for blood. This neck of the woods needs a lesson. Hockensmith, take any four men you choose and ride out there and look for a trail. If you find one, follow it."

"The boys said they looked that ground over foot by foot, Cap'n. There was bushes beat down, like several men had had a rare fuss. But they couldn't find no boot tracks. There wan't no trail, except of two hossmen ridin' north. Looked like devil-ghost work."

"Would a ghost carry off all their guns and knives?" Yet the bandit leader was impressed by the mystery, and his gaze became furtive as he continued examining his surroundings. Then he suddenly asked Brant, "But you heard guns west of here?"

Brant nodded, and repeated:

"I heard guns. But I have no idea who fired them, or for what reason. It's as big a mystery to me as it is to you."

"Hockensmith, pick some of the boys and go out there and cast about very carefully. It's too damnable queer to leave behind us. After Ben made the find, he couldn't have searched very far, or very thorough."

Hockensmith ran to the camp and soon was riding away with three men trailing behind him. Quantrill continued nursing his aversion to what was inexplicable. He was afraid of mysteries. Todd had ousted him from leadership once, and he feared Todd. He believed Anderson was hostile to him, and he was afraid of that stormy guerrilla. If not for Brant's testimony he might have credited the deaths to invisible powers. Had the dead men been killed by knife or gun he would have suspected treachery on the part of those in his band who were planning to oust him from command. But the gunfire, testified to by Brant, and the seemingly impossible feat of an agency destroying two of his followers, all loyal to him, without using knife or bullet, left the worried leader in a rare mental fuddle. He told Brant:

"You're free to walk about. Don't stick here. You're safe with my men if you don't try to bolt."

"I don't want to bolt. I want to wait here until my friend, Dandy Jacques, comes. That's why I'm here—to meet him."

"Jacques is smart," said Quantrill. "But go over and neighbor with the boys."

Brant wandered to the outlaws' camp and was treated civilly. Some of the men, having learned he was fresh from a long stay in the gold country, were avid for information. Many in the band realized that bushwhacking could not continue. Those who had planned to escape retribution for their many crimes by flight to Texas or Old Mexico were recasting their plans and were wishing themselves in the gold camps. Brant quickly perceived their trend of thought, and his description of the rich diggings caused more than one man to smack his bearded lips and avow his desire to be where fighting and killing was more richly rewarded.

Dissension had been smoldering in the band for some time. Anderson and Todd already were planning to oust Quantrill from command. The file of the organization feared the net was about to be drawn tightly about all free riders and wished to leave the border before they were caught in the inexorable roundup of all their kind. Quantrill was unique among all ruthless men along the border. He hated the North, but was not deeply concerned over the welfare of the South. Above all else he hated Kansas. He hated the Confederate General Price. He despised Shelby. He had grown to hate the Confederacy, believing he had been denied official advancement because of Price's opposition.

His men knew much of all these hates. They also knew there was rivalry between Todd and Anderson, both seeking to supplant Quantrill. Such politics were deadly. The men knew Todd would side with Quantrill in order to oust Anderson from the band, and then would be the actual leader, governing through Quantrill. It was all too involved and vexatious to simple minds concentrated on the simple problems of killing and looting.

Because of this general unrest and fear for the immediate future, Brant found ready listeners to his stories. He described so vividly the richness of Last Chance and Alder gulches that his hearers licked their lips. Had either Quantrill, Anderson, or Todd at that time suggested a migration to the northern mines the exodus would have included practically

every man.

One bearded guerrilla expressed it for all when he summed up their situation by saying—

"This damn stretch of border is gittin' too damn fussy."

NOR were the men slow to discuss the mysterious extermination of their two comrades. Some were superstitious, and, like their leader, they feared what they could not comprehend. Had the bodies been found shot through and slashed with bowie knives, there would have been no mystery. Brant, finding he was listened to respectfully and accepted as an authority on gold mining, would have preferred the camp to the cabin, if not for the presence of the girl. When he had ceased talking and the men congregated in little groups to discuss the gold country, he sauntered along the stump fence to the point nearest the cabin.

