



**CRACKER
BARREL
TROUBLE SHOOTER**

JIM KJELGAARD

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CRACKER BARREL TROUBLE SHOOTER

Books by Jim Kjelgaard

BIG RED

REBEL SIEGE

FOREST PATROL

BUCKSKIN BRIGADE

CHIP, THE DAM BUILDER

FIRE HUNTER

IRISH RED

KALAK OF THE ICE

A NOSE FOR TROUBLE

SNOW DOG

TRAILING TROUBLE

WILD TREK

THE EXPLORATIONS OF PERE

MARQUETTE

THE SPELL OF THE WHITE STURGEON

OUTLAW RED

THE STORY OF THE MORMONS

CRACKER BARREL TROUBLE

SHOOTER

Cracker Barrel Trouble Shooter

BY JIM KJELGAARD

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FOR BARBARA AND BETTY

**The characters and situations in this book are
wholly fictional and
imaginative: they do not portray and are not
intended to portray any
actual persons or parties.**

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CHAPTER ONE

Inheritance

When the gong ended the fifth round, Bill Rawls remained for a second in the center of the ring. He teetered uncertainly on legs that were made of rubber, and a foolish grin overspread his face while with blurred eyes he seemed to see half a dozen opponents. Then he regained his strength, walked to his corner, and sat wearily down. A moment later he felt the bite of the astringent that Johnny Markson, his second, was applying to a cut on his cheek.

Johnny's jaw was set and grim, but concern was also written in his face as he ministered expertly to his friend. Bill winked a puffed and swollen eye, winced with pain, and looked ruefully across the ring at a twenty-year-old who seemed to have a mule's kick in both hands and who could throw punches so fast that both fists were quite unaccountably in Bill's face and midriff at the same time and all the time.

He was Alan Chesterton, from State College, and Bill had drawn him in this inter-collegiate boxing meet.

Johnny's soothing hands were rubbing Bill's shoulder and back muscles now, and Bill relaxed gratefully. He stole a glance at the clock and grimaced. A half second ago, or so it seemed, he had sat down. But the minute's intermission between rounds was already more than half gone.

Johnny asked, "Want me to stop it, fella?"

"Nope."

"He's murdering you and you know it."

"I can still move."

"A couple of more rounds and you won't be able to."

"If I could only figure his style, I might get him."

"Style is what that boy's got, brother."

"I know it. It's been bouncing off my face for five rounds. I can't seem to get inside his guard."

"Still think I'd better stop it."

"Nope."

Johnny said wearily, "All right. Go in and get your fool head knocked off."

The gong clanged again and Bill rose to move into the center of the ring. He circled warily, watching as he did so this young man who could handle himself so expertly and hit so hard. Of course, under all ordinary circumstances, Johnny would have been right and the fight should have been stopped; nobody but a born idiot deliberately asks for a beating. But for five rounds Bill had faced Alan Chesterton, and during that time he had studied the other very carefully. It did seem that there were times when he held his lethal right hand just a little bit lower than he should and, if Bill could get inside his almost-faultless guard for even a split second, there might be a chance of at least fighting to a draw.

There was a short flurry in which nobody got hurt. The two fighters clinched and were separated by the referee. Then Bill

saw the opportunity he had been awaiting and that was the last thing he saw.

His head was spinning when he awoke, and for a moment he could not remember where he was. Then, with a sudden rush, everything was crystal-clear. He was boxing and, naturally, one did not box by lying on the canvas. He must get up and resume the fight. Bill rose to a kneeling position and then to a crouch. He pulled himself up on the ropes, swayed, and Johnny's steady hand was on his shoulder.

In the center of the ring, the referee was holding Alan Chesterton's gloved hand erect in token of victory. Bill turned puzzled eyes on Johnny, and Johnny shook his head.

"That's all there is. There is no more."

"But—"

"It was a knockout, William, the neatest and cleanest these dim old eyes have ever beheld. He hit you so hard that your great-grandfather's teeth must have rattled."

"But that can't be!"

"It was. If you doubt me, there are a few hundred reputable witnesses present who will bear me out. I told you it would happen. That guy's a born boxer."

Alan Chesterton, who was no longer a raging demon but a nice, towheaded, amiable youngster, moved across the ring with a deceptively-awkward shuffle and grinned at Bill.

"Little boys," he said, "should not try to box men."

Bill sniffed. "The next time I fight you, you can be sure of one thing; I'll have my cousin help me."

They shook hands and Bill climbed out of the ring. Johnny stayed beside him as he went up the aisle toward the dressing rooms, and Bill murmured politely to the many spectators who spoke to him. Until now, when he had met someone who was really good, he had rather fancied himself as a boxer. It was more than a little disconcerting to be so easily out-pointed and out-classed.

Entering the dressing room, Bill took off his shoes, slipped out of his trunks, and stood still for a moment. He had taken a great many savage body blows and mighty upper cuts to the head, and it seemed impossible to hurt in so many places all at once. Johnny grinned at his many bruises.

"As a boxer," he said, "you should be a first-class architect. Into the shower with you!"

"Aw for pete's sake!"

Johnny was relentless. "Into the shower with you. Then old Doctor Johnny will rub some horse liniment on those caved-in ribs and things you're wearing."

Bill entered a shower stall and let its needle spray sting his body. His various aches melted away to throbs, and suddenly he began to laugh. Johnny poked a suspicious head inside the shower stall.

"Have you gone crazy at last?"

"His face!" Bill chortled. "I just remembered his face!"

"Whose face?"

"My uncle's!" Bill gasped, as though that were self-explanatory.

"You're punch happy!"

Bill hurled the bar of soap and Johnny ducked just in time to avoid getting it in the head. Bill's side-splitting laughter dribbled away to a few hearty chuckles.

His father had died nine years ago, when Bill was ten, and his mother had died two years before that. His uncle, who liked to be called Alfred Carling Rawls, had been appointed Bill's legal guardian and the administrator of the tidy fortune which his father had left. Alfred Carling Rawls had profound and unshakable ideas about various subjects.

For a short space Bill renewed his laughter. It was his uncle who had suggested that he go to college and study architecture and Bill had considered it a good idea. But his uncle also had positive notions as to who was and who was not a gentleman and what did and did not befit gentlemen. At Christmas vacation he had had a heart-to-heart talk with his nephew. Bill remembered the exact quotation:

"William, we are not without some right to family pride. But that right at the same time imposes certain obligations, and not the least of these is dignity. Never forget that and all that it means."

Bill laughed again, and at the same time he knew a sense of shame. To stand in a boxing ring and trade punches with Alan Chesterton—or to be punched by him—hardly coincided with

his Uncle Al's idea of dignity. He would consider it rowdyism instead, and maybe the next time Bill went home the less said about some things the better. But now Bill knew only that he had enjoyed the fight.

He gave the cold water full force and his skin seemed to shrivel beneath it. But it felt good. A young man and a healthy one, he had all the recuperative powers of the young and healthy. His head was no longer rocking, and the faint nausea that had been in the pit of his stomach was washed away under the shower. He turned the water off, and while the faucet surrendered its last few gurgling splashes he stepped onto the shower mat and rubbed himself briskly with a rough towel.

Johnny advanced on him with a bottle of liniment in his hand and a gleam in his eye. Bill protested.

"I don't need any skin remover!"

"Sissy!"

Bill groaned and gave in while Johnny applied the liniment. Then he dressed and turned to his friend.

"How do I look?"

Johnny squinted at him and pronounced judgment. "Like you've been whipped up with a potato masher. One more fight like that and you'll be all cauliflower. Not that you ever were a beauty, of course."

"There won't be any more fights," Bill promised. "I've just had rather convincing proof that there are better boxers than I. Do you think I'm a dope?"

"Do I have to answer that one?"

"My pal," Bill grunted. "I won't forget your loyalty. When you're a famous lawyer and I'm a famous architect, I'll throw all my business your way."

"I haven't any doubt that you'll give me the business. Come on. Let's go drown the memory of your humiliating defeat."

Side by side they left the auditorium and walked into a star-sprinkled night. A cold wind blew and here and there a patch of dirty, melting snow still lingered. But the wind was not the snarling one that had whipped about corners while winter was at its height. It had lost its storm-born sinews and its teeth. Winter was on its way out. In a week or so, spring would bloom over the university town of Tenngale. And spring always brought new promise.

The pair passed shadowy figures as they walked, sometimes one or two and sometimes a group, and murmured greetings. Everybody either knew everyone else or, if they did not, they could be sure that they were meeting a fellow student. It was a free and easy atmosphere dominated by young people, and it was a life that Bill liked. But as he walked along with Johnny he felt a vague unrest which he could not explain.

He had been so young when his parents died that he did not remember a great deal about them. Because he had pictures, Bill knew that his mother had been lovely and he took a somewhat smug pride in the exploits of his father. Colin Rawls had landed in New York with twenty pounds in his pocket, and by sheer strength and fighting spirit he had become a successful contractor. Then a year before his marriage he had brought his young brother and sister from the genteel but

down-at-the-heels ancestral home in England and ensconced them in the comfortable New York house where Bill had grown up.

Bill's aunt, Alicia, had been married before Bill was born and she died ten years later. Her brother, Alfred Carling Rawls, a boy of sixteen when he and Alicia came to the United States, had devoted himself to a life of quiet study. In recent years he had lectured frequently before learned gatherings whose purpose Bill understood only dimly.

It was difficult to reconcile the two brothers, product of the same father and mother but so different, and to find the right place for each of them. Each, in his own way, did seem to represent something fine and decent and something the world needed. But Bill often wondered, as he was wondering now, whether his uncle really understood the dynamic forces which he himself felt sometimes and whether or not Alfred Carling Rawls was really capable of guiding him. Still, he liked architecture and he seemed to have a knack for it.

"Why so quiet?" Johnny asked.

"I was thinking."

"Miracles will happen," Johnny murmured, and fell into some silent reflection of his own.

They turned the corner, and midway down the next block a neon rooster with a comb of red flame strutted back and forth above the sidewalk. This was The Rooster's Nest, and sooner or later every one of the students found his way to it. In addition to being a wonderful place for having fun, it was also a retreat where plans could be made, cramming done, sorrows

quieted, new hopes born and old ones revived, and broken hearts mended under the understanding supervision of John Paleopastrinis, who had never even been to high school but who knew as much about the students at Tenngale as anyone else except the Dean of Men.

Bill and Johnny stood aside while a crowd of laughing youngsters filed out, then made their way in. The booths were filled and, save for four empty chairs, so was the fountain. A juke box played the latest hit tune and in the center of the floor two couples were dancing. Toward the rear of the long building the lights were shaded and the acoustics were such that the juke box's music was heard there as only a gentle melody. That was the quiet part of The Rooster's Nest and it was intended for those who wanted peace.

Bill and Johnny made their way to two of the empty stools at the counter and Rip Parker, who was in Law with Johnny, turned around to say with a grin, "Hi, Champ."

"Hi," Bill said cheerfully.

"Sorry you didn't take him."

"You can't lick everybody."

"Nope. You can't. That guy's got a wicked right."

"And an even wickeder left."

"Let's not get sentimental," Johnny said with mock severity. "And sleeping dogs are just as well not awakened. This sadly-battered man needs forgetfulness."

Johnny rapped on the counter and John Paleopastrinis himself

responded. He was a short, fat man who had a miraculous way of keeping a clean white apron about his bulging midriff. Freshmen at Tenngale always watched breathlessly, waiting for the apron to fall off, but it never did. The top of John Paleopastrinis' entirely bald head came just about to a medium-tall man's shoulder, but on the day he was born some kindly angel had breathed a smile into his eyes and it had been there ever since. He beamed to a halt in front of Johnny and Bill.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "You been fightin' again!"

"Not so much chatter!" Johnny, still the mockingly-severe mentor, said. "We need something to drown our sorrows because the hope of Tenngale has fallen! What'll it be, Bill?"

Bill affected an air of desperation. "Coke! Make it a double one with a dash of lemon!"

"That's the old fight! We'll have two of those!"

They sipped their drinks, paying little attention to the noise around them and not speaking themselves. Bill's reflective mood prevailed and he had no desire to talk. He drained his glass, then waited for his friend to finish. Finally Johnny turned to him.

"Strong stuff, huh?"

"Potent."

"Have another?"

"No, thanks."

"What would you like to do?"

"Let's go home."

"Brilliant! Let's."

Johnny reached for his wallet but John Paleopastrinis waved a hand the size of a small ham.

"No, this time it's on the house."

"You're a gentleman. Thank you."

They turned to leave, and John Paleopastrinis called after them, "You win the next time! Yes?"

Bill grinned and said "Yes."

Into the night that was still winter, but that held a strong promise of becoming spring, they went. A few fleecy clouds floated across the sky and the stars shone through them. Bill edged up to walk closer to Johnny, who, when the occasion demanded it, had a tongue tipped with acid but always a nature tinged with honey.

Johnny asked, "Feel any pangs?"

"No."

"I thought you might, now that you've seen your boxing career smashed on Chesterton's gloves."

"I never had or wanted a boxing career. It's just fun to stand up and trade punches sometimes."

"Good boy!" Johnny said.

They took a right-angle turn down the street to Moody Hall,

entered the lobby, and side by side walked up the stairs to the second-floor room which they shared. Bill, whose aches were returning, took off his overcoat, hung it in the closet, and went in to wash his bruised face again.

When he came out of the washroom, Johnny was sitting on his bed. His eyes were troubled, his manner thoughtful, and in his hand was a square of white paper. "Feeling okeh?" he asked.

"Sure."

Johnny glanced down at the piece of paper and he raised his eyes to meet Bill's. "The Intellect wants to see you. Now—urgent."

"Oh, hang! Let me see it!"

Bill took and read the message. Instructor Tom Crooks, who was not much older than the students he supervised but who still managed to obtain a fair amount of order in Moody Hall, wanted to see Bill as soon as he came in. Bill must not for any reason delay the interview. He laid the message on the dresser and Johnny looked at him in concern.

"You in trouble, fella?"

"None I can think of."

"Well, run along and see what The Intellect wants. If you need anything, you know where I am."

"Sure thing."

Bill walked rapidly down the hall to Instructor Crooks' room and knocked on the door. Crooks himself, a young Political

Science expert already noted for his mental capacities and known even to his face as "The Intellect," admitted him.

"Come in, Bill."

"Thank you."

Bill entered the plainly furnished room and waited expectantly. Everybody, even those to whom he gave poor marks, liked Tom Crooks for his fairness and complete honesty. He was not famous for his subtlety, though, and now he seemed troubled. He blinked behind thick glasses, looked at the floor a second, and faced Bill squarely.

"Bill, I'm afraid it's bad news."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I had you paged at the auditorium but you'd already left. I tried again at The Rooster's Nest, and missed you by only a minute or so. Your uncle has suffered a heart attack."

"Is it serious?"

"He's dead, Bill."

Bill stood dully, not able to assimilate at once the full meaning of all this. Within a short time, he thought oddly, it would really hit home. Right at the moment, it meant little. Bill could only think to say, "It—it's hard to imagine."

Tom Crooks said quietly, "I'm sorry, and there really isn't much anyone can do in the face of death. On the assumption that you'd want to get home as fast as possible, I did take the liberty of reserving a seat for you on the eleven o'clock plane."

"Thank you."

"I'll go with you if you want me to."

"I think I'd rather go alone."

"I understand," Tom Crooks said. "Pack your bags and I'll drive you to the airport."

Bill walked back to his room, and all he still felt, or thought he ever would feel, was a dull ache. He was grateful for Tom Crooks' understanding. This was a personal matter, one to be handled personally. His friends would extend their sympathy, and when they had done that they could do nothing else. None of them had known his uncle.

When he entered the room, Johnny looked up and Bill said, "I'm leaving, Johnny."

Johnny asked, "Is there anything I can do?"

"I'm afraid not. My uncle died of a heart attack."

"Sorry, fella," Johnny said, quietly.

Bill was glad because he said no more, but then Johnny would say no more. If Bill wanted him along, he would have been asked to go along. Johnny understood that. Bill packed his bags and he was aware of Johnny helping him. When he was ready, Johnny held the door.

"Be seeing you."

"Yep."

It was an uninspired leave-taking, but Bill felt uninspired. For

the first time in his life he was at a loss for something to do, some direct course of action which he might follow. There was nothing.

Tom Crooks had been entirely right. There is little the living can do in the face of death.

A week later Bill sat in the outer office of Kincaid and Montgomery, attorneys whom he had asked to straighten out his affairs. He drummed his knuckles nervously on the arm of his chair, still feeling the strain of the past week and still bewildered.

A man emerged from one of the offices and the efficient secretary said to Bill, "You can go in now, Mr. Rawls."

Bill entered the office to face gray-haired Richard Montgomery, and the attorney rose decorously to shake his hand. From his desk drawer he took a file of papers and shuffled through them. Then he looked keenly at Bill.

"Your uncle handled all your affairs?"

"That's right."

"How long has he been in complete charge?"

"Since my father died. That's nine years ago and I was ten at the time."

"You trusted your uncle?"

"Why—of course."

The attorney said gravely, "I am sorry to tell you that he was not the man to handle anything at all, excepting, perhaps, his own studies."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't misunderstand me. Your uncle was not a fraud and he was not dishonest. He was just a very inept manager. There has been a series of almost weird investments. For the past several months your uncle has met current obligations by borrowing as heavily as possible on his insurance." The attorney looked at Bill again. "It is the doctor's opinion that worry over the fact that he had lost almost everything was a factor in hastening his death."

"I wish he'd taken me into his confidence," Bill said.

"Unfortunately he did not. However, you are not entirely destitute. There is some jewelry which has been appraised at a little over fourteen hundred dollars and one other item. Do you know where Elk Shanty is?"

"Elk Shanty?"

"Yes. Obviously it's a town, though not one of metropolitan stature. You do own a store there which in the past year," the attorney ran his pencil down a column of figures, "shows a net loss, though I don't know how much. I am afraid that your uncle considered facts and figures rather unimportant."

"What kind of a store?"

"A country store apparently. It is one of your uncle's

investments and it is managed, or perhaps I should say mismanaged, by a man named Gosmer Wisman. If you care to have us do so, we can conduct an investigation and determine the store's worth."

The attorney scrawled idle circles and meaningless figures on a piece of paper. Then he was no longer a polished and methodical man of law but a complete human being whose eyes were gentle and troubled.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way," he said. "But you retained us to find out and tell you the whole truth. You do have one priceless asset that no accountant can ever compute; that's your youth and energy. Your life needn't be ruined because you are left with very little."

"I wasn't thinking about that," Bill said.

"Then go back to college and resume your study of architecture. More than one young man is working his way through school, and you have at least a small nest egg. Put the store in our hands. If there is any money to be realized from it, we'll do that."

Bill felt a little coldness in the pit of his stomach, and his hand trembled when he raised it. He had expected to be left with enough money so that he would be comfortably well off for the rest of his life. Now he found that he had very little. He did have a bank account at Tenngale, but after he had paid his outstanding debts there would be no more than perhaps two hundred and fifty dollars left in that.

Bill stared blankly over the attorney's shoulder. Finally he said slowly, "Thank you very much, sir. I'll have to think this over

for a while."

"Do that, and please advise me of your decision."

They shook hands and Bill left the office. He had no wish to go home, and anyway it was not his home any more. Mismanaged by his uncle, that had gone with the rest. Bill felt no bitterness, but only a deep regret. Had he known that things were going so badly, he might have been able to help.

He wandered into a drugstore, ordered a cup of coffee, and left it untasted on the counter while he looked at the far wall. He could go back to Tennagle, but if he did, he must get some sort of job to pay his expenses. That didn't worry him particularly. Many of the fellows at Tennagle were helping themselves. Or he might try for a full-time job with some firm of architects. Certainly the attorneys or some of his uncle's friends would help him.

On the other hand, a store, even if it was a country store, was no insignificant asset. Bill had always felt inclined to be in business for himself and many outstanding merchants had started with a lot less than their own store.

Suddenly Bill felt much the same sensations he had known when, despite the fact that he realized he was outpointed and outclassed, he just had to go back into the ring and continue the fight with Alan Chesterton. His father had started with nothing, and he had succeeded. Bill would try. There was some money. Surely it would not cost a fortune at least to go to Elk Shanty, wherever that was, and investigate the store. Bill went to the telephone, dialed his attorneys' number, and asked for Mr. Montgomery. A moment later the latter was on the other end of the wire.

"Yes?"

"This is Bill Rawls, Mr. Montgomery. Is there any doubt that I own this store in Elk Shanty?"

"No, the papers are clear."