His steps were quickened by what seemed to be a shrill protest. He ran through a narrow opening of the rude barrier and came upon Mary Weldon, who was flushed of face and was staring wrathfully at Quantrill. The latter spun about on his heel and savagely commanded:

"Get back to the camp! This cabin's headquarters. Your place isn't here."

"But I heard the young lady cry out in fear—as if she had been scared by a snake."

"Never mind what you reckoned. Get back where you belong!"

Brant remained, his thumbs hooked in his belt, his gaze fixed on the guerrilla's long, slim hands.

"Get back across that fence!" again ordered Quantrill, his eyes widening in the killer's fixed stare.

"I'm Southern born," quietly replied Brant. "I don't belong to your outfit. And if the young lady is alarmed I am not taking any orders from you. Your men can easily kill me, although they'd rather I would guide them north to Montana. But before anyone can kill me I'll get you first. I know you're quick with a gun, but I'm quicker. I can beat you on the draw."

For a bit Brant believed it was to be a test between the guerrilla and himself. But Quantrill had problems sufficient to require the most subtle planning without being needlessly involved with an outsider. And he noted that the men in the camp were slowly drifting up to the fence. He harshly

said:

"You make a boy's talk when you brag about gunplay. I'll overlook it this time. This young woman misunderstood me. And a Southern gentleman should always be ready to protect Southern women. You've made a mistake, but I believe you were honest in doing so. My protection is enough for any of this household. This young woman can be in no danger. Isn't that true, miss?"

"Oh, yes! Yes!" Mary was now afraid for Brant, whereas she had been afraid for herself.

"Having heard her say that, will you go back where you belong?" The snarl had returned to Quantrill's voice.

But Brant realized that he had advanced too far into the animosity of the killer to withdraw without catching a bullet in the back. His decision was quickly taken. Even if his presence spelled the ruthless killings of daughter and father, and himself, he knew he must not again leave the girl unprotected.

He drawled quietly:

"I am sticking here."

Quantrill inhaled deeply, crazy lights dancing in his eyes. Brant was alert, his hands nervous, eager to draw his guns and have it over with. He slowly closed his fingers more tightly about the two Navy Colts, the famous .44 being the favorite arm of the day.

When it seemed as if the impending tragedy must explode, there came an interruption—a shout from the creek path south of the cabin. Quantrill's nervous muscles relaxed, only to tighten instantly as he wondered what fortune, good or bad, was coming up behind him.

A HORSEMAN was approaching the cabin at a gallop, waving his hat and calling out greetings. Quantrill asked the girl:

"Miss Weldon, who comes?" He still faced Brant.

"A friend," she exclaimed, her frightened eyes lighting. "James Jacques, our friend!"

Not until then did Brant dare shift his gaze from the bushwhacker's guns. He lifted his head as the handsome, reckless rider came racing to the front of the big log cabin.

Dandy Jacques sensed the tenseness of the two men's truculent bearing even before he was clear of the saddle. He stepped between the two and extended a hand to each, and genially greeted him.

"I trust that I find no misunderstanding here."

"Not on my part, Dandy. Your friend was unnecessarily alarmed."

"If he really was alarmed, Captain, then I am alarmed. He's too cool a hand to be alarmed needlessly. He and I were boys together. I know him and vouch for him. But surely it's only a misunderstanding. "Just that, and nothing more."

"I want him to stay in the camp with my men."

With a reckless laugh Jacques countered:

"And I want him to stay here, with me."

"Jacques," somberly began Quantrill, "you can do almost anything with me. But even you can go only so far." His eyes frowned as he beheld his curious followers pressing closer.

"I live so much in a pilot house, Capt'n, and have my way when I give orders—give orders even to the captain of the boat—that I've got used to having my way." Then he turned to his friend, and asked, "What's your objection to staying in the camp, Lige?"

"I heard a woman call out, as if frightened," said Brant.

JACQUES' dark face was filled with sudden passion. His voice was a bit unsteady, as he told Quantrill:

"I vouch for Brant. He's my friend. I saved your life when a gun was at your head in a St. Louis barroom. You pretended to appreciate my intrusion then. But you don't like my intrusion now. Now I'm interfering with your business. I want my friend here where I can talk with him."

"I told him to stay in the camp, and there he stays," said Quantrill.

"And I know him too well to expect him to change his mind, once it's made up. But maybe I can change it for him, now that I am here. Maybe I can't. But whether you insist on his living on the other side of that stump fence, or try to kill him in his tracks, that decision will cost you and your outfit just a cool million dollars, Quantrill. Seems to be a question how high you value the having of your own way."

The men of the band were now separated from the three men and the maid only by the stump fence. They exchanged startled glances. Quantrill knew that gold had spoken to his followers more loudly, more compellingly, than ever he could speak. He licked his dry lips, and conceded:

"It's something to be talked over—this million

dollars. If you vouch for Brant, he can stay where he pleases. We'll go inside the cabin and talk about that million."

From across the fence George Todd spoke up.

"We're all mighty keen to hear about that very same million, Cap'n." As he said this he swaggered through the opening, with the others quickly crowding behind him.

Quantrill swallowed his wrath and readily acquiesced:

"Very well. I intended to report fully to you if Jacques' talk amounted to anything. We'll all cross to t'other side of the stump line and hold a council. More room there."

"I'll be with you in just a few minutes, gentlemen," said Jacques. "I have a few messages for Brant from some of his old St. Louis friends. I must repeat them before I forget them."

With that he turned and led the way into the cabin, stepping aside at the door for the girl to precede him. Those outside saw him clap his hands on Brant's shoulders and shake him playfully and pretend to struggle with him. The men grinned at the foolishness of it as Brant stood motionless, while the river-pilot in pantomime pretended to be exerting himself to his utmost.

Then the two men dropped on to a couch of bearskins and the girl walked to the window across the room to give them privacy. Jacques' laughing lips quickly warned:

"This is a hell-trap for you and Mary. I'm crossing over the stumps to keep them interested with fairy stories while you two light out. Yankee cavalry is within two miles of here, perhaps much closer. Scouting for Quantrill. Let Mary vamoose out the back window and have half a mile start of you down the crick. While waiting for her to get that lead, show yourself at the window and door, and look over your shoulder as if talking to her. Then you follow her."

"And you?"

"Oh, I stand ace-high here. I'll come along. Before you pull out start a blaze in the fireplace. Empty a feather bed on it to make a smoke; empty anything. Then hustle out the back way and down the creek. The smoke should call the cavalry here. Once you catch up with Mary, go into snug hiding till the cavalry comes in and makes all safe for you two."

"But what of you, Dandy?" insisted Brant.

"Why, nothing. They'll believe my fairy story.

I'll be all right. Now we mustn't talk any longer. . . . Remember when our hats started sailing down the Missouri? Till we meet again, you old whelp."

The girl called out warningly:

"Something is happening."

Jacques stepped to her side and raised her hand to his lips, and assured:

"Nothing can happen to hurt us. Come Federal cavalry, come devil, we're all hunky-dory." As he spoke he backed through the doorway, extravagantly flourishing his soft white hat and laughing as if much amused.

From the window, after gazing at the hand he had kissed, the girl softly said:

"You've acted as if you were saying goodbye."

"Till we meet again!" With another wide gesture of his hands, in which Brant read an imperious urging to immediate flight, Jacques briskly joined the silent, ominous group.

The girl had warned that something was happening. Despite his jaunty bearing Jacques was wondering what new dilemma was forward. Once he was with the bandits he took his cue from their focused eyes and beheld the men whom Quantrill had sent out on a second reconnaissance, returning. Todd hurriedly told him about the mysterious death of the two men. This party of investigators came up at a round gallop. Quantrill was very expectant on beholding their ill-repressed excitement. He barked:

"Well, what killed them?"

Hockensmith leaped to the ground and cried:

"Found nothin' new where our boys was kilt. But we found their dawgs, each one shot to death. By a revolver."

Quantrill's eyes glistened. He eagerly asked:

"You fetched back one of the bullets, of course?"

"Naw. Dawgs was kilt. Can't ye take my word for it? Why fetch back a bullet, or tote back a dead dawg?"

With a resigned sign of disgust, Quantrill said:

"That's why I am your leader. You have heads, but you don't think. The bullet would at least tell the caliber of the gun used." To his men he announced, "We can't feel safe for a minute until we know how our friends died."

"We can look into that later," spoke up George Todd. "Why bother about dead dawgs when a story about a million dollars is waiting to be told?"