"Then," said Bill, "I have made my decision. I am going to Elk Shanty and find out about it."

CHAPTER TWO

Elk Shanty

The snorting little train that ran out of the city of Cannasport, which was the end of the Limited's run, consisted of one small engine with a bored-looking engineer leaning out the window and an ambitionless fireman who pecked desultorily at chunks of soft coal in the coal tender; one box car that was evidently packed with freight consigned for the town of Blissville; and one express-mail-passenger car.

Standing on the station platform with a tightly packed bag in each hand, Bill grinned at the almost unbelievable locomotive and cars. Cannasport was a modern city, with a big rail terminal, and the other trains present made this one look like something dreamed up by a child who wanted to play at railroading. Still, it had been pointed out to Bill not only as the train for Blissville, which was as close as trains could get to Elk Shanty, but the only train that ran there.

Bill crossed the tracks, letting his overcoat hang open. Cannasport itself was in the mountains, and the forested slopes rising on both sides of the city still wore a shabby crazy-quilt of snow. But it was disappearing fast. Swollen to angry proportions by snow water, a snarling little stream pitched down a mountainside and hurled itself, in a shower of sun-tinted spray, over a cliff and into a river.

At the passenger entrance to the triple-purpose car stood a tall man dressed in a blue conductor's uniform. But the uniform lacked the snap and dash of those worn by the Limited's

personnel. Bill decided that it must have been tailored, for the same man who was wearing it now, at about the time the train was fashioned. He thought whimsically that neither had changed a particle since. Bill's eyes rested on a gold watch chain, almost as big as a dog chain, that looped across the conductor's vest and on an age-yellowed elk's tooth that dangled from it.

"Is this the train to Blissville?" he asked.

"Yep." When the conductor spoke, he revealed teeth that might have been a good match for the elk's tooth.

"When does it leave?"

The conductor took a massive gold watch from his vest pocket. He squinted at it.

"In just nine minutes, right on the button."

"Guess I'd better get aboard."

"Ye'd better if you're goin' to Blissville. We haul out on time. Got your ticket?"

"Yep." Unconsciously Bill found himself mimicking the conductor. He showed his ticket, and without even glancing at it, the conductor punched it. Bill mounted the steps, entered the car, and looked around.

The car had six seats on one side, five on the other, a washroom, and a wooden partition which evidently marked the boundaries of the passenger department. Once the seats had been neatly covered with some sort of heavy green material, but the car had been in use so long that the green cloth had

worn thin. In many places the under fabric showed through.

Bill leaned back and made himself as comfortable as he could. Already, or so it seemed, he was as far from Tenngale and New York as he could possibly get. But this car certainly had history, though by the Limited's standards it was primitive. Scrawled across one side in fading red paint was, "Wild Cat Jackson rode here." In the domed top there was a ragged hole, and after careful scrutiny Bill decided that it was a bullet hole. Nor was time alone responsible for the dilapidated condition of the fabric covering the seats. Careless passengers—possibly with knives—had scuffed or cut some of it away.

Presently the conductor, still leaning on the rear platform, bellowed in a voice that would have done credit to a bull, "*All abo-aa-ard!*" He came in, pushed the back of one seat over so that two seats faced each other, sat down on one, put his feet on the other, and immediately went to sleep. Surprisingly smooth in spite of its ancient lineage, the train began to move.

Bill propped his elbow on the window ledge, rested his chin in his hand, and watched with great interest as they rattled up the tracks toward Blissville.

The valley, narrow enough even at Cannasport, narrowed still more as they got farther away. Down every tributary valley pitched a wild little stream and their combined volume of water made a raging torrent out of a river which would be impressively wide even in normal summer weather. There were some deserted houses along the right of way, some small cabins and shacks whose purpose Bill could not guess, unless they were used by summer vacationists, and a few farmhouses that were still inhabited.

The conductor came suddenly awake and bawled, so loudly that Bill was startled, "Debbston! All out for Debbston!" Having delivered himself of this, the man promptly went back to sleep. Bill grinned. There were no passengers except himself in the car, therefore nobody to get out at Debbston. Probably the conductor had been on this run so long that he automatically called every place they might halt.

The train drew to a stop beside a collection of a dozen houses, a man took a mail sack out, and they were off again.

Though they passed another small cluster of houses, apparently there was no reason to stop at them. Bill continued to watch, and he felt a ripple of amusement as he wondered what Johnny and Tom Crooks would say if they knew where he was and where he was going. Johnny, with his customary candor, probably would not hesitate to pronounce him crazy. Well, maybe he was.

Bill glanced at his wrist watch and saw that it lacked two hours until noon. Five minutes later the conductor awakened with another mighty roar.

"Blissville! Blissville! End of the run! *Aa-lll* out." He subsided to a normal tone of voice and nodded at Bill. "This is Blissville, Son."

"Thanks," Bill said.

He turned to peer at the town as they rode into it. It was more than a country village. From what he could see, Bill estimated that about three thousand people lived in Blissville; but definitely it was no city. The main section strayed along the railroad tracks, and the rest of Blissville clung to the sides of

the mountain that rose behind it. The streets were quite steep, and Bill reflected idly that when there was ice on them they might be dangerous. There were a good many cars and trucks, some new and some very old, crawling like giant beetles along the streets.

The train rolled to a stop beside a small station across which BLISSVILLE was written in white on a black background. An energetic youngster in shirt sleeves and bluejeans rolled a hand cart over to receive the various parcels and mail sacks from the express-mail section of the car. At the far end of the sun-sprayed station, a furry brown and white dog lay fast asleep, and his front paws twitched as he dreamed.

Bill was a little bewildered and not at all sure of himself when, with a bag in each hand, he left the car and stepped onto the station platform. It had taken much patient research on the part of an overworked railway ticket agent just to discover Elk Shanty, and Blissville was certainly as close as any train came to it. However, the agent had assured Bill that there must be some means of transportation between Blissville and Elk Shanty. The best advice he could offer was that Bill ask after he arrived at rail's end.

Bill pushed open the station's door and a scrawny man, with a pronounced Adam's apple that bobbed up and down every time he moved, looked up from the telegraph key over which he was bending. "Howdy, friend," he said, without any preliminaries.

"How do you do," Bill replied.

"Right smartly, right smartly, now that the winter's 'bout over. There was some mis'ry when I got out of bed this mornin', but

I rubbed it good with rattlesnake oil and that fixed it! Yup!
That fixed it! Rattlesnake oil will fix any mis'ry!"

"I'll remember that when I get a 'mis'ry,'" Bill murmured. "Can you tell me how to get to Elk Shanty?"

"Elk Shanty! What do you want in Elk Shanty?"

Bill looked furtively about and whispered, "I'm going to rob the bank!"

"Ha!" The other's Adam's apple bobbed furiously. "Ha! That's a good 'un! I'll have to pay it some heed. Next time somebody asks me what I want in Elk Shanty I'll tell 'em I'm going to rob the bank! Ain't no bank in Elk Shanty!"

"I'd still like to get there," Bill said patiently.

"What for? Nobody wants to get to Elk Shanty."

"I do."

"What for?"

"Must be I'm crazy."

"Must be you are." The man glared suspiciously at him. "You ain't joking me again?"

"No. Is there a bus?"

"To Elk Shanty? Ha!"

"Well is there a taxi in town?"

"Yup, but it ain't runnin' and won't be for a while. It got smashed up yesterday."

"Is there *any* way to get to Elk Shanty?"

"Shanks' mare."

"You mean on foot?"

"That's what I mean." He looked closely at Bill. "You bound to get to Elk Shanty?"

"I thought I'd made my intentions clear."

"You could have rode with the mailman, except that he's sick and won't go today."

Bill murmured, "Another illusion shattered."

"What'd you say?"

"It seems I won't ride with the mailman."

"That's right. And if your mind's set on going to Elk Shanty, then I ain't no man to stop you. Go up to Main Street. That's the first street and you can't miss it on account there's a sign at the corner. 'Main Street' it says. Right there plain as day, 'Main Street.' Turn left to the first road that turns right, away from the river. You can't miss it on account there's another sign there. As plain as day it says—"

"Elk Shanty?" Bill guessed.

"Nope. It don't. It says 'Tower Hill Road.' But it goes to Elk Shanty. Right square down the middle of Elk Shanty it goes. Stay on the Tower Hill Road and you'll come to Elk Shanty all right."

"How far is it?"

"Depends on whether you're riding or walking, and what you might be riding. Now, if you was riding a horse—"

"Skip it," Bill said hastily. "And thanks for the information."

"No thanks needed. Didn't cost me nothing."

Bill went back out the door and up to Main Street. Some passers-by paid no attention to him, but some gazed with frank curiosity and Bill realized suddenly that he was almost the only male in town who was wearing a suit and an overcoat. The rest were dressed hunter style, in jackets or short coats and overshoes. He suppressed a rising irritation. The way some people were looking at him, it was almost as though he belonged in a zoo. Then he shrugged off their stares and strode briskly down Main Street.

As he drew near the end of town there were fewer houses; and when he left the sidewalk to strike down the concrete highway, even these were left behind. Bill felt a rising pleasure. He had always enjoyed hunting and fishing and often he had known a secret desire to live for a while in some good game and fish country. It looked as though at last that desire was going to be realized. He came to the Tower Hill Road, turned right on it, and his pleasure increased.

The concrete he had just left was part of a modern transcontinental highway, a link with all the things Bill had always known. The Tower Hill Road was gravel. Much narrower than the concrete, it was hugged tightly on both sides by sap-wet hardwood forests in which buds were already uncurling. Bill smiled with his eyes as he saw a splash of blue flowers growing right at the edge of a snow bank.

He climbed steeply, and the higher he got the more snow he found until, at the summit of the mountain, there was a foot of snow on either side. The road, however, had been plowed and the warm sun had melted such patches of snow as remained on it. Snow was still melting on both sides and little rivulets were trickling into the roadside ditches. Bill discovered abruptly why the citizens of Blissville dressed as they did.

A runlet of snow water emptied into the road, and the ditch that should have carried it off was blocked with mingled mud and rocks. A miniature pond overspread the road. It looked like a very gentle flow, but there was enough force in the water so that it had washed away all the top gravel and left nothing but soft mud.

Bill put his bags down and shook a puzzled head. If he were wearing boots, or even overshoes, the pond would not be too much of a problem. But all he wore was a pair of oxfords that had been polished and shiny when he got off the train at Blissville. He glanced down at them and saw that they were already mud-splattered. There was another pair of shoes in one of the bags, but that was all he had. He had better wait until he got to Elk Shanty, which certainly couldn't be far now, before changing. There was no point in ruining two pairs of shoes.

Meanwhile, just standing in the road would get him nowhere. He had a choice between the snow banks and the pond.

Bill picked up the bags, stepped into the water, and sank halfway to his knees in mud. But the die was cast; his feet couldn't get any wetter than they were or his trousers any muddier. Bill waded across, came to firm gravel, put his bags down, and stooped to scrape his trousers with his fingers. He

wrung them partly dry.

When he picked up his bags, he sighed wearily. He had thought himself in good physical condition and able to tackle any sort of hike, but this one was exhausting. He looked at his watch, discovered that he had been walking for about an hour and a half, and plodded grimly on. It would have been a good idea to find out, from someone besides the station agent, just how far it was to Elk Shanty. But Bill had been in no mood for another long-winded explanation and he had hesitated to ask anyone on the street because they looked at him so curiously. Of one thing he was fairly certain; Elk Shanty lay down this road. Sooner or later he would find it.

The road swung down the other side of the mountain and on both sides the snow banks disappeared. Bill loosened his overcoat and let it hang open. It was spring in the valleys, but certainly it was still winter on top of the mountains. Bill stopped in his tracks.

A hundred feet ahead of him, almost like a floating gray shadow in the bright day, a white-tailed deer leaped from the side to the center of the road and stood for a second looking at him. With an effortless bound, the deer jumped clear across the road and disappeared in the timber. Five more deer, none of which stopped, followed the first, and Bill's heart began to sing again.

This was rough backwoods, but it was a good country. Even if it offered nothing else, it certainly was going to offer fine hunting. Bill wished that he had found the place before and wondered how his uncle had ever stumbled across it. A genteel drawing room, rather than this underdeveloped land, seemed

more in keeping with his Uncle Al's character and tastes.

Suddenly the silence of the mountains was shattered by a rifle shot.

Bill put his bags down and listened carefully, trying to place the direction from which the shot had come and the caliber of the gun that had fired it. He knew something about firearms and he had heard tales, which he had never believed, of mountain dwellers. According to some ill-calculated fiction, all they ever did was tend stills in which they made illicit whiskey, and such time as they could spare from that interesting operation was devoted to feuding with their neighbors. Bill had always placed such stories strictly in the category of fantastic tales, but now he wasn't so sure. The place was very lonely and isolated. Anything *might* happen.

He heard the blast repeated and definitely identified it as no rifle shot at all, but the backfire from a car or truck. Bill moved his bags to one side of the road and waited.

The garrulous station agent had told him that nobody, excepting possibly the mailman, went to Elk Shanty and by now Bill was more than half willing to believe that. But obviously somebody besides himself was on the road and he had something to ride in. He might give him a lift. Two minutes later the vehicle rocked down the slope Bill had just descended and came in sight.

It was a red truck that had seen its best days at least a dozen years ago. One side of the windshield was broken off and a board put in its place. Both doors, neither of which had any visible glass, were tilted forward on broken hinges and wired to the hood. The hood itself, which flapped like a great bird's

wings as the truck came forward, was held on with more wire. Bill held his breath because it seemed that the cab must certainly fall off. Probably that was wired on, too.

The contraption lurched to a drunken, shivering halt beside Bill and he looked with interest at the truck's occupants.

A man as lean as a wolf, and with something about him that was suggestive of a wolf's ferocious air, sat behind the wheel. He might have been thirty years old or fifty; his face was so wind and weather-beaten that nobody could make an accurate guess about his age. He was clean-shaven, but from beneath a felt hat that was as old and battered as the truck escaped long strands of curly black hair that was sadly in need of cutting.

Beside the man was a well-oiled, carefully-tended, and obviously much-loved repeating rifle. The third occupant of the truck was as fascinating as the first two.

He was a white hound whose hide was spotted by the dappling known as "blue tick." His head was so big and his jaws so long that to some extent he resembled an alligator. When the dog stood erect, if he ever did, his ears would come within three inches of brushing the ground. He owned long, strong legs and a powerful chest, but slatted ribs showed and his paunch was so lean that Bill could almost have encircled it with his two hands. The body wandered out in a thin tail that was tipped by a cluster of very long hairs.

The hound looked sadly at Bill. The man smiled, and when he did his wolfish look vanished as swiftly and completely as a puff of mist vanishes before the rising morning sun. He asked, "You walkin' because you like it?"

Bill smiled back because he couldn't help himself, and because he knew at once that there was something about this man which he could like greatly.

"No," he responded, "I'm walking because I want to get to Elk Shanty."

"I expect," the man said, as though he had just arrived at some profound decision, "that ridin' would be easier."

"I know it would!"

"Get in, then. But you'll have to set in the middle. Lamb Chops, he sort of favors the outside seat."

Bill threw his bags in the rear of the stake-bodied truck and he saw that it also contained a small gasoline engine which, as with everything else about the truck, was fastened down with wire. He walked around to the door and was about to climb in when Lamb Chops thrust his great head forth, extended a tongue the size of a wet dish towel, and enthusiastically began to lick his face. Bill drew back, sputtering.

"Your dog's very friendly, huh?"

"Tain't my dog an' he just likes you. Lamb Chops don't like everybody, neither." The man spoke as though Bill should consider himself complimented.

Keeping a wary eye on Lamb Chops, who blinked mournfully at him, Bill slid into the center seat. The hound immediately put both front paws in his lap and pushed his face very close to Bill's, as though there were something about this newcomer that he wished to study at great length. Hastily Bill slid an arm around the dog's neck and began to tickle his ear. Lamb Chops

sighed, relaxed, and went to sleep sitting up.

"The name is Smith," the truck driver said. "My mother tagged me Elijah, but most folks calls me Rifle Eye."

"My name's Rawls," Bill introduced himself. "My mother named me William, but I answer to Bill."

"Good enough, Bill. We'll get movin'."

Using all his strength on the gear shift, Rifle Eye pushed it into low, shifted into second, and with a fearful clattering of gears they were moving again. However, once it was under way the truck didn't make quite so much noise and they could talk.

"How far are we from Elk Shanty?" Bill asked.

"Fourteen miles."

"Oh gosh!"

"Somethin' the matter?"

"Only that I asked the station agent at Blissville how far to Elk Shanty, and he started to tell me without ever quite getting around to it. If I'd known how far it was, I never would have set out to walk it."

"The station agent's Henry Jumas," Rifle Eye commented. "He knows quite a bit but somehow he don't ever get around to tellin' it. Not sure he ain't smart at that. Elk Shanty's nineteen miles from Blissville. You've already walked about five of it."

Lamb Chops poked a cold, moist nose into Bill's neck and Bill recoiled. Rifle Eye spoke severely.

"Now, you looky here, Lamb Chops! You got to behave yourself when we ask somebody else to ride, else I ain't goin' to take you to Blissville with me no more!"

As though properly chastened, Lamb Chops moved to his own part of the seat and devoted himself to looking out the window. Rifle Eye spoke to Bill.

"He knows all right when you tell him somethin'. Lamb Chops is smarter'n most people."

"Who does he belong to?" Bill asked, remembering that Rifle Eye had denied ownership of the white hound.

"He never yet picked nobody to belong to. Lamb Chops, he'll spend a few days here, a few days there, an' whenever he knows I'm goin' to Blissville he comes up to my place so he can ride along. Likes to get into town once in a while an' see the sights."

"He knows when you're going to Blissville?"

"Lamb Chops knows everything."

"Does he hunt?"

Rifle Eye's warm smile lighted his face again. "Nope. He could if he wanted to, but he's too smart for that. Let some other dog run its fool legs off, an' fight a varmint after they ketch it. Lamb Chops, he's got more important things to do."

A flock of wild turkeys ran across the road in front of them and Rifle Eye clattered nonchalantly on. But when they saw another deer, he stopped the truck and lovingly caressed the rifle at his side. Then he put the rifle down and drove on,

speaking more to himself than to Bill.

"Reckon not. I'll wait 'til they're summer-fatted."

Bill withheld comment. He knew perfectly well that deer season was not open and would not be open until autumn. He suspected that the people in these mountains were accustomed to taking what they wanted when they wanted it. But he was not the guardian of Rifle Eye Smith's principles.

"Lot of game around here?" he asked.

"A right smart amount. Turkey, deer, few elk, bear, a shag of grouse an' squirrel, plenty of varmints."

"How about fishing?"

"You like to fish?" Rifle Eye warmed to the question.

"I love it!"

"Goin' to be around Elk Shanty long?"

"I expect to be."

"If you should be here when trout get ripe, I'll show you where we can get our hooks into some goshamighty nice ones. Fair bass, too."

Rifle Eye braked the truck to a quivering halt beside a rutted trail that led into the timber.

"I live up here," he explained. "An' I got to get my engine workin' so I can pump water an' such-like. Took the thing into Blissville to get it fixed. Elk Shanty's a mile down the road. You want to wait until I get things goin', I'll take you in."

"I'd just as soon walk," Bill said.

"Might be quicker. Maybe it will take some little time to get things goin'. Get a chance, come see me."

Bill said with real sincerity, "I'd like to. And don't forget our fishing trip."

"I won't."

Bill stepped out of the cab and a second later Lamb Chops unjointed his long body and slid out behind him. He pushed his great head against Bill's leg, and seemed to be drowsing, and Bill looked again at his scrawny mid-section. It was a real mystery how Lamb Chops ever kept his head and tail together. Bill petted the big hound.

"Looks as though he's going with me," he commented.

"He is," Rifle Eye assured him.

"But—I don't want him."

"That ain't the point. Lamb Chops wants you an' there ain't nary a thing you can do about it. Lamb Chops is a right strong-minded hound dog."

"But—"

"You'll get used to him," Rifle Eye said. "Besides, he prob'ly won't stay with you more'n three-four days, or weeks, or months, before he takes it in his head to ramble on an' stay with somebody else. Be seein' you."

The gears clashed and the truck moved up the rutted trail that led to Rifle Eye's house. Bill waited until it had disappeared,

then turned to Lamb Chops. The big hound was sitting in the center of the road and he blinked sorrowfully at Bill. The boy gritted his teeth; the last thing he needed was a tramp hound.

"Look," he said reasonably, "Rifle Eye says you understand what people say. Why don't you go along now and stay with somebody else?"