Quantrill shifted his gaze to the cabin, and his



eyes glittered as he beheld Brant standing in the doorway, his head turned as he talked over his shoulder. To Jacques he explained:

"Your friend Brant said he heard gunfire in the west while on his way here. I was at the cabin at the time. I heard none. What he heard must have been the shots that killed the dogs."

THE discovery of the slain dogs disturbed Quantrill more than he cared to have his followers realize. When he had the odds on his side, and the advantage of a surprise attack, he was a most effective killing machine. He was an excellent marksman, and the revolvers in his belt meant as many victims as their chambers held bullets.

The strength of his band varied from one to two score hard riders who were thoroughly familiar with the technique of border banditry. This maximum of strength increased and diminished, according to whether the band was riding to victory, or galloping from defeat. In the back of Quantrill's mind ever was the worry of being deposed. He slept apart from his followers, and the slightest sound would cause him to awaken and be on his guard.

He was a haunted man, and the dread of treachery, as well as the insane hatred of all things pertaining to the North, had created in his mind a demoniac lust for slaying. Now his suspicious mind was wondering if some of the Todd following had killed the dogs for some subtle reason, or whether some Northern sympathizer had exterminated the pack.

He could not rid his mind of the mystery: for a puzzle it was when the death of the two brigands, and the manner of their dying, was recalled. His first words, as the band squatted in a big circle, or reclined prostrate on the ground, harked back to what was troubling him. He said:

"Brant told me that he heard firing in the west." He turned to stare suspiciously at the lounging figure in the doorway. "I reckon I'll have him over here to see if he don't know how the dogs were killed."

"If he knew anything about the dead dogs he never would have let on that he had heard any firing," spoke up Jacques. "He don't know who killed the dogs any more than I do."

"Jacques, when business is brought up here, you keep that trap closed, or somebody will close it for

you." Quantrill's eyes showed overmuch of the white as he shifted his gaze to stare steadily at La Barge's best pilot.

But the young man was not visibly impressed. He laughed good naturedly, and challenged:

"Here I am, surrounded by an ocean of Navy .44's, the guest of a certain Captain Black, whose life I saved in St. Louis. It needs but one pill from the doctor's medicine bag to snuff out my candle. The man who acts the doctor will always be remembered as firing the shot which cost him and his friends a cold million."

"No one here wants to kill a million dollars," harshly spoke up Todd. As he spoke he exchanged glances with Anderson.

Quantrill, through half closed lids, noticed his exchange of glances. He had known of their hostility to him for some time. He also had realized they were rivals for the leadership of the band. Thus far he had succeeded in playing one against the other. He was not yet ready for an open break with them. The odds were not in his favor. He faced Jacques and ordered:

"Let's hear your plan. I hope for your sake it is a good one. Hockensmith, post a man south and west, so there can be no surprise attack."

Hockensmith hurriedly named two men. But these remained sprawling on the ground, with no relish for missing the pilot's plan for making what would be the record-breaking coup of all border thieving. Hockensmith grinned widely and tossed up his hands in a gesture of helplessness. Todd was quick to grasp an opportunity. He growled:

"Mattox, you take the southern post. Menk, you take the west."

THE band understood. Todd had been quick to accomplish what Quantrill had failed in. It gave him the edge on Anderson, his rival. The men named were Todd's friends and followers. They knew their interests were safe so long as he sat in the council circle. His order had been obeyed, whereas Quantrill's, indirectly given, had been ignored. Two other men volunteered under the simple impetus of Todd's questioning gaze. This incident angered both Quantrill and Anderson.

Quantrill bottled up his seething rage, occasioned by this minor insubordination. Anderson glowered heavily at his competitor. Quantrill's eyes were lurid as he turned to Jacques, and curtly said:

"We're listening."

Jacques swept his gaze over the reckless, eager, bearded faces, hugged his knees, and began.

"I know where a million dollars in clean gold nuggets and dust is being held, awaiting shipment to Washington."

"Where?" fiercely demanded Todd.