But when Bill started down the road, Lamb Chops paced along beside him. Every now and then he looked up, and Bill knew a moment's uneasiness because there seemed to be an infinite wisdom and a great understanding in the hound's melancholy eyes. Hastily he banished such thoughts from his mind. Let Rifle Eye believe that Lamb Chops had a superior intellect, if he wanted to. Bill would keep his own thoughts.

Halfway down the long hill at the top of which Rifle Eye had let him out of the truck, Bill got his first look at Elk Shanty. A little creek sparkled in the sun, and he saw the road winding like an undulating brown ribbon on up the valley. Elk Shanty nestled in the valley. Around the hamlet, for about a quarter of the way up the mountain on either side, there was no forest but only scattered trees. Bill quickened his steps, anxious to reach the end of his journey.

The road wound past a clearing in which there was a weather-beaten barn and a neat white house. Three cows cropped at the new spring grass as though they would never get enough of it, chickens scratched in the barn yard, and a brown horse loafed luxuriously in the sun. A young fellow of about Bill's own age, but thirty pounds heavier, leaned over an old-fashioned rail fence that zigzagged across the front of the clearing. His face was florid, his eyes sleepy, and his lips thick and blubbery. Bill

came abreast and—

"Hey, Ma!" the other yelled in a high falsetto voice. "The woodchucks are out of their winter holes! There's one going down the road right now!"

Bill felt anger rise quickly, but he controlled it. A fight was the worst possible way to begin any new venture. He kept his eyes straight ahead and walked past.

However, just as he had already discovered that he would find friends in Elk Shanty, so it seemed now that he might find enemies. It was not a comfortable feeling.

CHAPTER THREE

The Store

Lamb Chops, who never seemed to run if he could walk and never walked if he could sit down or lie down, wandered over to a clump of brush growing beside the road, stopped, and a rolling bay that ended in a high-pitched howl broke from his massive chest. A cottontail rabbit scooted out of the brush, ran twenty feet to a burrow, and ducked into it. Lamb Chops watched the rabbit go without making the slightest effort to give chase, and Bill shook a puzzled head.

Dogs do not think; everybody knew that. But now Bill wasn't so positive that he knew it. Nor was he any longer in doubt that Lamb Chops had a character and personality all his own. If almost any other dog had done the same thing, it would have been just a dog snuffing out a rabbit. Lamb Chops managed to give the incident drama, and in his own mind Bill re-created the story. The rabbit, no doubt sneering in rabbit fashion, had both seen and heard them coming and had contemptuously decided that, if only he sat still, neither dog nor man would know he was there. Lamb Chops had just wanted to prove him wrong.

The gaunt hound, still threatening to come apart with every step, padded back to Bill and fell in beside him. He sniffed Bill's leg, but there was no wag of his tail and nothing except mournful eyes to show what he was thinking, and those eyes revealed little. Bill chuckled. He was beginning to understand why Rifle Eye had spoken as he had. Lamb Chops might well have served as a model for some caricature of a hound. But

there was something about him which made itself felt.

Bill let his dangling fingers play about the big hound's head, and Lamb Chops sighed blissfully.

They were at the bottom of the mountain now, out of the forest, and Elk Shanty was clearly in view. Within itself the hamlet, or what remained of it, was a riddle. A sleepy little mountain town, very plainly inhabited by people who must struggle hard just to make ends meet, Elk Shanty at one time had obviously been a bustling place, and certainly some of the people who lived there must have had more than an average amount of money.

Situated on a grassy little knoll, somehow managing to dominate the whole town, was a huge house that must contain at least fourteen or fifteen rooms. Massive beams supported the porch roof, and the porch ran clear around the entire house. The windows were boarded up, there were barriers across the doors, the white paint was fading, and the grounds had long since been abandoned to weeds and brush.

Nevertheless there was an air of quality about the place, as though whoever had lived there at one time had expected and had been able to pay for the ultimate in gracious living. Were the house restored, and located in a city, no one would expect it to be the home of any except a wealthy person.

There were two other houses comparable to this one—or they had been at one time. Now they were almost complete ruins. The windows were broken out or stolen and the doors were missing. The roof of one, sagging from end gables toward the center, reminded Bill of a swaybacked horse he had once seen a clown ride in a circus. There were gaping, brick-lined cellars

where still other buildings had been, and various small houses.

Some of the latter were newly-built, and they ranged from one-room affairs to houses that might contain four or five rooms. Invariably they were roofed with tar paper, and some of them were sided with the same material. All the rest were either weather-beaten or painted a dull red, and Bill tried to remember where he had seen that color before. Then he knew. It was the same hue that the Cannasport-Blissville Railroad used on its buildings. Evidently Elk Shantyites didn't buy their paint.

Bill furrowed his brows. Elk Shanty was not exactly a ghost town because there were still quite a few people—Bill could not even guess how many—living there. But it was a decadent town. However, if it hadn't once been a scene of great activity and industry, what explanation was there for the places that only a lot of money could build? Then the mystery solved itself.

The clue was a weathered tree stump beside the road. Fully five feet in diameter, at one time the stump had supported a mighty tree. Bill stopped to look at it and he let his eyes stray to the mountains rising above Elk Shanty. He thought he had the answer.

When the first colonists landed on the shores of North America, one of the most formidable obstacles they had to face was vast and apparently endless forests. All possible means of destruction were used against the great stretches of woodland; there was fertile soil beneath the trees and crops do not grow in shade. For centuries the war against the forests was carried on. Only a few people of extraordinarily clear vision foresaw the

eventual end of the trees unless measures were taken to use them scientifically.

The weak voices raised in protest might as well have been a few pebbles trying to stem a volcano. The forests, as anyone who took the trouble to look would know, could have no end, and a growing country needed lumber. Beginning in the east, lumber crews swept through the great stands of pine and hemlock, cut everything that was worth money, and moved on. While they were present, money was plentiful and it flowed freely. When they left, as they must leave when there were no more trees to cut, their by-products were desolation, broken hearts, and shattered hopes.

This Bill had read, and it explained Elk Shanty. He knew that lumbermen no longer operated in such a fashion. The awakening had come at last and some of the best scientific brains in the country were constantly at work to replace with new trees the timber that must be cut to fill the ceaseless demand for lumber. But the lumbermen had been both ruthless and thoughtless at one time.

Nobody knew how many villages like Elk Shanty were the partial result of a policy so vicious. Most of its former inhabitants had probably moved on with the lumber crews. But there are always those who lack the initiative to make a move and those who, for one reason or another, will live where they wish, no matter how hard and meager life may be there.

Bill looked at the forest-clothed mountains around Elk Shanty. The lumber crews had probably operated here about the turn of the century. The fine hardwood forests now present could have grown up since then, and obviously they were under good

management.

While Bill studied the stump, Lamb Chops disappeared and Bill looked about for him. He felt a momentary sense of loss. Nobody in his right mind would take Lamb Chops as a gift, but he did make his presence felt. Bill tried an experimental whistle, and when Lamb Chops did not respond he walked on.

Almost without any warning at all, a bristling dog stood in the road. He was a furry mongrel, bigger than Lamb Chops, and his lips were lifted from gleaming ivory fangs. There was no mistaking his intention, and Bill made ready to swing with one of the bags while at the same time he poised his foot for a kick. Such a big dog, angered, was capable of doing real harm.

Then, as unaccountably as he had rushed out, the dog turned, curved its tail against its rump, and slunk back up an embankment. Glancing in that direction, Bill saw the roof of a small house. The dog must have come from there.

A second later, Lamb Chops pushed his head against Bill's leg and sighed. The latter breathed his relief and petted the white hound's ears. Lamb Chops didn't look like much; he didn't even look entirely like a hound, but apparently the canine population of Elk Shanty had a vast respect for him. Lamb Chops' personality had never done that; he must have fought many a fierce battle before he proved who was boss dog. Yet, as far as Bill could see, he bore no scars. Even his dangling ears weren't torn.

Bill warmed more to the gaunt hound. Aside from the fact that he liked him, obviously Lamb Chops was not a complete liability to whichever person he adopted as his current companion. "Owner" and "master" were scarcely fitting terms

as far as Lamb Chops was concerned.

A graying-haired woman who wore bluejeans and a stag shirt came down the road towards Bill. She had a strong, pleasant face, but hard work and a hard life had left their marks on it. Twenty feet from Bill she swerved to the side of the road and picked up a dead crow from whose black feathers the sun still plucked iridescent glows. Bill tried not to look but he couldn't help looking. The people of Elk Shanty hadn't much money, but surely they weren't reduced to eating dead crows! Bill came abreast of the woman and said civilly,

"Good morning."

"Good morning." Her voice was as rich and pleasant as her features.

Bill's eyes were riveted on the crow and he suddenly found himself embarrassed. Trying to cover it he said, "That's a nice crow."

Immediately he decided that he had made matters worse, but the woman merely held her prize by one leg and looked at it fondly.

"It is," she agreed. "It is that. Billy Bishop shot it this morning with his .22. He wouldn't bring it to me, though." She spoke warmly and openly, as a country dweller would.

Bill said lamely, "Guess we'll have to talk to Billy Bishop."

The woman smiled. "There's another crow down the road a bit. I'll have to go get that one, too."

Bill walked on, his head reeling. Maybe mountain people were

eccentric, but who besides a lunatic would go around picking up dead crows and gloating over the find? Maybe the fiction he had read was correct; perhaps living in solitude did things to people!

He was in the main section of Elk Shanty now, three houses to his left, two to his right, and just ahead of him, near a steel bridge that spanned the creek, another building. It was a long, solidly-built structure, a big place. Nor was it carelessly or hastily erected. Planning and thought had gone into it, but like all the rest, it was sadly dilapidated. It had been unpainted for so long that it was impossible to tell what color it might have been originally. Sun, rain, wind, and snow had done their worst to the exterior, so that some of the boards were warped. Bricks were missing from the chimney that rose above the flat roof.

Bill knew a moment's sadness. Men had labored mightily in Elk Shanty, and the final result was this! Then he came to where he could see the front of the building and stopped in his tracks. A cold little shiver ran up his spine. Once the building's identity had been clearly printed across the front in big gilt letters, but some of the letters were completely gone and others were faded badly. All one could read now was G-NE-AL M—C-AND—E.

Evidently the sign had once read GENERAL MERCHANDISE, and this was the Elk Shanty store!

For a moment Bill stared almost stupidly at the sign, then he lowered his eyes to the front of the building. The place was in disrepair, but glass windows sparkled in the sun and the front was neat and clean. It was dilapidated, but it was not slovenly.

Bill looked hopefully up the road and he saw where Elk Shanty

trailed out in a little cluster of houses. There was nothing that could be seen beyond them except blue haze in the valley, and certainly there was no other store in Elk Shanty. This had to be the place.

Bill straightened his shoulders, thrust his jaw out, walked to the front door, and entered. Lamb Chops squeezed in beside him. Bill looked about the store's interior.

To his right was a glass showcase with a box of red jawbreakers and a few other assorted candies in it. On top of the showcase was a half-filled box of cigars and a partly-emptied box of gum. There was a rack of cigarettes. A long counter ran two-thirds the length of the store to within three feet of a partition, and behind the counter there were shelves reaching to the ceiling. Prominent among the wares on the shelves was an assortment of both smoking and chewing tobacco. There were some canned goods, many of which bore labels that Bill had never seen before; a few bags of flour, some bolts of cloth, and various knickknacks.

On his left, toward the front of the store, were five racks filled with assorted garden seeds. There were some new steel traps hanging from a peg driven into the wall, and a small display of ammunition for various kinds of firearms. A red metal sign depicted a self-satisfied character who was supposed to be enjoying a cup of coffee, with the caption, "Henley's Coffee Grinds Finer and Tastes Better." In the center of the store was a pot-bellied stove, and against the wall were some wooden chairs. Toward the rear and against the partition was some sort of cabinet that must be a cooler or icebox.

Everything was neat and clean; though the outside of the store

had received little attention, somebody was taking care of the inside.

"May I help you?"

Bill whirled, startled because he had not seen anyone, and found himself facing a young girl with a feather duster in her hand. Evidently she had been kneeling, cleaning under the counter. She was half a foot shorter than Bill's five feet eleven and her sandy hair framed an attractive face. There was a splash of freckles, deep brown eyes, and Bill decided at once that if what was still hidden under the counter matched what he could see above it, this teen-ager would have no difficulty whatever in getting all the dates she could handle, if only she should attend Tenngale. Bill smiled.

"Is Mr. Wisman here?" he asked.

"He," for a split second the girl hesitated, then, "is busy right now. Can't I help you?"

"I must see Mr. Wisman, Gosmer Wisman."

Again the girl hesitated, and said, "To tell you the truth, Grandfather's resting."

"Grandfather?"

"Yes. I'm Janice Wisman."

"My name's Rawls. Bi—William Rawls."

"Oh!" Her eyes were friendly. "Are you related to Uncle Alfred?"

"Uncle Alfred?"

She laughed. "He wasn't really my uncle. I just called him that."

Bill said, "I'm afraid that he really was my uncle."

There was a questioning look in her eyes. "Why didn't he come with you?"

"He died two weeks ago," Bill said soberly.

"I'm sorry." She said it simply but there was both pain and regret in her face.

Bill thought oddly that she must have known his uncle and had good reason to like him more than casually. He asked, "Did Uncle Al really own this store?"

"Yes, he did."

"Well, it seems that I'm the new owner."

She said, "I think I'd better awaken Grandfather. But," she looked squarely at Bill, "he hasn't been very well."

She disappeared through a door leading into the store's partitioned rear, while Bill stood troubled and uncertain. He decided that everything would have been better all around if he had taken the attorney's advice and had gone back to Tenngale. Obviously the store, like all the rest of Elk Shanty, was barely able to struggle along. His coming here not only would do him no good, but it would complicate the lives of the Wismans.

Again Bill looked around the store. If they depended upon this for a livelihood, their affairs were already desperate enough.

The door in the partition opened, and a man who seemed as old

as one of the hills that rose above Elk Shanty stood framed in it. He was a huge man, four inches taller than Bill and massive in proportion. A crown of snow-white hair graced his head. His step was lithe and firm, his chin up. Every outward appearance proclaimed that here was a mighty man.

But outward appearances were as misleading as the sheath of bark, the thin layers of wood, and the still supple branches on a great tree that has grown hollow. Here had once been a mighty man. Time had worn thin everything that made him powerful. Gosmer Wisman was very old. He had lived through six ages of man and was now living in the seventh. His face bore all the marks that only time can write, but his clear blue eyes were as simple and trusting as those of a child. Janice put her mouth very close to his ear and still spoke loudly to make herself heard.

"Grandfather, this is Mr. Rawls."

Gosmer Wisman extended a huge hand and enfolded Bill's. His voice was soft and pleasant.

"It is good of you to come again, Alfred."

Bill, not understanding, said, "But Mr. Wisman—"

Janice was again speaking in her grandfather's ear. "It is not Alfred Rawls. This is his nephew, William."

"William?" Gosmer Wisman came out of the mists in which he had been wandering. "William, kin to Alfred? You are welcome here, sir. When is Alfred coming again?"

"He is—"

Janice shook her head warningly, and Bill said no more. But Gosmer Wisman had understood partially.

"He is what?"

"He is busy," Bill said.

"Ah, yes, a busy man and a fine man. But his friends await him here. When will he come again?"

"Mr. Rawls," Janice said quickly, "told me that he would come as soon as he can."

"That's right," Bill seconded.

Janice took the old man gently by the arm. "Come now, Grandfather. You had better rest again."

"One moment," Gosmer Wisman's almost transparent eyes sought and found Bill. "You will stay here?"

"For a while," Bill promised.

"Good. I look forward to visiting with you."

Janice led him away and Bill stared hard at the almost empty shelves. A store with practically nothing in it, a girl who would stand out in any crowd, and an old man in his dotage. Bill whistled tunelessly through his teeth. Janice came back quietly and stood beside him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Sometimes he is all right and sometimes he isn't. He just doesn't seem to understand or remember too much any more."

Bill said, "Tell me something, will you?"

"If I can."

"When I came into Elk Shanty I met a woman, a nice-looking woman, who picked up a dead crow. She said there was another one. It seems that some kid named Billy Bishop has been shooting 'em with a .22, and she had to go get that one, too."

"Yes?"

"What the dickens would anybody want with dead crows?"

Janice's eyes sparkled with amusement. "That would be Fanny Gowen. And she didn't want the crows. She wanted the feathers."

"The feathers?"

"Yes. She ties fishing flies."

"Good ones?"

"They must be; the fishermen who come here want them badly. They want Asa Dorr's rods, too. He makes them himself, and I've been told that they're much better than those you buy elsewhere."

"Oh!" Bill felt a mighty sense of relief. He had, after all, come among perfectly normal people. Some of them just happened to follow unusual occupations. Bill stared for a moment at the candy case, and Janice broke his reverie.

"Mr. Rawls—"

"Why don't you call me Bill?"

"Informality should not be one-sided."

Bill grinned. "Jan's easy to say."

"Now I feel more at ease. You must have some questions?"

"Yes, but I don't know where to start."

"Start anywhere."

"How long has my uncle been coming to Elk Shanty?"

"I met him last summer, when I came to stay with Grandfather. I don't know how long he has been coming, but he and Grandfather are old friends."

"You work for your grandfather?"

"Since last summer, a few days after I graduated from high school. He pays me twenty dollars a week and room and board."

Bill asked the question he had been yearning to ask. "Now tell me how the dickens this store earns any money?"

Janice was silent for a moment. Then, "It doesn't."

"Go on."

"It has been kept going, and so has much of Elk Shanty, on Grandfather's three hundred dollars a month."

"He has a pension?"

"No." She looked at him levelly. "That was the salary your uncle paid him to manage the store."

Bill's head reeled. "A series of almost-weird investments," the attorney had said. This one verged on the fantastic! Bill thought of his uncle. Alfred Carling Rawls might have had almost no business sense, but certainly he had enough to know that such a store, in such a place, would be a profitless undertaking. What had ever possessed him to finance such a foolhardy venture?

"My uncle paid him that much just to manage this place?" Bill asked.

"That's right. Bill—" Again she hesitated.

"You can say it."

"There was some sort of agreement between Grandfather and your uncle that had nothing to do with the store. I don't know what it was. I never asked, and I think no one except Grandfather knows exactly what took place. It has been supposed around Elk Shanty that Grandfather does have an income of his own."

"Oh," Bill said.

He knew no more than he had known before. What possible secret agreement could there have been between his uncle and Gosmer Wisman? If there were other business interests, why hadn't they shown up in the audit? It was absurd to suppose that Gosmer Wisman had been blackmailing his uncle. The old man had still been getting three hundred dollars a month to manage a store whose gross sales probably were not a great deal more than that. Why? Why, for that matter, had his uncle ever come to Elk Shanty?

Lamb Chops, who had been sleeping in a corner, rose, walked over to the cooler, and deliberately sat down in front of it. He glanced at Bill, yelped three times, and returned his attention to the cooler.

Bill looked puzzled, but Janice said, "He's hungry."

"I should have guessed that myself. How long do you think it's been since he's had a decent meal?"

"Maybe four hours."

"Four hours!"

"Uh-huh. Lamb Chops has a vast talent for eating. He eats all the time."

"Without growing any fatter?"

"That's right."

"Maybe there's something wrong with him?"

"No, there isn't. He's just Lamb Chops."

Janice took the remains of a veal roast from the cooler, at least two pounds of meat, and put it on a paper on the floor. Lamb Chops inhaled and the meat disappeared as effortlessly as dust goes into a vacuum cleaner. The gaunt hound padded back to his corner and blinked at Bill. The boy grinned.

"Mighty expensive meal for a hound."

"Ordinarily it would be, but Grandfather and I have so much that we can't possibly use all of it. We get it in trade."

The door opened and the beefy young man whom Bill had seen leaning against the fence came into the store. He said to Janice, "Hello, Sugar."

"Hello, Joe," she said casually, and introduced the two. "Bill, this is Joe Lantman. Bill Rawls, Joe. He's the new owner of the store."

Bill saw a thinly-veiled anger that was almost hatred rise in the other's eyes, and his own anger flared anew. He had done nothing to Joe Lantman, he scarcely knew him. But the ill-feeling that this heavy-set fellow felt was as evident as a shower of sparks.

"Just call me Tarzan," Joe Lantman said. "You've heard of him? He can handle any ape."

He came very near and Bill instinctively braced himself. Tarzan's hand came out as though in a friendly gesture, but the fingers that gripped Bill's closed with all the force of a steel vise. Tarzan jerked, and Bill felt shooting pains travel up into his shoulder. He made ready to swing with his left, but just at that moment Tarzan stepped back.

When he did he stumbled, let go of Bill's hand, and made a wild effort to maintain his equilibrium. Then he fell heavily backward, landed in a sitting position, and glared.

A second ago Lamb Chops had been sleeping in his corner. Now, though nobody had seen him move there, he stood directly behind Tarzan. When the latter stepped back he had fallen over Lamb Chops, who slithered like an eel to get out of the way and avoid any hurt to himself. It was almost as though the white hound had planned it that way, and Bill exploded in

laughter.

Tarzan picked himself up. The rage that seethed within him seemed ready to burst through and destroy whatever it touched. But he made no move for a moment.

Then he said, shortly, "I'll be seeing you," and left the store.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hopeless Venture

After Tarzan left, Bill went to Lamb Chops, knelt, and tickled the hound's dangling ears. Lamb Chops closed his eyes, blew loudly through his nose, and licked Bill's wrist. That much taken care of, he let himself go limp on the floor and fell sound asleep.

Bill rose, and a faint grin that was both appreciation and amusement curled the corners of his lips. It had taken Lamb Chops, whom he wouldn't have had near him under ordinary circumstances, only a couple of hours to win his heart completely. The white hound might not possess the super-intelligence that Rifle Eye had ascribed to him, but twice since Bill had left Rifle Eye's truck Lamb Chops had been in exactly the right place and had done just the right thing.

"He's quite a dog," Bill said. "Where did he come from?"

"Nobody knows," Janice told him. "He's been here ever since I came. Sometimes I have an idea that he was here to greet the lumbering crews."

Bill flicked a hand toward the door. "The character who just went out—Tarzan. He doesn't strike me as the type who would fall over a dog and do nothing about it. Why didn't he try to get even with Lamb Chops?"

"He knows better. Just after I arrived in Elk Shanty last summer, a fisherman who came with Mr. Prosser was fishing the Blue Hole on Game Creek. That's one of Lamb Chops'

favorite pools, too, and he was wading around. This fisherman threw a stone at him and he wasn't found until almost midnight."

"Where did they find him?"

"Up a beech tree, with about half his trousers dangling from Lamb Chops' jaws. He'd been there almost ten hours and Lamb Chops was still waiting for him to come down. He isn't a dog you can mistreat, and Joe knows it."

"Then he does know something," Bill murmured.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," Bill said. Tarzan had called Janice "Sugar," and she hadn't voiced any objections. Bill decided that he would be just as well off if he didn't say too much until he knew his way around.

"Are you hungry?" Janice asked.

"I could eat." Bill had had nothing since breakfast on the Limited's diner.

"I'll fix something. Come on. I'll show you your room."

She led him through the door, and Bill discovered that a neat apartment lay behind the partition. The furniture was old and the carpet threadbare, but like all the rest of the place, the apartment was clean.

Janice showed him a room with a massive oaken bed, a dresser to match, and a chair. Probably the furniture had come in with the lumber crews, and Bill was surprised to discover a

washroom just off his. Even though only the cold faucet ran any water, evidently the early lumbermen were not as crude as some people thought. They had all the conveniences that were available.

Bill unpacked his bags, hung his extra clothes in a closet, and changed his trousers and shoes. At the first opportunity, always providing he stayed here, he would have to get some knockabout clothes of the type favored in these mountains. Business suits were all right in the city but they just weren't practical here.

Bill washed, filled a glass with tap water, and discovered that the water was ice cold. Probably whoever brought the water into the store had tapped a spring somewhere on the mountain, and melting snow explained the water's temperature. Perhaps it was that cold the year around.

Completely refreshed, he left his room to sniff at tempting odors that drifted out of the kitchen. He caught glimpses of Janice, who was in the kitchen, moving between a huge wood-burning stove and the table. She saw him.

"Come on in," she called.

Bill entered, and fairly drooled. A freshly-baked pumpkin pie that must have been prepared earlier in the day was cooling on the table. Beside it was a heaping plate full of fluffy biscuits. Something simmered in a pot. There was the fragrance of fresh coffee and a tantalizing odor of French fried potatoes. One of the stove lids had been removed, and a rack of lamb chops that Janice was broiling sputtered over the flame.

"It won't be more than a minute," she said.

She bustled about, set the table with two plates, and laid three lamb chops on one plate and two on another. She cut a quarter of the pumpkin pie and another smaller slice and put them beside the plates. Then she dipped crisp potatoes out of their kettle, let them drain, and portioned some out. Finally she served a vegetable that Bill guessed must be spinach in two smaller dishes, and indicated the larger portion.

"This is your place." When Bill stood aside, waiting for her to be seated, she smiled. "Go ahead. I'll be right with you."

Bill sat down, took a biscuit, and spread it with fresh country butter. He was hungrier than he had thought he could be, and he did not speak for a few minutes. No gourmet, he still knew good food when he ate it and this had been prepared by a master cook. Bill tasted the green vegetable and discovered that it was not spinach. It had a tang and a taste that could come only from the freshness of a newly-awakened earth.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Dandelion greens. We don't get many fresh vegetables until they appear in the spring. Soon we'll have all we can use, though. Our own gardens will be ready."

Bill finished, sat back, sighed, and loosened his belt. "Your mother certainly taught you how to cook!"

She said simply, "I never knew my mother. She and Dad died in the same accident when I was two. I lived with my older brother and his wife until I came here. Mrs. Burns, who lives in that house you can see close by, keeps a wonderful watch over Grandfather and me. I call her Aunt Dottie."

All this, Bill decided, explained her initiative and self-reliance. She could do things for herself, because from a very early age there had been no one to do them for her. It never occurred to Bill that the same explanation might apply to his own early maturity and almost-adult outlook.

There was a sound from the other room and Janice excused herself. "That's Grandfather. I'll take him something to eat."

She poured milk into a bowl, put two biscuits on a plate, and carried everything into one of the other rooms. A moment later she was back, smiling, and some of the nervous tension that had been upon her was gone.

"He's feeling better. He says that I could bring him baby food if he were a baby. Now he wants something to eat."

She broiled two more lamb chops, buttered the rolls, added a small portion of dandelion greens, filled a cup with coffee, and took that to her grandfather.

Bill went back to the store, and saw a thin little man wearing a loose jacket leaning impatiently on the counter. The little man wore a cap with a peak so huge that his face was almost hidden. Bill took a deep breath. If this was going to be his store, he might as well begin to learn about it right now.

"Something I can do for you?" he asked the little man.

"Snoose," the other said.

"What?"

"Snoose, snoose."

Bill said caustically, "Snoose to me, too."

"Ah, don't you know nothin'?"

The little man walked around the counter, took a package of snuff from that part of the shelves reserved for tobacco, and held it up for Bill's inspection.

"This is snoose. Charge it."

The little man walked out and Bill leaned thoughtfully against the counter. Evidently there were several factors that entered into running a country store, and none of them had anything to do with the way business was conducted in cities. Lamb Chops walked over to the door, sat down in front of it, and barked. Bill let Lamb Chops out.

Fifteen minutes later Janice joined him.

"Have some snoose?" Bill invited.

She looked startled. "Heavens no!"

Bill grinned. "A little man in a leather jacket—he must have been all of four feet five—just bought a package. He said to charge it."

"That's Ten-Trap Gallagher," she decided.

She went behind the counter, knelt down, took an account book from its hiding place, and made an entry. She replaced the book and turned to Bill.

"He's feeling better," she said cheerfully. "He wants to be sure to talk with you."

"I'm glad."

Bill made no further comment. He had sensed an undercurrent of worry and uncertainty in the girl, and he thought that it was born of his arrival. If what he suspected was true, Janice had been sent here to take care of Gosmer Wisman, as well as to work for him. Until now they had been secure, but news of his uncle's death and new ownership of the store could prove disconcerting.

Still, how could he tell her anything definite when he himself was not sure as to what he wanted to do? If he lost the store, he'd be penniless, too. The idea of continuing to pay Mr. Wisman three hundred dollars a month was impossible.

Twilight came, and a lonely whip-poor-will piped its evening song. Darkness trod softly on the heels of twilight, and Janice lighted a gasoline lantern. A couple of customers drifted in, were served, and their purchases were entered in the account book. Lamb Chops barked to get back in. Bill yawned.

"Would you like to turn in?" Janice asked.

"Sounds like a marvelous idea."

"Go ahead, then. I don't think anyone else will come tonight, but if they do and need anything, they'll pound on the door."

Bill went to bed, slipped between clean white sheets, pulled the blankets up to his chin, and lay quietly to do some serious thinking. A tang of frost was in the air, cold tumbled in a soft stream over his exposed face, and it was no time for serious thinking. Within two minutes he was fast asleep.

He wakened to warm sunlight pouring through the window and

sat up guiltily. He had gone to bed at half past nine and it was now half past seven; not in years had he slept so long. But neither, for as long as he could remember, had he felt quite so good. He washed, dressed, and went into the kitchen. The smell of fresh coffee tickled his nostrils and Janice smiled at him.

"Good morning."

"Good morning. Whee! I sure pounded my ear!"

"You were tired."

She poured a cup of coffee for him and one for herself, fried ham and eggs, and they ate. Bill thought of the big dinner he'd eaten last night. In Tennigale or New York, he had seldom been this hungry; apparently mountain air did do something to people's appetites.

"Grandfather won't be up for a while yet," Janice said. "He sleeps a great deal lately."

"Is he ill, too?" Bill asked.

"He has some trouble."

"Serious?"

"He's very old, Bill. Doctor Jackson—we have to call him in from Blissville—said that there really isn't too much that can be done for him."

"Maybe he'll live for years yet."

"I hope so. Bill, what are you going to do with the store?"

He answered gently, "I haven't decided."

She did not question him any further, but when he excused himself and started into the store he felt her eyes on his back. Bill frowned. The Wismans hadn't been able to make the Elk Shanty store show a profit, even though Gosmer Wisman had been subsidized with three hundred dollars a month. How could he possibly hope to do it? How could he even stay in business?

Mornings, especially week-day mornings, are not a country store's busy time. Bill inspected the counters, discovered some bins that he had not seen before, and he found a vast quantity of garden seeds beneath the counter. He tried to make a mental tally of just how much they would plant, but he knew little about gardening. At a guess, there were enough seeds to plant every garden in Elk Shanty for the next ten years. Why should Gosmer Wisman, or anyone else, invest so heavily in seeds when the stock of almost everything else was so pitifully inadequate? There was little sense in the whole thing.

Lamb Chops walked to the cooler, sat down, barked, and Bill went in to see Janice.

"Lamb Chops seems to be starving again. What'll I give him?"

"There's some stew in the cooler. He can have that."

Bill went outside, picked up a dish he had noticed in front of the store, and opened the cooler. He whistled softly. The cooler—cooled with ice—was heavily stocked with meat, butter, and eggs. Maybe the Wismans hadn't much money, but certainly there was no danger of their starving. Bill found the mulligan, transferred it to the dish, put it on the floor, and Lamb Chops

began to eat.

A second later a whimper of pain escaped him, and Bill glanced in his direction. Lamb Chops was standing away from the dish, looking at it, and for the first time he seemed puzzled. He started to eat again and a second time he whimpered. Janice came into the store and laughed.

"I should have told you," she said. "There's a special technique for dish-feeding Lamb Chops."

She went back into the apartment, returned with a clothes pin, gently laid Lamb Chops' big ears over his head, and pinned them there.

"His ears are so long that they fall into the dish, too, and he bites them when he eats," she explained.

Lamb Chops exercised his vacuum-cleaner technique and in a second or two the dish was clean. Janice went back into the kitchen.

The door opened and a man who was certainly not a native of Elk Shanty came in.

He was elderly, but he had kept himself in trim. About Bill's size, he had none of the paunch which is so often the mark of older men. His face was lined, but it had an almost youthful alertness. A deep intelligence lay behind his clear gray eyes, and his voice was that of a cultured person.

"Good morning."

"Good morning," Bill greeted him.

"Where's my friend Jan?"

"In the kitchen. Is there something I can do for you?"

The man's gray eyes seemed to penetrate Bill's head and read his thoughts.

"Do you work here, too?"

"It seems," Bill was half-embarrassed, "that I am the new owner."

"Oh, no! Do you mean you let Al Rawls unload this white elephant on you?"

"My Uncle Alfred is dead."

"I'm terribly sorry." And for the second time Bill saw genuine regret in a person who, as far as he was concerned, was a total stranger. Apparently his uncle had more than one friend whom he had never shared with anyone else. The stranger continued, "When did he die?"

"Two weeks ago. It was a heart attack."

The man said, "He knew it would come some day. I'm John Prosser. Al and I started coming here together five years ago."

Bill's interest quickened and he introduced himself. Maybe John Prosser knew the answers to a lot of questions that Bill would like to ask. He said, "You've known my uncle for five years?"

"That's right. For five summers your uncle, myself, Gosmer Wisman, Axel Helgeson, Ten-Trap Gallagher, B. B. Jones, Bill Gowen, and other notables, have been settling world affairs in

this store."

"May I join the charmed circle?" Bill asked.

"Are you going to keep the place?"

"Do you think I should?"

"As a practical businessman, I'd say you'd come out far ahead if you gave it, lock, stock, and barrel, to Gosmer and Jan. As a friend of your uncle and of the Wismans, it would be nice, if you can afford it, to continue the present arrangement."

"And just what is that?"

"Do you mean you don't know?"

"It seems to me that I'm the only one who doesn't know."

John Prosser was thoughtful. "What's bothering you, Son?"

"In the first place, what brought my uncle here?"

The older man asked, "Just how well did you know him?"

Bill dimly remembered his governess, and later on his tutors. There had been boarding school, prep school, college, and summer vacations spent working or traveling. He had not been home a great deal and he said honestly, "Not very well."

"Few people did. Your uncle came here because he's human, and the human being who can bear forever the world he creates for himself has yet to be born. It is called, I believe, 'getting away from it all.' Your uncle needed a refuge, a haven where he could think different thoughts. All of us need such a place at some time or other. Some of us would find it in the heart of

New York, some in the heart of Elk Shanty."

The explanation was reasonable. But other aspects of the whole affair were murky as a storm-ridden sky. Bill asked, "Why did my uncle buy this store and pay Gosmer Wisman to manage it for him?"

The older man said, "I'll tell you because I think you have a right to know. Five years ago this summer your uncle rode the train to Blissville. He did not know where he was going; Blissville simply happened to be rail's end. Your uncle asked the Blissville taxi driver if he knew of any place where he could find peace and quiet. The driver brought him here, collected his fare, and went back. In front of Gosmer Wisman's house, your uncle suffered his first heart attack. Gosmer certainly had no reason to suppose that he was a wealthy man, or anything except an unfortunate man. But he took him in, gave him a comfortable bed, called the doctor from Blissville, and paid him out of his own pocket. Does that tell you anything?"

"A lot."

"I'll tell you the rest. Your uncle, having two eyes, saw for himself how things were with Gosmer. He was very old even then, and he had saved almost nothing. But he had his pride and he'll have it to the day he dies. To offer him an outright grant of money would have been to insult him. So your uncle thought of the store. He would buy it and pay Gosmer to manage it. That way nobody would lose face and Gosmer would have no worries. Even then Gosmer was suspicious. But," John Prosser shrugged, "you've met him?"

"Yes."

"He started going right after he got the store. It's senility, old age, and nothing else. He'd be in an old people's home now if Jan hadn't come to take care of him."

"How do you know so much about it?" Bill asked.

"Your uncle and I were close friends. He confided in me when he would confide in no one else. The rest of Elk Shanty thinks that Gosmer suddenly inherited a vast fortune."

"Jan knows where the money came from."

"She doesn't know the whole story and she wouldn't tell."

"She told me."

"That's because she's honest. Look, Son, why don't you let things ride just as they are?"

Bill said bluntly, "Mr. Prosser, when my uncle died there was just enough money to bury him and a little bit over. Aside from that, there is the store."

"No!"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do?"

"I haven't decided."

John Prosser said slowly, "Considering the circumstances, I cannot advise you. If the going gets too rough, I may be able to help a bit. Jan knows where my cabin is."

"Thanks. I won't forget."

Janice came into the store and cried, "Mr. Prosser!"

"Jan!" the older man exclaimed. She ran to him. He embraced her and kissed her cheek. "How these dim old eyes need to look at you!"

"How was your trip?" she asked excitedly.

"I didn't see a girl in Paris as pretty as you. And I've brought you a present."

He felt in his pocket, brought out a small parcel, and handed it to her. She opened it and bubbled her delight; it was a vial of French perfume. Removing the stopper, she smelled it.

"*Um-m!* Oh heavens! I forgot my coffee!"

She raced back into the kitchen and John Prosser turned to Bill. "I've been in Europe, and came straight here after two days in Boston. That's why I hadn't heard of your uncle's death."

"I see."

Janice came back and talked eagerly to John Prosser. Once in a while she excused herself to wait on a customer and Bill noticed that, out of six, only one paid cash. The rest were all entered in Janice's book. The eighth customer, ordering a bag of flour, left a fat dressed chicken in exchange and Janice put the fowl in the ice box. John Prosser left, and Bill was surprised when Janice called him to lunch. The afternoon went as swiftly.

Gosmer joined them at dinner, and he talked at length of the old days in Elk Shanty. He spoke of wild log drives down Elk Shanty Creek, and when Bill questioned him, because the

creek seemed hardly big enough to float a log, Gosmer explained that they built a series of wood and earth dams. The logs were floated in behind them. The dam was knocked or blasted out, and the logs were gone in a rush of water. Gosmer talked of hardy men, bunk houses, battles, an endless supply of timber and the oxen that had helped haul it.

Bill listened, fascinated, while Gosmer told of all the things that had taken place when his world was young. But that was the only world in which Gosmer really lived any more, and soon after dinner the old man went back to his bed. Bill helped with the dishes and stared at the gathering darkness. He turned suddenly to Janice.

"Does the store have a complete set of accounts?"

"They're complete since I've been here."

"Did your grandfather keep any at all?"

"Some, but they're sketchy."

"Can we have a look at them?"

"Certainly."

When they went into the store, Lamb Chops, who had managed to do away with two more huge meals during the day, asked to go out. Bill let him go, and the hound wandered away to attend to that mysterious business which humans never know about but which is vastly important to dogs. Janice had drawn two wooden chairs up to the counter and laid four closed cigar boxes and two account books where they could easily be reached.

"They're in order," she said. "The cigar boxes are Grandfather's and the books are mine."

Bill opened the first cigar box and read a slip, "owed from D. Matou, four dollars and eight cents." The slip had no date and it did not say what D. Matou, whoever he was, had purchased. The next paper was "owed from F. Gowen, six dollars and nineteen cents." That slip was equally lacking in detail. Bill read eight before he found, "owed from A. Flanagan, two dollars," and the notation, "paid."

The slips were monotonously the same. It seemed that everybody in Elk Shanty, and almost everybody who had ever been in Elk Shanty, owed the store money. There were numerous entries that denoted a trade; Gosmer had given somebody ten pounds of sugar, fifty pounds of flour, steel traps, ammunication, or something else, for meat, eggs, fruit, furs, or some other local product.

Patiently Bill went through the cigar boxes and turned to Janice's books. They were much more complete. The date, the article bought, who bought it, and the price, were all carefully noted. But it was the same story. There were comparatively few cash sales. Bill closed the books and turned to Janice.

"How much do you think the store is owed?"

"More than eight thousand dollars. I myself went over the accounts a month ago."

"Can we collect it?"

"I doubt if everyone in Elk Shanty together could produce half that much," she answered.

Bill said, more to himself than to her, "And the inventory consists of seeds!"

"Grandfather bought them," she said. "He did it to help Elk Shanty. He thought that if the people here had really good seed, they could grow better gardens."

"Why did he buy so much?"

She stiffened. "That should be plain."

Bill, knowing that she referred to Gosmer's condition, said, "I'm sorry I asked that. Do you sell any seed at all?"

"Very little. Nobody around here buys anything if they can grow or make it. They always plant enough extra so that they can have their own seeds from year to year."

"Seems to be an all-around flop, doesn't it?"

Her anger flared. "I resent that! Grandfather's done the best he could. He isn't a criminal because he thinks in terms of human beings instead of money, either! When you decide what you're going to do with the store, please be kind enough to let me know! After all, I do have a few plans of my own!"

She flounced out of the store and back to her own room. The door slammed so hard it rocked the wooden partition, and for a moment Bill stared at it. Then he got slowly from his chair.