For once Quantrill relished the young man's independence, who was now drawling:

"Suppose you let me go about it in my own way. When folks fire questions I get confused and am liable to say anything. There's no chance to bag it offhand." And, apparently not noticing Todd's malignant gaze, he plucked short tufts of grass and idly tossed them for the soft breeze to sport with and, incidentally, inform himself that a heavy smoke from the cabin chimney would be blown to the west and not over the wolfish men, and thereby call attention to the smudge Brant was to make. He leisurely continued:

"Most of you know I am a Missouri river pilot. I've fetched many fortunes from the mines through all the different kind of river dangers and many Injun attacks. I did my own work well for La Barge. He paid well for my services. I'd never scheme with any men to get that gold while it was on a La Barge boat. I'd fight to the death to protect it. But, after it's taken from the boat, it's a hoss of a different color. I've seen so much of gold that it's gotten to be common with me. I never think any more about it than I do about mining machinery, or any other freight."

"Yes, yes," impatiently prompted Quantrill. "Where is the gold? What's your plan?"

"I've got to tell this my own way, Cap'n, else I'll be forgetting things. The plan is all pictured in my mind. The sudden holdup, the capture of the gold, and the escape with it."

"I'll attend to the last," curtly assured Quantrill. Anderson smiled grimly. Todd's brows went up in a query.

"To get clear of the border will be the hardest part of the job," Jacques continued. "Just as careful planning is necessary for holding on to the loot as in getting it out of the place where it is housed. As I size it up, it can be done without the loss of a life, and no hard riding except at the start."

HE paused, and idly tossed up more grass, and again noted that the breeze from the east was blowing a considerable volume of smoke from the

cabin into the western woods. Clapping his hands sharply, and thereby focusing all the predatory eyes upon him, he leaned forward, and unconsciously added drama to the situation by lowering his voice as if fearful of being overheard. Fixing his gaze on Quantrill, he continued:

"The job must be done at night. There must be no confusion. No gunplay. No alarm will be given if we succeed. The actual capture of the gold can be made by four men. Two strong carts will be waiting in the alley beneath the window. The four men will lower the bags. Four men in the alley will place them in the carts and cover them with garden dressing. The drivers of the carts should be out of the town before the loss is known. They will travel south. The horsemen will gallop west. The entire plan must be understood by all before we stir a step. I've figured the plan all out, in every detail, while coming down the river.

"One, or several, prairie schooners must be camped at a certain point. The carts will be taken there and left. The drivers, taking the horses, will ride for cover. The carts will be burned, the iron work thrown into the crick. The schooners should go into camp there several days before the raid, perhaps two weeks. The women should do much washing. Their men will walk to town and buy supplies and ask questions as to the safest roads into southern Kansas. It would be a fine touch if we could have some little children in that train. The younger the better.

"Remember, after the surprise attack, with not a gun fired and not a man killed, the gold will be slowly taken to the camp and thrown out. The immigrants will be waiting to scoop it up and hide it in the wagon beds. The horsemen will not pause for a moment. No more jogging along. They'll ride furiously south. After ten or a dozen miles, with the chase hot or cold, the band will split, no two men keeping together. Each horseman will know ahead just the place he is to go to and hide. After the excitement has died down a bit, and the chase has led to nowhere, the horsemen will make for the Injun Territory line, traveling at a moderate rate of speed, but no two can travel together. The chase will be centered on the horsemen. They will meet at a rendezvous, the name being given each man on the night of the raid. After reaching the rendezvous the hiding place of the gold will be revealed, and the ride to it will be in a body.

"Now to return to the wagon train: the poor

whites will not break camp until the chase is far ahead of them. Then it will proceed, traveling only in the daytime, and making poor headway. Everything about the train will suggest ill luck—no hard money, shiftlessness. The people of the train will wear homespun, and the men will carry long Kentucky rifles, and every man will have fair to middling whiskers. There will be no six-shooters in the train. If a posse comes up and asks questions, they're just pilgrims, and very timid. They've seen one band of horsemen riding off in the west. They'll beg the posse to keep along with them to protect them from Injuns and border ruffians. The posse never will quit the search for the lost million to defend any poor white trash. In this way the gold can be taken into Injun Territory."

JACQUES paused for breath, and noted that the smoke from the cabin chimney was heavier and darker, and was crawling higher into the heavens. But the structure did not appear to be on fire.