The store, Janice had said, was owed well over eight thousand dollars. Certainly his attorneys could collect some of that. Even if they had to take forty cents on the dollar, it would be better than this. Bill walked out the front door into a night so filled with spring that it seemed ready to explode.

Stars sprinkled the sky, and the near-by stream sang a happy song. The haunting cry of an owl floated across the valley and Bill drank deeply of the night air. He walked away from the store.

The shadow that followed him moved so stealthily that, until the last split second, Bill did not even know it was there. When he knew, and turned, it was too late. The thing remained just a shadow. But a clap of thunder burst in Bill's head and as he fell he thought he heard a mocking voice say, "Go away, city boy! We don't need you in Elk Shanty!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Beginning

Bill was back in Tenngale, and it seemed hours ago that the gong had signaled the beginning of his fifth round with Alan Chesterton. Or was it the sixth? He could not be quite sure because his head was a series of flashing lights and explosions. There was no pain but only a sort of dullness, as though his body were somehow a thing that had no sense or being. The round ended and he was still on his feet.

He turned, and by a great force of will he managed to walk without staggering. Bill went to his corner, sat down, and felt the blessed relief offered by a damp towel in Johnny Markson's expert hands. It was wonderfully soothing, and he knew that all he wanted to do was sit there and go to sleep. But he must not sleep. There was a fight to be finished.

Bill struggled back to consciousness and as soon as he did the flashing lights became shooting pains and he felt sick in the pit of his stomach. He lay quietly while the red mists before his eyes gave way to the darkness of a spring night. His head clearer, he became slowly aware that it was not Johnny Markson's towel but Lamb Chops' tongue on his face.

Ghostly-white in the blackness, the big hound sat beside him with his cold nose inches from Bill's cheek. When Bill moved, Lamb Chops voiced a happy little whine, rose, and for almost the first time Bill saw his tail wag. Lamb Chops raced away. Bracing himself with stiff arms, Bill fought to a sitting position.

His head throbbed and the sickness was almost overwhelming. Bill moved his jaws and tasted a thick tongue. Then he bent forward to rest his head on his knees and battled an urge to sleep again. He must get up.

Two minutes later Lamb Chops came back with something in his mouth. He dropped it beside Bill and the boy thrust an exploring hand out. Instantly he drew it back, for his outstretched fingers had touched a wriggling object that was clammy and cold. He got a grip on himself, raised his head, and bit his lower lip hard to counteract pain and nausea.

The second time he thrust his hand forth he closed it about the object Lamb Chops had brought and discovered that it was a live sucker—a fish—that Lamb Chops had offered as a comforting present to a friend in trouble. The gaunt hound had not been near to help defend him, but he was laying a great treasure at Bill's feet. There was no telling how and where he had caught the fish.

Still tinged with a hint of frost, cold air brushed Bill's face lightly. It was like an application of ice water. Then a stronger gust blew out of the north and, though it still throbbed, Bill's head cleared completely. The next thing he knew was a mighty rush of anger.

He had not hurt anyone, but obviously there was someone in Elk Shanty who resented his presence so strongly that he, or they, would go to any lengths to drive him out again. Bill rose shakily to his feet and Lamb Chops looked up at him with deep concern. Bill clenched both his fists.

Maybe the store was a hopeless venture. Perhaps staying here and trying to run it would be like beating his head against a

stone wall. But he had done that before. Certainly he had done it when he went back into the ring with Alan Chesterton; everybody except Bill had known that he couldn't possibly win and they were right. Now Bill knew only that, at last, he saw a clear and certain course of action and he was incapable of anything except following through.

Lamb Chops put his nose to the ground and snuffled so heavily that the sound could be heard above the rushing wind. For a moment Bill felt a flaring resentment. If Lamb Chops were all Rifle Eye Smith and others thought him, he would now take the trail and, straight as a homing bee, lead Bill to the man who had slugged him. Then he knew the silliness of such a notion and stooped to pet the big hound. Dogs acted that way in melodramatic story books. They didn't in real life, and it was absurd to expect any such miracle.

Bill's legs were stronger now and the feeling of nausea had departed. Lamb Chops stayed close behind him as he went into the store, and as soon as they were in, the white hound went to his own corner. But not for a moment or two did he lie down. He stood erect, watching Bill with sad eyes and waiting to see what he intended to do.

"It's all right, Lamb Chops."

Bill spoke soothingly, and as soon as he did Lamb Chops lay down. He did not go to sleep immediately, but stretched his great head on his front paws while his ears curled on the floor. He watched every move as Bill locked the door, took the gasoline lantern from its hook, and went back to his own room. Only then did Lamb Chops sleep.

Bill walked softly, treading on the balls of his feet so as not to

disturb Janice and Gosmer Wisman. But flaring anger gripped him so tightly that his teeth were clenched and his muscles were rigid. He went to his own room, struck a match, and lighted the oil lamp that stood on the dresser. He took the gasoline lantern into the washroom and stared at his own reflection in the mirror.

His face was pale, and so tense and taut that every muscle stood out like a stretched cord. The collar of his shirt was splattered with blood, and when Bill put a hand to the back of his head, his fingers came away bloody. His eyes were blazing, and he was tempted to go back out into the night and do whatever he could to track down and fight whoever had struck him.

Bill gained some measure of control and with it a return of common sense. As yet he knew very little about Elk Shanty, and who and what the place contained. To go out and look for the person who had crept up and hit him would be easy, but finding the right person would be impossible. He must, for the time being, wait and let events take their course.

Of one thing Bill was sure; sooner or later he would find out who had slugged him, and when he did there would be a real battle.

He let the cold water flow until it had reached its coldest, soaked a wash cloth in it, and applied it to the back of his head. It was soothing and it took away some of his headache. Bill rinsed the bloody cloth, soaked it again, and kept washing his head until no more blood was evident. He held a cold compress on the wound until his own body heat had warmed it, then wrung out the cloth and reapplied the compress. He took off

his shirt and tossed it on the bed. Grimly he thought that if he ruined any more clothes, he would need a complete new wardrobe.

When he was finished he felt better. His headache had subsided to a few throbbing pains. His flaring anger had become a steadily-burning flame that nothing could extinguish. It might, as John Prosser had said, be impossible to make the Elk Shanty store show any profit. But Bill was very sure of one thing. He intended to stay in Elk Shanty and find out for himself. Nobody was going to run him out.

Forgotten was all thought of sleep or rest. Bill put on a clean shirt and opened the window wide so that the full freshness of the night air spilled like a cold stream into his room. He paced restlessly back and forth, trying to evolve some feasible working plan. But after an hour all he had thought of was that, no matter what else happened, he intended to stay in Elk Shanty and run the store.

Carrying the gasoline lantern, Bill walked softly back into the store and Lamb Chops raised a sleepy head to look at him. He went to a shelf where he remembered seeing some large rectangles of white cardboard, and he took two of them out. About thirty inches long by twenty wide, one side of the cardboard proclaimed in large black letters that whoever did not avail themselves of the manifold benefits inherent in Jackerson's Stomach Balm, which contained no harmful acids, would have only themselves to blame. But the other side was blank.

Bill went to a shelf where he had seen a few small cans of paint. He took a can of black paint, one of three small brushes

that were also on the shelf, and went back to his room.

He had only a vague idea of how a store should be run, but just looking at this one had given him more than a faint notion of how one should *not* be managed. Some of the stock on the shelves must have been there for years, and if anybody wanted to buy it, it would have been bought long ago.

Bill laid the square of cardboard, blank side up, on his dresser and printed carefully: COMPLETE CLEARANCE! EVERYTHING MARKED DOWN 50% AND EVERYTHING GOING! Holding the sign by its edges so he wouldn't smear the paint, he tilted it against the wall, stepped back, and looked at it. It was not a professional job, but it was good enough and it conveyed the idea he wanted to put across.

He laid the first sign aside and worked laboriously over a second: IF WHOEVER BLACKJACKED ME LAST NIGHT WILL MAKE HIMSELF KNOWN, I'LL BE GLAD TO KNOCK HIS EARS OFF. He looked critically at the second sign, then tore it in four parts and threw it into the waste basket.

This was supposed to be a store, not a place for settling grudge fights. Besides, it was hardly likely that anyone who would strike from behind, and in the darkness, would be lured into betraying himself because a sign invited him to do it. The next time he struck, and Bill thought there would be a next time, he would again be in ambush and probably sheltered by darkness. Bill would just have to watch himself.

He glanced at his watch, saw that it was twenty minutes before two, and went to bed. As soon as the back of his head touched the pillow, he winced and turned over on his side. There he

lay, restlessly wooing sleep that scorned him. The dim light of early dawn was flirting with his window when he finally dozed off.

Two hours later he awakened, washed, dressed, and left his room to see Janice in the kitchen. Last night's hot words had burned away the smile with which she had been greeting him and she said only, "Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes."

"Thanks."

Bill stood silently by the doorway. He waited for her to speak, and when she did not he said, "You asked me to tell you when I have any definite plans. Well, I have some."

"Yes?"

"Just a minute."

Bill returned to his room and brought his sign into the kitchen. He held it so she could read it, and there was a question in her eyes.

"You're going to sell everything?"

"For cash," Bill said grimly.

"Then," she hesitated, "you're going to close the store?"

"I am not! I am going to start it out fresh with a complete new stock from Cannasport! If you'll stay on, at your present wages, I'll be glad to have you. I can't be here all the time."

She said, "I really think I'm worth twice as much money."

"But—"

Her eyes were dancing and the smile had come back to her face. Gone was her air of nervous tension. Bill had a curious feeling that it was not herself she had worried about, but her grandfather. Elk Shanty had been his home for only he knew how many years, and, like an old tree, to uproot him now might prove disastrous. Bill grinned.

"I'll raise you a dollar a year," he offered.

"Good! In fifty more years I'll be earning seventy dollars a week!"

"Oh, no. I said a dollar a year. In fifty years you'll be paid just what you're getting now, plus fifty dollars."

"There is a Santa Claus!"

They ate, and Bill went into the store to put his sign in the window. A youngster, idling past, flattened his nose against the outside of the glass and skipped away.

Janice came into the store. The smile was gone from her face and fear lingered in her eyes. She looked squarely at Bill.

"Bill, what happened?"

"Nothing yet. Some kid read the sign and ran away. I suppose he has some important fishing to do."

"You know what I mean," she challenged.

"No, I don't."

"I went in to make your bed and found the pillow all bloody!"

Bill said lamely, "I must have cut myself."

"Tell me the truth. What happened?"

"Nothing much." He looked out the window, but there was about her a force that could not be denied. Bill knew that she intended to find out what had happened, and he decided that she would find out. He said, "All right. It was somebody's idea of a joke. I stepped out last night to get a breath of fresh air and instead I got slugged."

"Who did it?" she gasped.

"I wish I knew."

"You aren't safe here!"

"Yes, I am. But he won't be as soon as I find out who he is."

"Aren't you going to do something?"

"You bet! As soon as I find the right party!"

"That's the Sheriff's job."

Bill said, "This kind of fight's a private affair."

"Be reasonable!"

"I am reasonable."

The youngster who had plastered his nose against the window came back into the store, and opened a grimy fist to reveal three pennies reposing in it. He went to the candy case and pointed at the jawbreakers.

"Some of them," he said. "They used to be two for a penny but now they ought to be four for a penny. My pop said so."

Janice looked at Bill. He nodded. "Go ahead."

She put a dozen of the hard round candies in a paper bag and the youngster scooted away. Janice placed the three cents in a cigar box that served as a cash depository and recorded the transaction while Bill made a mental note. When and if he could afford it, he must buy a proper cash register. This method of handling money was primitive and time-consuming.

The next customer to enter the store, two minutes after the youngster left, was Ten-Trap Gallagher. The huge peak of his cap extended like a porch roof over his forehead and shaded his eyes. Swaggering like a bantam rooster, he stalked up to Janice and flicked a calloused thumb toward the window.

"That mean what it says, Jan?"

Bill stood aside. Apparently the news had yet to make the rounds that he owned the Elk Shanty store, and Elk Shantyites were used to being served by Janice. She looked over Ten-Trap's head at Bill, and Bill nodded again.

"Ten traps I needs an' ten I sets," the little man said. "But for half price I will buy some more."

Bill knew a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. His first move had been a blunder. Traps were durable. Those hanging on the wall would last indefinitely, and not in years had the basic design of a steel trap been changed. He might better have kept the traps and sold them for full price. But the die was cast.

"How many do you want?" Janice asked.

"All of 'em," Ten-Trap announced. "They ain't costin' me a cent. I can sell a little better'n half to Joey Kanite for as much

as you're askin'."

Janice counted the traps and Ten-Trap slung the heavy load over his shoulder. He was a small man, but he carried the traps with little more effort than most men would have used on five pounds of sugar. Ten-Trap strutted up to the counter.

"Charge it," he said grandly.

Bill tried to sound pleasant. "I'm sorry, but in a sale like this we cannot charge anything. It's strictly cash."

Ten-Trap said bluntly, "Keep your beak out of my corn, Bub."

Janice saved the situation. "Mr. Rawls is the new owner of the store, Ten-Trap."

"Huh!" the little man snorted. "An' he don't even know what snoose is! Oh well—"

He dug deeply into his pocket, produced a homemade wallet, unfolded it, and from the inside pocket he took a frayed ten-dollar bill. Janice searched in the cigar box.

"I'm afraid I haven't that much change."

"I already told you to charge it," Ten-Trap said.

Bill replied grimly, "No charges."

"Ha!" Ten-Trap snorted. "Think you're goin' to put somethin' over an' sell them traps to somebody else, huh? I'll fix you! I'll spend the whole ten dollars! I need snoose."

He bought eight packages of snoose, a bag of flour, ten pounds of sugar, ten of beans, some small knickknacks, and when his

change would have come to two cents, Ten-Trap asked for and received eight jawbreakers. Leering at Bill, somehow he managed to store everything in his pockets or carry it in his hands and he walked out of the store as jauntily as he had entered it.

What mysterious grapevine spread the news, Bill didn't know, but a steady stream of customers was entering the store now. Bill recognized Fanny Gowen, who gathered feathers for fishing flies; and as she rushed past him on some errand, Janice pointed out Asa Dorr, the maker of fishing rods. He was roughly-dressed and unshaven, but his eyes were those of a dreamer, and his long, supple fingers might have graced the hands of an artist.

Bill stood almost stupidly aside, with little idea of what to do or how to go about doing it. Deciding to rid the store completely of old stock, he had marked everything down fifty per cent. But he hadn't known the original price of anything and he didn't know it now. Therefore the major portion of the work was up to Janice.

Bill put all the one-dollar bills in his wallet in the cigar box, and remembering that there were several dollars in change in his room, he went to get it. Janice had to have change. When he returned, John Prosser stood quietly to one side and Gosmer was helping Janice.

The old man sparkled like a drop of dew in the morning sunshine. At last, at long last, Gosmer's sleeping world had reawakened. He had seen this bustling activity in the days when all was young here and lumberjacks had swarmed out of the woods with money in their pockets and an urge to spend it

in their hearts. In less than an hour, Gosmer had gone back fifty years.

Bill watched with sinking heart while Gosmer Wisman traded yards of red cloth to a middle-aged woman who laid a country-cured ham on the counter. The cloth was so outdated and so outlandish that nobody except an Elk Shantyite would have considered buying it, and it was one of the many articles that Bill wanted to clear from the shelves. But he had also hoped to realize as much money as possible from this sale. The cooler was already stocked with as much food as they could possibly use if each of them ate six big meals a day.

Still—Bill looked again at Gosmer Wisman's delighted face and knew that he lacked the heart to stop him. There was not too much pleasure left in the old man's life. Bill walked over to stand beside John Prosser.

"Just like Christmas on Fifth Avenue." The other grinned. "Did you decide to hang on?"

"As long as I can." Bill's worried eyes remained on the old gentleman. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Certainly."

"Will you get Gosmer Wisman out of here without—without hurting his feelings?"

"Why?"

"He's trading and—Darn it! I need every last cent I can lay my hands on for new stock!"

"If you're worried about that ham," John Prosser said, "I'll buy

it at the going price in Blissville."

"I wouldn't want to impose on you."

"It would be no imposition," the other assured him. "That's Ellery Ganson's wife, and Ellery knows how to cure a ham so it's out of this world. It has to be the right time of the moon, and he must use hickory chips that he himself seasons for the smoking. You don't get ham like that anywhere at all except Ellery's smokehouse."

"You can have it," Bill said.

John Prosser smiled. "Do you want to know something, Bill?"

"Sure."

"Some day you may be a successful merchant, but you'll never be a hard-hearted one. Maybe I can move Gosmer for you."

John Prosser walked unobtrusively toward the elderly man, but another couple whom Bill did not know had come in. The man, a hill farmer, bore a crate of eggs on his shoulder and his wife searched the counters and shelves with darting eyes. They engaged Gosmer in conversation, and Bill groaned. A whole crate of twelve dozen eggs were far too many for three people. Still, Gosmer seemed intent on trading again.

Within an hour the jawbreakers were sold, most of them to Elk Shanty's younger set who came in with pennies in their hands. The tobacco was gone fifteen minutes later, and Bill berated himself. He might have kept the tobacco stock, and staples like sugar and flour, and sold them at full price. Certainly the store would lose money on this sale. But that, Bill supposed, was one of the ways by which a storekeeper learns.

Bill cast a grim eye on the vegetable seeds. Even though they were marked down, comparatively few had been sold. Bill ducked into the back room and made a new sign: SEEDS, FOUR PACKS FOR THE PRICE OF ONE. Immediately men and women started crowding around the racks and carrying seeds to the counter. As soon as a rack was depleted, Bill refilled it from Gosmer Wisman's hoard.

The latter and John Prosser had disappeared, and Bill felt grateful. He was desperately in need of as much money as he could raise. If they took any more in trade, they would also have to build a new cooler to hold it. John Prosser came out of the back room and walked to Bill's side.

"How goes it, Merchant Prince?" he asked.

"Looks as though it'll be a sell-out."

"It will be," the other stated. "People will buy anything if they think they're getting a real bargain. If you had a cage full of giraffes, and offered them cheaply enough, every family in Elk Shanty would buy one. By the way, you won't have to worry any more about Gosmer. He's gone to sleep."

"Thanks."

"Don't forget about my ham."

"Take it with you?"

"Sure."

John Prosser walked to the counter, waited until Janice had a free moment, and spoke to her. She weighed the ham on the store's old scale. John Prosser paid her and left.

By noon the shelves and counters were empty, except for a few battered odds and ends, and the customers had left. Starry-eyed, Janice leaned on the counter.

"My, that was fun!" she breathed.

"It was?"

"Goodness yes! I've dreamed of the time when the store would be this busy, even if we did sell everything for half price!"

"How much money did we take in?"

Janice opened the cigar box, counted the day's receipts, and re-counted.

"A hundred and sixty-five dollars and fifty-three cents."

"Give me a hundred," Bill requested. "And will you make a new sign? Just have it say OPEN FOR BUSINESS, and we'll put it in the window tomorrow morning."

"But—"

"The stock will be here," Bill promised. "I'm going to get it right now."

"How about your lunch?"

"I haven't time."

Bill went to his room, opened his traveling bag, took a small packet out, and put it in his pocket. Janice awaited him with a filled sack.

"This is lunch to take along," she said. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going up to see Rifle Eye Smith," Bill answered.

CHAPTER SIX

Open for Business

Lamb Chops paced steadily beside Bill as he walked swiftly up the road toward Rifle Eye's place. Bill opened the sack and munched one of the sandwiches Janice had prepared for him. He threw a crust to Lamb Chops. Without breaking stride, and without seeming even to look around, the gaunt hound snapped the crust in midair and inhaled. The crust was swallowed.

Bill ate half of another sandwich, gave half to Lamb Chops, and nibbled on a handful of cookies that were also in the sack. Lamb Chops did not look around and there was about him none of that vast anticipation which most dogs exhibit when they want something more to eat. The big dog would take what was offered to him, but he wouldn't beg. Bill gave him the last cookie and threw the sack away.

He was at the rutted trail leading into Rifle Eye's place when he remembered something that he should have thought of before leaving Elk Shanty. Cannasport was a good-sized city and certainly there would be wholesale houses, but Bill had forgotten to ask Janice where they usually dealt. He was almost tempted to go back and find out, but time was going fast and he wanted to be in Cannasport as soon as possible. Maybe Rifle Eye would know of a reliable place. If he didn't, Bill would look in the telephone directory after he got to Cannasport.

He made a mental tally of the goods he wanted and he had an uneasy feeling that the money in his pocket would not be

nearly enough to pay for everything. Perhaps he could get the rest on credit. If not, he had one final resource. He was not greatly worried about the first load of goods for his store. After that—

Bill set his jaw. If things worked out as he hoped they would, he would pay for the next consignment after he sold the first. If things did not work out—Bill looked down at Lamb Chops and stooped to touch the hound's head. Now was not the time to indulge in forebodings of disaster.

He came upon Rifle Eye's house and stopped short.

Built of logs, the place was on a grassy little knoll. All about was sturdy cutover, but great white oaks evidently spared by the timber crews grew on the knoll and shaded the house. The oaks must have been at least a hundred years old and perhaps older. There was no dead wood on any of them and all were laden with tightly-curved leaflets. At one side, almost hidden by cutover, was a shed to which the wheel tracks pointed, and Bill supposed that Rifle Eye kept his truck there. On the other side, in the shade of the trees, were three kennels, with a long-eared black and tan hound chained to each. The hounds looked solemnly at Bill, but they made no outcry.

Bill felt an inner glow. This was a woodsman's home, and nobody except a man of the woods could possibly live here. It was very clean, with no litter lying about. Bill looked again at the three hounds, and they returned his gaze. The ears of all were shredded, and a leathery scar made a ragged pattern across the ribs of the biggest hound. Obviously these were fighting dogs, used to hunt animals that fought back.

Lamb Chops ignored the other hounds and stayed near Bill.

Three feet from the door he sat down and waited, and Bill caught a flicker of motion as someone ducked away from the window. A second later the door opened and, rifle in hand, Rifle Eye appeared.

"Howdy, Bill!" he said.

"Hi, Rifle Eye!" Bill eyed the rifle. "Do you ever go anywhere at all without that?"

Rifle Eye's warm smile flashed. "Don't hardly feel dressed without her. Yep, leavin' her behind makes me feel downright clothesless."

Bill thought whimsically that in most of the stories he had read woodsmen named their rifles Old Betsy, Meat-in-the-Pot, or something similar. Rifle Eye had not yet referred to his in any such way, and somehow that was a relief.

Bill said, "I've come to see if I can hire your truck to go down to Cannasport and bring back a load of goods?"

"A man can allus use a dollar."

"How much will the truck carry?"

"As much as we can put on her. How soon do you want to be in Cannasport?"

"As soon as possible."

"Want to start now?"

"Suits me."

"All right."

Rifle Eye closed the door without bothering to lock it, and Bill and Lamb Chops followed him down to the shed. There were no doors on the shed, and Bill felt a momentary misgiving as he looked again at the truck. Anything to ride in would have looked good the day he was hiking from Blissville to Elk Shanty, but even then the truck had seemed incapable of running ten miles. Now Bill wondered if they could make it go even as far as the Tower Hill Road. But he knew of no other truck, and he had to have stock.

Tenderly, Rifle Eye laid his rifle on the seat, loosened the wire that held the hood on, lifted the hood, and there was a snapping noise as he tinkered with the engine. He climbed in, tried the starter, and the engine groaned. Again he manipulated something under the hood, and the next time he tried the starter there was a blasting report, a spurt of smoke shot out the rear end, and the truck was running. Rifle Eye fastened the hood, backed out of the shed, and stopped.

"Hop in," he invited.

Bill took the center seat. Lamb Chops settled in his favorite outside position, and Rifle Eye backed so fast that they seemed in danger of crashing into the house. Just in time, Rifle Eye swerved, cut around the corner of the house, and only then did the three hounds set up a thunderous baying.

Rifle Eye shouted, "They think I'm goin' huntin'."

"What do you hunt with them?"

"Bear, coon, cats. Anything that trees."

"Are they good dogs?"

"Passable. I've had better'n I've had worse. I'll take you huntin' if you stay in Elk Shanty."

"It looks as if I'll stay."

Rifle Eye said nothing, and Bill remembered that so far he had not asked a single personal question. He didn't even care why his passenger wanted to go to Cannasport. Bill sat back. He felt a strange satisfaction and a new liking for Rifle Eye.

Apparently the wolf-lean hill man had no intention of prying into other people's affairs.

They rolled along as fast as the truck would go, and it seemed to Bill that they were making at least seventy miles an hour. But when he looked at the speedometer to verify their speed, he saw that the needle remained on zero. The speedometer, like everything else on the instrument panel, was broken.

"How fast are we going?" he asked Rifle Eye.

"'Bout twenty-five."

"Seems as though we're making three times that."

"Could be," Rifle Eye agreed, "but it's only twenty-five ahead. 'Tother fifty would be up an' down."

They came to Blissville, and Bill relaxed. He had been in doubt when they left Rifle Eye's house as to whether they'd go more than a mile or two, but the truck was sturdier than it looked. In addition, Rifle Eye knew every bolt and rivet, and long experience had taught him what to do when anything went wrong. Rifle Eye stopped for a traffic light and Lamb Chops jumped out.

"Come back here!" Bill shouted.

Without even looking back, Lamb Chops leaped to the sidewalk and disappeared around a corner. Rifle Eye smiled.

"Leave him be. He just wants to visit his friends in Blissville an' I don't reckon he'd like Cannasport nohow. He ain't a city dog."

"He's running loose," Bill objected.

"He'll come to no harm an' he'll pick us up on the way back," Rifle Eye promised. "Don't worry about him."

The light changed and they started down the river toward Cannasport. For a while Bill was silent. He should have talked this trip over with Janice and asked her advice. But maybe Rifle Eye could advise him.

"Do you know the wholesale houses in Cannasport?" he asked.

Rifle Eye shook his head. "Don't go to Cannasport more'n once in a blue moon, an' then all I do is visit Pete Marrett. Owns a tradin' shop, Pete does, an' I sells him furs sometimes."

"Does he have any good clothes, like you're wearing?"

"That he does."

"How late is his place open?"

"Pete don't keep no hours. He should happen to be asleep, all you got to do is pound on the door an' he'll open up. Used to live in Elk Shanty afore he had a mite of trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"He stepped in a bear trap an' they cut his right leg off," Rifle Eye said casually.

Bill shuddered. If losing a leg was a "mite" of trouble, what would Rifle Eye consider serious? Bill's mind went back to his own problems.

"I need a whole new stock of goods," he said. "We sold everything in the store this morning."

Rifle Eye said drily, "First time that's happened in Elk Shanty sinst the big flood of eighteen years back. Some people lost all they had and had to buy new."

"It wasn't quite that good. Everything went for half price and we took some in trade. Got more in the cooler than a small size army could use."

"Why'nt you fetch the extra along, you mullethead? There's allus a market for it in Blissville an' Cannasport."

"Say! That's right!"

Bill saw what he hoped was a solution to one of his most pressing problems. The Elk Shantyites didn't have much money, but they had produce that would bring money in other markets. He would have to see what he could work out. Again he went over the mental list he had prepared, and he knew again that he had been too hurried. Buying for a store seemed such a simple matter until one set out to buy, and he could not afford to make too many mistakes. He said impulsively, "Will you go along with me when I buy?"

"Me? I don't know nothin' 'bout buyin' for stores."

"I don't either," Bill confessed.

"Goshamighty!"

"You know what they use in Elk Shanty," Bill pointed out.

"I know what the men use, but men don't do the buyin'."

"Come along anyhow."

Rifle Eye said doubtfully, "Well—all right."

The miracle Bill had hoped for came about; nothing went wrong with the truck and they rolled into Cannasport about half past two. Rifle Eye stopped at a filling station and an attendant approached. He was smart and quick, but even while he filled the gas tank his amazed glance roamed over the truck. It was incredible to suppose that such a thing would run.

Rifle Eye stayed with the truck. Bill went to the phone booth and looked in the classified pages of the directory. He ran his finger down the "Grocers-Wholesale" column, ended at Zunder Brothers, and shrugged. Since he didn't know where to go anyhow, he might as well try them. Bill noted the address, and when he went out the attendant was polishing the glass half of the windshield. Bill paid for the gas and climbed into his seat.

"Do you know how to get to 1287 River Street?" he asked Rifle Eye.

"Yup. That's over by the river."

Rifle Eye swung out into the stream of traffic and expertly threaded his way through it. Bill jumped at a hideous, blasting report, and the car ahead of them pulled over as quickly as

possible. The terrible noise was repeated and Bill saw Rifle Eye tapping the horn button. Apparently one thing on the truck was still in operating order.

Rifle Eye halted in front of a brick building that seemed to occupy most of a city block, slid into a parking space that Bill thought was too small to accommodate the truck, pointed his front wheels at the curb, and blocked the rear ones with two pieces of planking.

"The parking brake ain't any good," he explained. "Well, here we are."

Bill felt at ease—he was accustomed to meeting people—but Rifle Eye was hesitant. He neither knew nor understood this sort of thing and he didn't like it. But he would go along; a friend had asked him to. Rifle Eye trailed a little behind Bill, and it was only when an amazed passerby whirled to stare at them that Bill saw the rifle in his companion's hands. He felt a flush of embarrassment.

"Do you have to carry that thing in here?"

"I don't aim to leave her in the truck."

Bill said nothing. Probably, if Rifle Eye got off the train in Grand Central Station, he would still insist on carrying his rifle. If there was any trouble, Bill would just have to try to explain the situation. It seemed very evident that Rifle Eye had no intention of leaving his beloved rifle behind.

They entered the lobby, and a girl who sat at a desk behind a waist-high partition stared in disbelief as they came in. Her eyes were wide, her lips curled, and there was an expression of

utter horror on her face. She was not looking at Bill, but at the rifle in Rifle Eye's hand. Bill hurried over to the partition. The girl's hand was creeping toward a telephone and Bill guessed there was a police station on the other end of the line. He wanted to forestall that. He smiled pleasantly and said, "How do you do."

The girl's hand came away from the telephone and her eyes remained riveted on Rifle Eye. She wrenched her gaze away and looked at Bill. Her voice betrayed her fright.

"Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yes. I'm a buyer and I'd like to see one of your sales representatives."

"One moment."

Reluctantly, as though expecting a bullet in the spine at any moment, she turned away and spoke guardedly into the telephone. Bill grinned. No doubt she was telling whoever was on the other end of the line that there was a buyer waiting. But there was also a wild man, with a rifle in his hands. Certainly *he* was not also a buyer and what should be done about it? The girl turned away from the telephone and her voice still trembled.

"Mr. Lawrence will see you. This way, please."

She came out from behind the partition and walked ahead of them toward two glass doors at the end of the lobby. Her head was high and she did not look back. But her hands were clenched and a twitching muscle in her slender arm betrayed her nervousness. Bill grinned. The girl was evidently afraid of

them and still thought they must be bent on robbery, but she turned her back to Rifle Eye. She had courage.

She led them down a long corridor, both sides of which were lined with offices, and swerved into one of them. The man who sat behind the desk was middle-aged and inclined to plumpness. Thinning hair, tinted with gray overtones, was combed back on his head. His gray eyes were friendly and at the same time reserved.

The girl said, "These are the gentlemen who wish to see you." And to Bill and Rifle Eye, "This is Mr. Lawrence."

"Thanks, Marian," he said.

With an almost audible sigh of relief, the girl left the office. Bill extended his hand and Mr. Lawrence took it.

"I'm William Rawls," Bill said, "and I have to stock a store. This is Mr. Smith. He—He's my transportation manager."

Rifle Eye said nothing; apparently only chosen friends called him by his nickname. Amusement sparkled in the eyes of the business man.

"It looks as though he doesn't intend to have any hijacking, either. Where is your store, Mr. Rawls?"

"In Elk Shanty."

"Elk Shanty? Oh yes, that's up in the hills. What is your situation?"

"We held a clearance sale this morning and got rid of all our old stock. I must start completely fresh."

"How about your credit rating?"

"Credit rating?"

"Yes. Where do you do your banking?"

"I—I haven't done any yet."

"Yet you own a store?"

"I just took it over."

"What are your assets?"

"I own the store."

Mr. Lawrence pressed a buzzer and the girl reappeared. The wholesaler said, "Get me what we have on the Elk Shanty store, will you?" He turned to Bill, and his manner was friendly while at the same time it remained aloof. "Don't make any mistake, Mr. Rawls. Our only business is selling, and the more customers we have, the better off we are. But we must take certain precautions. We cannot let anyone drive a truck in here, load it, and drive away again."

"I understand," Bill said.

The girl came back with a typewritten sheet and Mr. Lawrence scanned it. When he looked again at Bill, his manner was even more reserved.

"The store at Elk Shanty owes various business houses in Cannasport and Blissville more than nineteen hundred dollars in past due accounts. These accounts were contracted by Gosmer Wisman. Is that correct?"

Bill exclaimed, "Great guns!"

"What's the matter?"

"I didn't think we were that deeply in debt!"

"You are."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Do you have any other assets?" Mr. Lawrence asked.

"Some."

"Can you furnish us with references? Let us do a little investigating? If we can satisfy ourselves that you do own the store, and that you're capable of managing it, we still may work out something."

Bill said grimly, "I promised to be open for business in the morning."

"I'm afraid that's impossible."

"Mr. Lawrence, if I can leave you ample security, will you let me have what I need?"

"If you have the security, I will."

Bill slid his hand into an inside pocket, took the leather jewel case out, and laid it on the counter.

"Can you have this appraised?"

The wholesaler opened the case and looked at the various gems within. When he glanced again at Bill, suspicion lurked in his eyes.

"It's mine," Bill assured him. "It was not stolen and you can investigate as much as you wish. What I want is stock on my shelves when we open tomorrow."

Mr. Lawrence pressed the buzzer and the girl came in. He gave her the case. "Take this over to John Serian, will you? Find out what he thinks about it."

While the girl was gone, Mr. Lawrence talked to Bill. Many factors entered into the successful running of a store, and Bill must weigh carefully every one of them. No storekeeper ever had a profit so large that carelessness or slipshod methods could not destroy it. Bill must think of all the expenses that storekeeping involved. He should buy wisely, with a view to the personal tastes of his customers. Long hours were necessary; the store must be open when the customers came. Mark-up, the difference between what Bill paid for his stock and what he sold it for, must be exactly considered. He thought that Bill might mark up some articles as little as twenty per cent, but these were durable goods that would always have value. Since the Elk Shanty store had no refrigeration, but only ice, perishables would have to be marked up fifty per cent. Bill was certain to lose some.

Experience was the best possible teacher. Though there were certain basic rules, no one rule applied exactly or covered every situation. Bill would just have to wait and see, and bend the rules to fit his store. And all this, the wholesaler warned, was only a small part of what a successful storekeeper must know. From a shelf behind his desk he took four books, told Bill to study them carefully, and to come back for more when he had done so.

The girl came back with the jewel case and a note. The wholesaler looked at the note and leaned back in his chair.

"We can do business, Mr. Rawls. Do you still think it's a good idea?"

"Yes."

"All right."

He copied the itemized list that John Serian, obviously a jeweler, had written, signed the list, and handed it to Bill.

"Keep this. And you will be able to redeem your security any time you make a success of the store." He smiled. "When you do that, of course you will be able to pay your bill. Now, what do you need in stock?"

"Good eatin' beans get kind of puny in Elk Shanty this time of the year," Rifle Eye said. "Be sure to get some."

From the bewildering list Mr. Lawrence gave him, guided by both the wholesaler and Rifle Eye, Bill tried to make a judicious selection. Rice, sugar, coffee, salt, were basic staples that could not be produced in Elk Shanty. Rifle Eye pointed out that tea was the traditional drink of outdoorsmen, and Bill bought a supply. Mr. Lawrence recommended an assortment of spices; all cooks used them. Since almost every man in Elk Shanty either smoked tobacco or chewed it, there had to be cigarettes, pipe tobacco, chewing, and snoose. The wholesale house carried a side line of simple drugs and household accessories, such as pins, needles, and scissors. There had to be candy for the youngsters, but Rifle Eye looked doubtful when Bill bought some pound boxes of milk chocolates. Flour and

yeast must be in stock. Rifle Eye reminded Bill that kerosene lamps were widely used in Elk Shanty, and so were gasoline lanterns. They must stop at some wholesaler of such products and pick up a drum of each.

The list became an unbelievable variety of articles, and then Bill added some more. Even though Rifle Eye shook his head, he bought two dozen cases of assorted canned fruits and vegetables, two crates of oranges, a box of lemons, a crate of lettuce, some celery, and some grapes. The fact that such things had never been sold in Elk Shanty was not necessarily proof that they couldn't be sold.

When the list was finished, Rifle Eye backed his truck to the loading platform and stayed outside to supervise the loading. Bill remained to finish his business with Mr. Lawrence. The invoice was presented.

"One thousand seventy-two dollars and fifty-nine cents," the wholesaler said. "You have a balance with us of three hundred and eighty-five dollars. Is there anything else you need?"

"Nothing I can think of at the moment."

Mr. Lawrence shook his hand warmly. "We hope to see you back here often and we'll be glad to advise you at any time. The more you sell, the more we'll be able to sell. Good luck."

Bill said, "Thanks, I'll need it." Then, just in time, he remembered the feminine element of Elk Shanty. "By the way, do you know of any wholesale house near by where I can get dresses, cloth, and things like that?"

"Taylor and Brislow, five blocks down the street. Do you have

any money?"

"A hundred dollars."

"We'll back you to the limit of your security."

"Thanks, but I'll see what I can do."

He went out to the loading platform, saw the truck sagging on its springs and the body almost filled. He had spent more than a thousand dollars and it seemed to him that he had bought very little. But now that it was all together on the truck, it looked like quite a lot.

Bill swallowed hard. He was tense and nervous, and he remembered his attorney's advice. It was true that he might have had a comfortable backlog of money if he had gone back to college, but he wouldn't have it now. Bill set his jaw and went to Rifle Eye.

"Can you carry much more?"

"Load her as high as you want."

"Let's go five blocks down the street; I want to find Taylor and Brislow."

Rifle Eye cruised along slowly while Bill kept a sharp watch. He saw the sign in front of the shop, and a display window filled with samples of cloth and various articles of feminine wear. Rifle Eye parked, and Bill got out.

"Come on," he invited.

"Not me," Rifle Eye declined.

"You said you would."

"I said I'd go in 'tother store. I never said nothin' 'bout helpin' you buy frills for fillies."

"Oh, come on!" Bill pleaded.

"Nope."

"Do you want me to go alone?"

"If anybody goes in there, 'twill be you."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yep."

Bill went into the place reluctantly. He was confused to begin with, and even more so when a brisk young woman came up to ask him what he wanted. Bill looked around bewilderedly. He knew nothing whatever about fabrics or women's clothing, and he made a mental note to put Janice in charge, in complete charge, of this department as soon as possible.

Bill blurted out, "I have a store in the backwoods and I must get some things. I believe a lot of the women do their own sewing. Can you give me an assortment? One that might fit in?"

More than a faint glimmer of amusement lightened the young woman's businesslike air. "I think so. How much do you want to spend?"

"About thirty-five dollars."

Mindful that Janice must take over this part of the buying, Bill

kept the order small. He paid for the parcels the young woman arranged for him, got his receipt, and with vast relief carried them out to the truck. Rifle Eye was grinning at him and Bill looked fixedly at the street. They stopped to get a drum of kerosene and one of gasoline, and Rifle Eye drove him to Pete Marrett's.

Pete's was on a back street, a long, low, rambling wooden building that must have been built in Cannasport's earlier days. Without any hesitation, his beloved rifle in his hands, Rifle Eye leaped out of the truck and entered. But Rifle Eye seemed to fit in here as he would nowhere else in Cannasport. Bill followed him.

A medium-sized man, with the bluest eyes and the blondest hair Bill had ever seen, came towards them, using one good leg and stamping on a wooden peg that fitted about his right thigh. Bill felt for a moment as though he were back in Elk Shanty.

"Hi, Pete!" Rifle Eye said.

"Rifle Eye! I thought sure you'd been et by the b'ars long ago!"

"Nope! I eat bears, I don't get ate by them. Pete, I want you should know Bill Rawls. He's the new owner of the store in Elk Shanty an' he wants some gear that's fitten to wear."

"Glad to know you." Pete's strong hand gripped Bill's. "What's you have in mind?"

"He wants corduroys or bluejeans," Rifle Eye broke in. "A shirt that'll take some wear an' somethin' besides them piddlin' shoes he's got. Give him shoes he can wear on rocks."

Bill said, "Maybe some underwear, too—"

"*Pssht!*" Rifle Eye snorted. "A man don't need underwear 'cept in winter, then he should get some red woollies that'll do him some good."

While Pete brought the desired articles, Bill looked around the store. It seemed to contain some of everything that an outdoorsman might use. There were traps, guns, fishing tackle, clothing, shoes, boots, outboard motors, canoes, pack sacks and baskets, snares, sleeping bags, tents—Pete came back with the clothing Bill had ordered.