Every pair of eyes was fixed on Jacques. George Todd was the first to speak. He said:

"That outfit you describe never would be taken for pilgrims unless the women were real women. Mighty few of us could wear petticoats and fool anybody."

Jacques promptly replied:

"That's where Cap'n Quantrill comes in strong. From the dancehalls of St. Louis he can get a dozen women to dress and act the part of immigrant women. They won't be let into the secret, and they can't blab what they don't know. They'll be given to think the packages of gold are so many packs of ammunition for the Confederacy. The cap'n will pick only women who are loyal to the South."

"I can get a hundred inside of twenty-four hours and go bail for the loyalty of every one," boasted Quantrill.

"It's a good workable scheme, with two *ifs* against it. *If* it is not so strongly kept as to require a fight, and *if* we can get it out of Missouri. We'll arrange for the wagons and women at once. Now, where is the stuff stored, or hidden?"

"Pacific. Edge of Jefferson County," promptly answered Jacques. "Makes it only a short dash to where it can be passed over to the Indiana wagon train, in camp on some small crick."

"That chimbly's burnin' out!" cried a man.

"To hell with it!" growled Anderson. "The whole nest should be burned out. Anything else to

tell?" The last was addressed to Jacques.

"Nothing that you don't know. Shelby and his cavalry has crossed this State, if we be in Arkansas, and has been turned back near St. Charles by the Federal General Carr. By this time he should be re-enforced by Marmaduke. Missouri surely will be invaded. That'll take attention off from us. If our wagon train should be caught between old Rosecrans' men and our soldiers, our luck will be out."

"Why didn't you tell about Shelby in the first place?" fiercely demanded Quantrill. "If he's been licked, then we may be bagged."

"I suppose you knew what was commonly known from St. Louis to Springfield—from St. Charles to Injun Territory."

"Judas! The old man's cabin *is* afire!" cried one of the lookouts.

QUANTRILL came to his feet slowly. Little murderous glints showed in his eyes.

"Why didn't your friend, or the girl, or the old man, sing out for us to help fight the fire, Jacques?"

Before Jacques could improvise an answer, the man on watch to the west called out:

"Tall feller ain't showed hisself at the door for some time. Must be lovin' the gal."

"I believe that something is wrong in there!" cried Jacques, and he made for the roaring cabin.

"Hold back there!" yelled Quantrill. "If your friend's been up to any game, you pay for both."

Jacques ceased running and allowed Quantrill to range along beside him. Todd also held back, his eyes as hard as flints. The cabin now was hopelessly engulfed by the flames. The men ceased running, and several dropped on the ground to enjoy the spectacle. Suddenly one of them scrambled to his feet and hoarsely yelled:

"Hosses comin'! Heaps of 'em! Licky-terlarrup!"

All the guerrillas ran to their mounts and opened fire, even as they retreated, at the head of a column of Union cavalry, which burst through the growth which bordered the creek path. With yells which equaled the war-cry of the irregulars, the cavalry came on, firing their carbines. Jacques felt a terrible blow on his shoulder, and spun halfway around. He was hit again, and fell to the ground. Dimly he looked up and saw that the shots came from the retreating guerrillas.

Laboriously drawing a long gun, he summoned

all his will power, and fired three shots rapidly before collapsing. Two guerrillas bowed to one side, and then pitched headlong from their saddles.

The guerrillas were in frantic flight, breaking up into twos and threes, and scurrying to cover. Jacques knew that he was badly wounded, although he felt no pain. His dull eyes lighted as he beheld Brant, bareback, racing toward him. Without waiting for his mount to come to a halt Brant leaped to the ground and kneeled beside his friend.

“Badly hurt, Dandy?” he hoarsely cried.

“Reckon I stopped right smart lead, Lige. Game

worked fine. Told my million dollar fairy story.”

“You ol’ river pirate. A little lead can’t kill you,” Brant said relievedly as he tore open the flannel shirt and beheld the wound.

“Shucks, Lige. I knew Mary had picked you. I talked a bit with her. Couldn’t let Quantrill kill Mary’s beau.”

“Dandy—I—”

“Hard a-port! Shut up! You don’t owe me anything. I’m just paying back for that mad wolf—just as I promised. You ol’ mountain man, you . . .”