"I think these'll do. Change in the back room if you want."

Bill went in to change, and he thought that, if only he indulged in flights of fancy like some poetically-minded students at Tennegale, the act might be considered symbolic. When he put on the clothes an Elk Shantyite wore, he became an Elk Shantyite. Bill discovered that Pete's judgment was surprisingly good. The shirt and trousers fitted well, and the shoes, though heavy, were comfortable and by no means clumsy. He folded his other clothes, draped them over his arm, and went back into the store. Pete looked at him with his amazing blue eyes.

"Rifle Eye says you might sell some of this gear in Elk Shanty?"

"I expect I could," Bill said. "But I can't take it now. I haven't any money."

"He didn't ask you did you have any money," Rifle Eye pointed out.

"I—I see."

Bill understood. There was more than one way of doing business. The wholesale houses had to operate as they did and be sure of their customers, because they couldn't afford to take a loss. But Pete had Rifle Eye's word that he wouldn't lose anything, and that was good enough.

Pete said, "I'll give you some to take along. The prices are marked. Keep twelve and a half per cent an' bring back anything you don't sell."

In a huge carton he put trousers, shirts, and socks. He added boxes of shoes and some hats and caps. On top of everything else, he placed a parcel of fishing tackle. They drove away from Pete's, stopped at a drive-in for a snack which, Rifle Eye claimed, must have come straight out of the garbage can, and just as darkness settled they started for Elk Shanty.

Heavily loaded, the truck no longer bounced and jolted all over the road, but they had to move more slowly because of the heavy weight on the springs. At the traffic light in Blissville, just as Rifle Eye had predicted, Lamb Chops leaped in and took his favorite outside seat. Bill dozed as they traveled the Tower Hill Road.

He was awakened when the truck came to a dead stop. The night was very dark, but with his rifle leaning against a fender, Rifle Eye was out of the truck and already had the hood unwired. He prodded beneath it, and when he got back in and tried the starter, the engine coughed into life.

"What was wrong?" Bill inquired.

"Gas line plugged."

Bill dozed off again, and a second time he was awakened by the truck's jolting to a halt. No more than half-awake, he tried confusedly to remember where he was but could not. He knew that Rifle Eye was beside the truck and he shook his head as though dreaming. This could not be.

But it was. So near that its new-leaved branches scraped the hood, a mighty tree toppled from its stump and fell squarely across the road. Rifle Eye snapped the rifle to his shoulder. A tongue of flame licked the night and there was a blasting report. Lamb Chops slipped from the truck. Wide awake now, Bill jumped out.

Rifle Eye snarled like a wolf. "That tree never fell! It was cut, an' cut to get us!"

"Did you get him?"

"Didn't shoot to kill! Just aimed to crease him! Come on!"

They went to the stump upon which the tree had stood, and Bill ran his hand over it. Rifle Eye was right. The tree had been sawed more than half through and, when they came along, chopped the rest of the way. If the truck hadn't stopped when it did, they would have been directly beneath the toppling monster.

Bill's anger flared anew. Somebody wanted to keep him out of Elk Shanty so desperately that he would even kill in order to do it. As angry as Bill, Rifle Eye stared into the forest.

"I could of got him!" he said savagely. "Maybe I should of!"

Saying no more, Rifle Eye produced a chain, hooked one end around the tree trunk and the other to the truck's front axle.

Again he tinkered with the engine, started it, and backed slowly. Inch by inch, the tree came around until there was room to pass.

Finally, they reached the store. Bill opened it, lighted the gasoline lantern, and they carried the stock inside. He sighed with relief when the last parcel was safely in, looked at the contents of his wallet, and followed Rifle Eye outside.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked.

"Aw, this ain't hardly no time to talk 'bout money. You bought all the gas."

"I want to pay you. Will fifteen dollars be enough?"

"For that much you can have the truck."

Rifle Eye drove away and Bill entered the store to face Janice. Her eyes glowed, a smile of sheerest ecstasy lighted her face.

"I peeked!" she exclaimed. "I peeked when you and Rifle Eye were bringing it in! Oh, Bill! You *did* get it!"

Bill forced a tired grin. "Rawls always comes through. Scamper back to bed now while I load the shelves."

"Not on your life! I got dressed so I could help you!"

Side by side they worked, ripping boxes and parcels open and re-stocking the shelves. They did not speak because they were too busy to talk, and Bill carried the empty cartons and bags to the rear, where later they would be burned. He stared in disbelief when there were no more, and looked at the lantern. Its light had been dimmed by the rising sun, but Bill had paid

no attention to either. He grinned again.

"No use going to bed now."

Janice picked up a can of peaches and assumed a pitcher's stance. "William Rawls! If you don't get some sleep, I'll hit you right in the head with this! I mean it!"

"Well, maybe for a little while."

He looked at his watch. It was half past five in the morning.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Under New Management

Bill got out of bed so early in the morning that stars still sparkled in the sky and a waning moon lighted his window. Moving carefully, striking no light, he made as little noise as possible. He dressed in the mud-soaked shoes and the ruined trousers he had worn the day he had set out to hike from Blissville to Elk Shanty, put on a shirt that he had bought from Pete Marrett, and slipped a sweater over that.

Spring was definitely under way. The wild cherries had bloomed and faded, and so had the mountain azaleas. Laurel patches had made whole mountains a mass of flowers, but even the laurel was fading now. The days were wonderful, with a tang and sparkle to them that made old blood race and set young hearts afire. But the nights and early mornings were still cold and blankets were needed for sleeping.

On second thought, Bill unlaced his shoes, took them off, and tiptoed into the store. Lamb Chops rose to meet him. The gaunt hound sat down on the floor and looked mournful. He closed his jaws over Bill's right foot, but he did not bite. As he always did when Bill was troubled, but only then, Lamb Chops wagged his tail. Bill put his shoes on and he and Lamb Chops left by the front entrance.

The hound faded into the darkness when they started down the road, and ten minutes later he came trotting after Bill. He blew loudly through the sides of his mouth, raised his head, and pressed into Bill's hand another of his personal treasures. It

was a gun stock with part of the breech mechanism still intact.

Bill accepted the gift, and by way of thanks he let his dangling hand brush the big dog's head. He grinned in the darkness.

Lamb Chops might not be a canine genius, but he was a true and faithful friend and apparently he had adopted the store as his permanent home.

Bill's grin faded and his brow wrinkled as he gave himself over to concentrated thought. It looked as though John Prosser had been entirely correct and there just weren't enough customers in Elk Shanty to support a store. More than half of those who were present hadn't enough money to pay for more than a small part of what they needed.

That was nothing to worry about, because all of them had produce of one kind or another, and for the first few days after he re-stocked the store Bill sold whatever they needed for whatever of equal value they could offer in exchange. They brought eggs, butter, meat, fowl, and other articles that had a ready market value. But this exchange produce had accumulated so fast that within four days Bill had had to hire Rifle Eye again and take it down to market. Even though Rifle Eye wanted only six dollars for going to Blissville and back, that had wiped out most of the store's profit.

Bill and Janice had inaugurated a new policy. They would extend credit but, with few exceptions, payment in cash or produce must be made within thirty days. Tomorrow was the thirtieth day and he had a lot of trade goods promised. There were veal calves, spring lambs, a dressed hog, poultry, crates of eggs, fresh asparagus, butter, and Ten-Trap Gallagher had promised two crates of strawberries. It would be quite a load,

and Bill would get Rifle Eye to carry it into Cannasport, because he needed more stock. Mr. Lawrence had written Bill that Zunder Brothers—they had a meat department too—would take all the good and choice produce they could get and either credit it to Bill's account or pay cash. If he took it in credit, he would be paid a slightly higher rate.

As he walked up the road, Bill tried to figure just what he had done since he had taken over the store less than a month ago. Despite Rifle Eye's opinion, Elk Shantyites, just emerging from a long winter, had been starved for fresh fruit and vegetables and they had gone swiftly. But the canned fruits and vegetables were still on the shelves, only one pound box of chocolates had been sold and that to John Prosser, and the woman at Taylor and Brislow's had not known what the women of Elk Shanty wanted or could afford.

After going over columns of figures night after night, Bill knew that he would just about break even on his first load of stock. A small profit would show in the goods from Pete Marrett's. Pete and Rifle Eye knew what the men of Elk Shanty wanted. Almost everything Pete had sent along was sold, and tomorrow Bill would pay Pete and pick up some more.

The sum he would have left after he paid for more stock, was an important factor.

Every Thursday he had paid Janice twenty dollars. But he had taken this money from his own personal funds and there was not enough left to pay her in full the next time, which would be the day after tomorrow. He would, provided things worked out well, have cash after he returned from Cannasport. But he also had great need for all of it.

The store could not possibly progress as long as it was entirely dependent on outside transportation. Not that Rifle Eye hadn't been completely co-operative, and certainly he did not overcharge. Bill had to have a truck of his own because, at any time at all, Rifle Eye might be elsewhere. Besides, it was evident that short trips to Blissville would be increasingly necessary. In addition, if he had his own truck, he would have to hire Rifle Eye's only when he needed a large order of stock.

There was a one-ton truck for sale in Blissville. True, it was ten years old. But it was in good condition and the owner would sell it for a hundred dollars, of which half had to be cash. But if Bill made that much of a cash outlay, and still paid Janice's wages, his reserve stock of money would be at a dangerously low point. He had wanted to leave quietly and very early, partly because he did not want to tell her and partly because he needed time to think.

Bill approached Rifle Eye's house just as the night was lifting and for the moment he put his problems behind him. The third reason he had for leaving early was that Rifle Eye had promised to take him trout fishing today.

A kerosene lamp behind them framed Rifle Eye's front windows in a pale orange glow, and the smell of wood smoke made the air pleasantly spicy. Bill knocked lightly on the door and Rifle Eye called, "Come on in!"

Bill entered and sniffed hungrily. Rifle Eye had told him not to bother with any breakfast because he'd have it ready, and not to bring any tackle either, because he had spare rods, leaders, and lures. Rifle Eye himself stood at the stove. A tantalizing odor of good things cooking filled the room, and the smell of fresh-

made coffee blended its fragrant overtones with the rest.

"Where's Lamb Chops?" Rifle Eye asked.

"I left him outside."

"Bring him in. Lamb Chops don't like to be left alone with only dogs for company. He likes people."

Bill opened the door and Lamb Chops made a dignified entrance. He did not look at Bill, but went straight to Rifle Eye and leaned his head against the woodsman's leg.

"He's mad at you," Rifle Eye said. "Lamb Chops don't like to have people bein' oncivil to him."

"I wasn't sure you'd want him in the house, and I'm sorry if I've offended Lamb Chops."

Lamb Chops turned, and his toenails scraped the floor as he walked back to Bill. Sitting down, he leaned his head against Bill's knee and blew through his nose. Apparently all was forgiven, and Rifle Eye's engaging smile flashed.

"Guess he ain't mad at that. Old Lamb Chops must like you well enough. Breakfast's ready."

He filled two coffee cups that held the better part of a pint each, put bread and butter and canned milk on the table, and from the skillet he lifted two huge steaks, plus a generous portion of fried potatoes. Rifle Eye divided everything equally between two plates, and Bill sat down. He tried the meat.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Veal," Rifle Eye said. "Right good veal."

"It sure is good."

Bill said no more. The steaks were not like any veal he had ever eaten, and in all probability he was eating venison, which was strictly illegal and out of season. But from the beginning of the human race, men who lived in the wilderness had taken part of their living from their surroundings, and until such men were no more probably they would continue to do so. Bill did not condone such practices, but he was a guest in Rifle Eye's home and there was nothing he could do about it. Probably some day the game warden would catch up with Rifle Eye, and when that day came he would pay in full for his "veal."

They finished breakfast, and while Rifle Eye washed the dishes Bill dried them. Rifle Eye stacked them in the cupboard, went into another room, and returned with two strung-up trout rods. He handed one to Bill.

"How do you like it?"

Bill took the proffered rod and immediately knew a vast pleasure. Perfectly balanced, the rod was a live thing in his hand. Bill guessed that it might have weighed four and three-quarter ounces, but from the thin tip of the butt every speck of weight was distributed perfectly. Bill whipped the rod experimentally. It yielded, but there was a strength and suppleness in its fibers that promised no breaking. This rod should handle almost any stream trout.

"This is something!" Bill exclaimed.

"It's a good 'un," Rifle Eye agreed. "Asa Dorr makes 'em, an' you don't find rods like that in every store. Did you ever fish grasshoppers?"

"No."

"It's fun, 'most as much fun as flies. Besides, this mornin' ain't goin' to be the best fly weather. Too cold an' wrong time of the moon. But it will be good grasshopper fishin'."

Rifle Eye went outside and came back with the lower halves of two nylon stockings. Both were loaded with grasshoppers which, their feet entangled in the sheer nylon fabric, were almost helpless. It was a novel and ingenious prison for such insects. Rifle Eye handed one of the nylons to Bill.

"There. I ketched 'em yestidday. Hook 'em under the collar an' don't let the line snap or you'll throw 'em off. Just let 'em fall in, like they was jumpin' from the bank an' landed in the water by themselves. When a trout hits, give him line. Let him take it under before you set the hook. You'll get the hang of it after you lose two or three. Ready to start?"

"After that breakfast I should be ready for anything."

Lamb Chops went with them, and again Rifle Eye left his door unlocked. Indeed, if there was a lock on the door, Bill had not seen it. His rifle in one hand and fishing rod in the other, Rifle Eye struck down a dim trail leading into the cutover.

Daylight had pounced upon and overwhelmed what remained of the night, and Bill shivered slightly. Frost lay heavy on the lower bushes and grass. It would not be warm until the sun was two or three hours high, and even high noon would not be oppressively warm.

Lamb Chops padded directly behind Bill, keeping squarely in the line of march so that frost-laden brush and twigs would not

touch him. No super-dog, Lamb Chops did know a lot about many things. There wasn't the least sense in being cold when, as Lamb Chops knew very well, the two men walking in front of him were sure to push most of the frost from the bushes before he came along.

A doe deer leaped across the trail in front of them, ran halfway across a small clearing and stood still, with her white tail trembling over her back. She looked over her shoulder, flashed her tail back and forth and thumped the ground with a front hoof.

Rifle Eye spoke, "She's got a fawn right near by."

"How do you know?"

"She's talkin' to it, wavin' her tail an' stompin' her hoof. 'Keep down,' she's a'sayin'. 'Don't you move a muscle, Willie, on account they's people comin' an' they got a dog. I'll let you know when the coast is clear.' Ha! Leettle devil thinks she's powerful smart."

"Can you tell a barren doe, too? One without a fawn?" Bill asked.

"Oh, sure. They don't act the same way. Take a doe without a fawn to look after, she'd of scooted out of here before this."

Rifle Eye swung up a ridge, entered a forest of massive-trunked beech trees and threaded his way through them to a stand of aspens. He stopped suddenly and held a cautioning hand erect.

Bill halted. Looking past Rifle Eye, he saw the trail blocked by a brown-muzzled black bear. About a hundred yards away, he

stood squarely in the trail and the lightening morning gave his coat a satiny sheen. Bill caught his breath. He had been told that black bears are not dangerous, but being told that and meeting a bear in the forest, instead of behind a zoo's protecting fence, were two different matters. Bill glanced down at Lamb Chops. The white hound had a keen nose and certainly he must smell the bear, for the wind was blowing straight from the animal to them. But Lamb Chops' air was one of complete boredom.

"Hi-yee!"

The sudden wild shriek came from Rifle Eye. The bear swapped ends and bounded into the cutover so hastily that he seemed in real danger of kicking himself in the chin with his flying rear paws. Rifle Eye laughed.

"Bet he won't forget that'n too sudden-like! He'll prob'ly look the next time he shoves his nose down this trail. I'll run that varmint with my hounds, come fall. Ever been on a bear hunt, Bill?"

"Never."

"It's fun. I'll take you out if you want. But don't leave your legs go soft on account it ain't no sissy huntin'."

"I'd like to go."

A mile farther on they came to the stream.

The trail was a dim trace here, overgrown with new spring foliage and obviously at no time had it known the feet of a great many fishermen. It ended completely at a snarling ripple where the stream hurled itself savagely against a nest of

outjutting boulders. Below and above the boulders were broad pools and ripples of varying swiftness. On both sides the stream was bordered by willows that gave way to big beech trees. Here and there was a small natural meadow.

Rifle Eye gave Bill his choice. "Want to fish up or down?"

"Makes no difference to me."

"To me neither." Rifle Eye took a coin from his pocket. "Heads you fish up, tails I do. Good 'nough?"

"Good enough."

Rifle Eye flipped, and when the coin landed tails, Bill made his way to a pool and studied it. He took a grasshopper from his nylon stocking, hooked it as Rifle Eye had instructed, and cast. In the clear water he saw shadows darting toward the shelter of overhanging banks, and Bill knew that he had made a mistake. Even in the remote wilderness, trout have many enemies for which they must eternally watch. Often the merest suspicion of anything alien will send them fleeing, and Bill had let his shadow fall across the pool.

When he came to the next pool, he crouched and slunk behind a clump of willows. Half-hidden, he cast his grasshopper into the pool and knew at once that he had made a clumsy cast. The lure must be so placed that it would look as though it were falling into the water naturally, and the leader made a tiny ripple. Nevertheless a trout came up from the bottom of the pool and lunged at the floating grasshopper. Suspicious of the leader, the fish slunk back. Bill made two more casts, provoked no rises, and went to the next pool.

On his first cast, a little seven-inch brown trout charged the grasshopper so hard and so viciously that it hooked itself. Bill drew the wriggling little fish to him, wet his hand in the stream, and gently disengaged the hook. He knew a short-lived disappointment. Rifle Eye had told him there were some real tackle-busters in this stream. But a seven-inch fish hardly fitted into such a category.

Bill missed a strike in the next pool, took a two-pound brown trout from the one beyond that, and began to enjoy his outing. Then he acquired the true knack of fishing with grasshoppers and gave himself completely to the sport.

Fishing grasshoppers might not be quite as fine an art as fishing dry flies, but it had its points. The cast must be precise, with no swirls from the line or the gossamer leader to arouse suspicion. Always the grasshopper had to look as though it had jumped from the bank of its own accord and had fallen into the water; nothing else would bring a strike. If the pool were properly approached, the right cast invariably achieved results. Setting the hook was as tricky as casting.

Bill lost without hooking a fair fifty per cent of the fish that were tempted by his grasshopper. But he caught enough so that there was action in almost every pool. He creeled a one-pound trout that was hooked deep in the gills and let the rest go; he had enough fish to provide a meal for Gosmer, Janice, and himself. Now he wanted a big one.

Lamb Chops, who had been with fishermen before, had learned to run on ahead, curl up and sleep, and wait for whomever he was currently favoring with his company. Now the gaunt hound, sleeping in the sun, raised his head as Bill

approached. Seeing that Bill intended to fish another pool, Lamb Chops went back to sleep.

Bill crawled carefully up to the pool. The forest had receded here, so that both sides of the creek were grass-grown, with only a scattering of trees. At the far end, a tangle of old logs slanted from the bank into the pool, and no doubt this natural barrier had helped deepen it. Eight feet wide by perhaps twenty long, the pool was floored with white sand. The water was as clear as a pane of polished glass.

Crawling forward, Bill disturbed a grasshopper that launched itself on colored wings and came down squarely in the center of the pool. Bill gasped.

The thing that rose from the sheltering logs could not be a trout, because no trout ever grew that big. Bill stared, still unwilling to believe what he saw but unable to doubt his own eyes. It was a trout. More than two feet long from the tip of its undershot jaw to the end of its square tail, it was the biggest trout Bill had ever seen or even dreamed about. And he knew by the color and shape that it was a brook trout, the finest prize of all.

The water dimpled as the monster paused beneath the kicking grasshopper and sucked it in. The fish lingered, sinking down in the water and fanning its tail. Bill lay almost flat on the ground and forgot to breathe.

A trout that big became huge because it was also wise. During its years in the creek it must have encountered and been victorious over numberless things that would have liked to kill and eat it. Not casually would it rise to a lure. With shaking hands, Bill hooked another grasshopper, raised his head just far

enough so that he could see into the pool, and cast.

It seemed an eternity before the grasshopper struck the pool's surface, and Bill knew that he had made a good cast. The monster trout rose slowly until his jaw was within an inch of the grasshopper and stayed there. Bill watched the grasshopper float slowly toward the foot of the pool while the trout moved with it. Bill's heart was a trip hammer, his mind measured half seconds.

Suddenly a smaller trout smashed into the grasshopper, gulped it, and the monster disappeared.

Bill felt dully sick as he rose to play the smaller trout in to the bank. He had seen the fish of a lifetime and had almost caught it. Now his chance was gone. The monster trout had fled back beneath the logs and would not strike again. Bill knelt, released the small fish, and looked up to see Rifle Eye.

"How you doin'?" the hill man asked.

Bill gasped, "There's a trout as long as a submarine in this pool!"

"Told you there's big 'uns in the crick."

"I'm going to catch him!" Bill declared. "I'm going to get that fish if it takes all summer!"

"I wish you luck. You aim to fish some more?"

"No. I have all we can use and I don't want to kill any more."

Rifle Eye looked approvingly at him. "So've I. Want to go back?"

"We might as well."

Rifle Eye sat down on the grass and Bill stared into the pool where the trout, a dream trophy if ever there was one, lay sulking. He would come back, he *had* to come back, and try again. Rifle Eye stretched luxuriously in the warming sun.

"A body could go to sleep here easy, huh?"

"Yeah, except that I've got a store on my hands. Can you go down to Cannasport tomorrow?"

"Sure. You need another load of goods?"

"That's right. I've also got a load to take down."

"How do you like the store business?" Rifle Eye asked idly.

Bill answered with grim humor, "If I keep on the way I've started, I should clear seventy-five cents for this year's work."

"In Elk Shanty," Rifle Eye pointed out, "nobody else is makin' no money neither."

"Nobody could be earning less than I am. I have to do something about it."

"What do you have to do?"

Bill explained. He needed a truck of his own. There were always goods to haul, and any time at all he might have to make a trip to Blissville or even to Cannasport. But if he bought a truck, he would have just enough ready cash left to run the store for a while and to make necessary change. To pay Janice the twenty dollars due her the day after tomorrow would bring his cash reserve to a dangerously low point. How should

he explain that to Janice?

Rifle Eye was silent for a moment. Then, "It's somethin' to ponder on," he admitted. "You don't have to pay me in money for your haulin', though. I'd as soon take it in trade. As for Jan, why'nt you just up an' tell her?"

"I can't."

"Why can't you?"

"I—I just can't."

Rifle Eye made no comment. They cleaned their fish by the stream, packed them in wet moss so they would stay fresh, and took the trail back to Rifle Eye's house. Rifle Eye, who said he was short of flour and had to go down to the store anyway, backed his old truck out of the shed and took Bill and Lamb Chops to Elk Shanty.

Bill put his fish in the cooler and went in to change his clothes. He cleaned up, and when he went back to the store Rifle Eye was gone. Janice, waiting on Ellery Ganson's wife, served her customer and turned to Bill.

"You got some nice ones, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I missed the granddaddy of 'em all."

"Oh, you'll catch him sometime," Janice said cheerfully. "Bill, how about advancing me two months' wages?"

"Uh—do you have to have it?"

"Desperately. I must have it. Three months' would be better."

"I—I'll see what I can do."

"You prehistoric lame brain!" she burst out.

"Huh?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" she scolded. "Why didn't you tell me the truth before?"

"What are you talking about?"

"As though you didn't know! You let me think that Uncle Al left his money to you, and that you wanted to play at being a country storekeeper! Now see here William Rawls! You go down to Blissville the day after tomorrow and get your truck! I'll take a rain check on my wages!"

Bill said desperately, "I can't do things that way!"

"You not only can, but you will! You hired me as your clerk and I'm not the type who fires easily! Yes, Rifle Eye told me the whole story! Now suppose I go to Cannasport with Rifle Eye tomorrow. Every housewife in Elk Shanty needs something that we do not have. I'll get it, and I can handle Zunder Brothers, too. Rifle Eye and Pete Marrett know what we need from Pete's."

"I—"

"You heard me! It's all arranged. Aunt Dottie has promised to fix some hot food for Grandfather and you at noon."

"Well—"



Rifle Eye and Janice left at six o'clock the next morning. Bill stayed behind to take care of the store. Except for a two-hour interval when he had some pressing business of his own, Lamb Chops slept in his corner. Gosmer Wisman talked to Bill and Mrs. Burns of the old days in Elk Shanty, as they shared the lavish meal that she had fixed for them with very evident delight.

At six that night Rifle Eye and Janice came back. They unloaded the truck and re-stocked the shelves. Rifle Eye stayed for dinner. Motherly Mrs. Burns had seen to it that Janice had very little to do in getting the meal ready. Customers drifted in, and looking almost as fresh as if she hadn't already put in a twelve-hour day, Janice helped wait on them.

It was half-past-seven when Tarzan entered the store where several customers still lingered. Bill hadn't seen the beefy young man for a month or more, and now that he saw him again, he took no special notice. Tarzan turned to speak to Janice, and when he did Bill saw a healing welt on his right cheek. He gave it scant attention.

But Rifle Eye, who had tilted one of the wooden chairs against the wall and was sitting on it, rose and sauntered across the floor. He leaned companionably on the counter beside Tarzan.

"Hi!" the woodsman said.

"Hi!" Tarzan glanced at Rifle Eye.

Rifle Eye's voice was so low-pitched that only Bill, Tarzan, and Janice heard him. "See you got your cheek cut."

"I was riding a horse and got spiked on a branch."

"That horse," Rifle Eye's voice was scarcely audible, "wasn't totin' a rifle, was he?"

Bill swung about and his mind returned to that night when a tree had fallen across the road and had come within a breath of smashing the truck. Rifle Eye had shot to crease, and not to kill. His dull eyes unreadable, but his inner hate and tension making itself felt, Tarzan swung on Rifle Eye.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'll give you one guess."

Tarzan stood still, a lumbering, surly bear who would like to crush and kill with his huge arms. But he knew better than to start a fight with Rifle Eye. Bill said nothing.

He knew now who his enemy was. He still had to know why.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Idea

Barney Jumas, brother of Henry Jumas, the Blissville station agent who knew a great deal but who somehow never got around to telling it, carried the daily mail between Blissville and Elk Shanty. Barney was a tall, cadaverous man who always looked, acted and talked as though some major calamity were imminent. He left his mail in the post office, a front room of Sadie Cadner's house.

Born in Elk Shanty, Sadie had been postmistress for as long as the oldest inhabitant could remember, and the fact that she had an acid-tipped tongue which she exercised very freely never jeopardized her position. She had been postmistress so long that nobody could imagine anyone else having the job.

After he delivered the mail, and largely because he could always be certain of somebody who would listen, Barney usually stopped at the store and carried on at length about his current overload of woes.

On a perfect late spring day, Bill was behind the counter when Barney entered.

"Hi, Barney! Nice day."

"It looks nice," Barney admitted. "That it does. But you never can tell. This is just the kind of weather that's like to kick up a storm. The cricks will overflow, and prob'ly wash the road out, and I'll have the devil's own time getting through. Prob'ly have a big repair bill on my car and I might even get killed.

Ever'body thinks I got a soft job on account I work for the Guv'mint. It ain't so easy, working for the Guv'mint."

"Things are tough all over," Bill said.

"You think so, huh? All I got to say is that you ought to be a mailman instead of setting here earning big money in a store. Sometimes I can't hardly make out from month to month. And you never can tell. My wife might need a expensive operation, or one of the kids might break a leg, and then where is a man? I'll tell you where. He has to mortgage his house, and sell his car, and does he spend the rest of his life working for himself? Nope. He spends the rest of his life working for a bank or finance company. That's what he does. No matter what you try, where are you? You're sunk. That's where you are."

Bill's interest quickened. John Prosser and a few others had told him that if he would stock fresh bakery bread and pasteurized milk, they would buy it. Bill had promised nothing, because making a daily trip to Blissville in order to have such merchandise fresh every day would cost too much. But here was an opportunity.

"Barney, could you use a couple of dollars' worth of groceries every week?"

"Who couldn't?"

"If you'll bring me an order of milk and bread when you come in, I'll see that you get the groceries."

"I don't know," Barney said lugubriously. "The bakery in Blissville is on a slope. Suppose I park there and my hand brake don't hold? The car would roll right down the hill.

Prob'ly it'd jump the railroad and, splash! right into the river. Then where would I be? I'd have to buy a new car, to say nothing of whoever might get hurt or killed, and they'd prob'ly sue me. They'd win a big judgment, too."

"Well, I'll get somebody else."

"Oh, I'll do it. But a body sure takes some awful chances."

Barney left and Bill leaned moodily on the counter. He had learned what the people in Elk Shanty wanted and he stocked accordingly, but one fact was painfully clear. Though the store was holding its own and he was not losing any money, neither was he making any and the outlook for the future was not brilliant. There simply were not enough people in Elk Shanty to support a store and make it show anything that even remotely resembled a reasonable profit.

With a stub of pencil, Bill doodled on a strip of scrap paper. Janice came into the store.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Figuring out how to get rich in Elk Shanty."

"So? Do you have it all figured?"

"Only the negative side. Don't run a store."

"Cheerful thought!" Her eyes were quick and understanding. "Bill, I thought you were going back up to try for your big trout this afternoon?"

"I probably wouldn't catch him."

"Now, don't let Barney Jumas rub off on you!" she scolded.

"Go ahead. It'll do you good."

"I have to take care of the store."

She sniffed. "Since when couldn't I take care of it?"

"I—"

"Go ahead."

"Driving me out, huh?"

"Yes."

Bill said melodramatically, "I go! Never to return!"

Rifle Eye had loaned him a trout rod and an assortment of flies. The woodsman was away on business of his own, but before he left he had advised Bill that a black gnat on a number fourteen hook should be right for this time of year. Trout fed in the waning shadows of late afternoon, and it was entirely possible that Bill could take the big one he had located.

Bill changed into his fishing clothes, waited a moment for Lamb Chops, and when the gaunt hound did not appear, drove his truck up to Rifle Eye's house. The three hounds—Rifle Eye had made provision for their care—blinked solemnly at him. Bill parked his truck and started down the trail.

The trees, well-leaved, shaded the way and a soft wind blew. A doe, with a fleet fawn at her heels, leaped across the path, and a robin sang happily. Bill rose out of his despondent mood to get in tune with that which was about him. A person might have dire forebodings when he started into the woods, but it was impossible to keep them after he got there.

Bill came to the creek, and without stopping at any lesser pools, made his way downstream to where the big brook trout lived. He slunk, crawling on his hands and knees, and very careful not to move any grass or brush so that such motion could be detected from the pool. He knew that he would have to make a perfect stalk and do some near-perfect fishing.

The late afternoon sun slanted long shadows across the pool, and a cloud of tiny black insects danced in the air. Bill studied them carefully. Rifle Eye knew his fish and his fishing, and a black gnat was right.

The wind was dying but it had not yet died and Bill forebore fishing. Very wise, the big trout would be tempted by nothing that was not exactly right. A wrong move could send him into hiding and keep him there. Bill held the rod erect and let the fly dangle. The almost-weightless fly was still moved by eddying zephyrs. He did not cast until there was no wind that could be detected.

His head was raised just far enough so that he could look into the pool, and he knew at once that he had made a good cast. Nothing happened. Bill retrieved his fly and cast again. That time, when he retrieved, a small trout darted out and went back to lurk near the pool's bottom. A black shape against the white sand, the fish did not move again.

Bill drew in his fly and waited. The smaller trout was not frightened but neither would he strike. Bill guessed that they were not feeding yet. He waited until the long shadows of late afternoon became the deep ones of early evening.

Upstream, in another pool, he heard the splash of a trout rising to a fly and falling back into the water. There was another

splash, and another. The night hatch of flies was getting under way in force. Bill cast again and held his breath.

There were other, smaller trout in the pool where the big one lived. Bill tensed, hoping that one of them would not strike. He watched his fly float down the pool toward the barrier of logs, and his heart sank as a small fish darted at it. Bill prepared to retrieve the fly and keep it away from the darting trout.

Just as he was about to bring the fly clear, a shadow appeared. One moment it was not there. The next it was at the edge of the logs. A monstrous thing, it was even a little frightening. As effortlessly as the water flowed, the big trout glided past the smaller one and smashed into Bill's fly.

Bill stood erect, and a trickle of perspiration dribbled down his cheek. Unaware of that, and of everything else save the monster fish on his line, he braced his feet and battled. The rod was again a live thing, a magic wand that had a mind and a will of its own, and that knew how to help whoever understood it.

For a few furious seconds the trout circled insanely, trying with brute force alone to rid itself of the line's pull. Bill gave him the tip and let him fight, but when the trout charged downstream, Bill had to give line. With all the skill at his command, he strove to turn the fish and keep him away from the logs. At the last possible second, he succeeded.

Smashing upstream, the trout splashed in shallow ripples and again circled insanely. He drove back toward the logs, wrapped the leader around an outjutting snag, and just as Bill's heart pounded in his throat because he was sure the leader must break, the fish came back in exactly the same way and unwound it.

Time stood still. There was nothing in the world except the stream and the savagely-fighting trout. Its courage and vitality had no limits. But finally the weary fish turned on its side at the edge of the pool and wriggled helplessly.

Keeping the line taut, Bill jumped down the bank, thrust his fingers through the trout's gills, and lifted his prize clear of the water. A leaping ecstasy coursed through his whole being. Bill had fished in many places and with many people, but never before had he seen a brook trout this big. It would, he estimated, weigh well over seven pounds. He gathered long streamers of wet moss from a bubbling spring and wrapped them carefully around the trout. He wanted to preserve as much of its sheen and color as possible until tomorrow, when he had to have some pictures. The trout swinging from his hand, he fairly danced back up the trail.



Night had fallen, and Axel Helgeson, Bill Gowen, B. B. Jones, and Ten-Trap Gallagher were in the store with Gosmer and Janice when Bill got back to Elk Shanty. Carefully he stripped the wet moss from his prize and held it up for inspection. Gosmer's eyes glowed, for he had caught trout such as this when Elk Shanty was new and he himself was young. Janice was delighted and three of the others were impressed. Only Ten-Trap remained aloof.

"Nice fish," he admitted, "but there's bigger ones."

"You've seen 'em?" Bill Gowen questioned.

"I've seen 'em in Hammer Stone Crick an' Catamount Crick."

"How come you never brought any in?"

"I gets my fish for eatin', an' who wants to sink his teeth into somethin' that big?"

"It's a good fish."

"I already said that much."

"There ain't many bigger."

"There is, too."

"Ah, you got rocks in your head!"

Bill laid the trout in chipped ice and went to bed happy. He might never make a success of the store, but definitely he had succeeded as a fisherman. Living in Elk Shanty had its points.

The next morning he borrowed John Prosser's camera, took two complete rolls of films, and sent the films down to Blissville with Barney Jumas. Three days later Barney brought the processed films back, and Bill examined them with pleasure. Even on a picture the trout looked huge. Bill inscribed the back of one with, "This is the kind of trout we have around here," signed his name, and sent it to Richard Montgomery, his attorney. An ardent angler, the lawyer would know how to appreciate a brook trout that size. Two other pictures Bill captioned, "Brook trout taken by the manager of Elk Shanty's store," and sent them to the papers in Blissville and Cannasport. A little free publicity couldn't possibly do any harm.

Bill soon forgot about the pictures and devoted himself to the various routine jobs that go into the running of a store. There was always something to do, with few idle moments. Bill was rearranging a shelf when Barney Jumas burst into the store. He was half an hour earlier than usual, and so excited that he had even left his car running.

"Look!" he yelled. "Look what I got!"

In his hand was a Western Union envelope. Barney held it at arm's length and squinted, as though hoping to look right through it.

"Thirty-one years I've been carrying mail-order catalogs and postcards to Elk Shanty!" he exclaimed. "Many's the time I've had it up to my neck. I've said to myself, 'Barney,' I've said to myself, 'you're in a rut. You'd best find another career while there's still time.' Only last week I said that to myself again. And now look! This is the first gen-oo-wine telegram I've ever fetched to Elk Shanty! It gives a body new ideas!"

"Who's it for?" Bill inquired.

"You. Why do you think I fetched it in here?"

"Let's have it."

Bill took the telegram, opened it, and Barney Jumas crowded close to look over his shoulder. "Somebody's prob'ly dead," he said hopefully. "Maybe there's been an accident and two-three people are killed. Or do you think somebody's house might of burnt up?"

Bill straightened the folded message and read:

JOE AND MYSELF ON WAY STOP BE IN
TUESDAY STOP FIND US A PLACE TO STAY
AND SAVE US A COUPLE LIKE THAT

RICHARD
MONTGOMERY

"Who's Joe and himself?" Barney Jumas demanded.

"A couple of lawyers from New York. They're coming to fish."

"All the way from New York? Just to ketch a fish?"

"That's right."

"*Pah!*" the mail carrier ejaculated. "I always figgered New Yorkers was crazy, and now I'm sure of it!"

As Bill reread the telegram, he was aware of Janice beside him. Slowly he lowered the message and stared at the wall. She asked impatiently, "Aren't you going to tell me?"

"I sent a picture of my big trout to my attorneys, Kincaid and Montgomery. Now they're both coming here and they want a place to stay. The wire says they'll arrive Tuesday."

"That's today! Bill, we can put them up! There are spare rooms!"

"That's asking a lot from you."

"Oh, what's two more at the table and two more beds to make? Besides, we can certainly use the money. How much shall we charge? Two dollars a day?"

"Four dollars a day each."

"That seems like a great deal."

"It isn't excessive and they can afford it. Jan, this will mean a lot of extra work."

"And a lot of extra money! Don't you worry."

Janice skipped away to prepare two more rooms while Bill took care of the store. He did not know how long the two fishermen intended to stay, but it seemed hardly likely that they would come all the way from New York for less than three or four days of fishing, and if they stayed that long, board and room money would be more than the profit he had taken from the store in any two weeks.

Bill waited halfheartedly on the few customers who wanted to buy. He was disturbed by the germ of an idea, and both restless and faintly annoyed with himself because he could not pin it down. He knew only that there was something to be done, and in time he would figure out what it was and how to do it.

Just before evening the two fishermen arrived. They came in Richard Montgomery's sleek black sedan, and at once a crowd of curious youngsters gathered to stare at it. Not since anyone could remember had a luxury model like this been in Elk Shanty, but Richard Montgomery and his partner seemed to fit in. Both were dressed in outing clothes, and both wore old crushed felt hats in which fishing flies were stuck. They carried suitcases with rods strapped to them, and both seemed a far cry from the suave and polished attorneys who so effectively ruled a metropolitan law firm. They shook hands with Bill.

"So this is what you found?" Richard Montgomery asked.

"This is it."

The attorney murmured, "All this and big trout, too. Did you get us a place to stay?"

"Jan says you can stay right here with us."

"Who's Jan?"

"My assistant. Her grandfather, Gosmer Wisman, lives here, too."

Joe Kincaid looked into the store. "Is that Jan?"

"Yes, that's Jan."

"There are times," the attorney sighed, "when a man wishes most heartily that he were thirty years younger. I really don't blame you for sticking around here."

Lamb Chops came up from the creek, sneered in canine fashion at the two attorneys, and entered the store to go to his accustomed bed in the corner. Bill escorted his guests in. They were shown to their rooms and, after dinner, which consisted of immense broiled steaks, coffee, fresh-baked rolls, a salad that Jan had made from such vegetables as she could gather, and strawberry pie, they sat comfortably on the kitchen chairs while Bill and Jan did the dishes.

Richard Montgomery said contentedly, "Now all we have to do is to wait until morning. Are you going with us, Bill?"

"I can't. There's a lot to do here. But I think Rifle Eye Smith will guide you."

"Rifle Eye, eh? Sounds like a character out of a dime novel. Is

he good?"

"He knows every trout in these mountains by its first name."

"That's good enough. Are you sure you can get him?"

"Quite sure."

They had not asked about guiding fees, and Bill knew that they would not protest anything reasonable. But he had never hired a guide and he did not know how much Rifle Eye should charge. However, both attorneys had fished in Canada and they had had guides there.

Bill said, "You seem to be sort of pioneers in these parts. As far as I know, nobody else has ever wanted to hire a guide and nobody knows a guide's fee. Just how much is it?"

"I've usually paid eight-fifty a day," Joe Kincaid said.

"That'll be all right with Rifle Eye."

At five o'clock the next morning, Janice knocked on Bill's door. He rose, washed, and when he went into the kitchen the two fishermen were already sitting down to a hearty meal of pancakes and some of Ellery Ganson's homemade sausage. Janice fixed a sack lunch for each of them, and driving his truck so he would have a means of getting back, Bill guided them up to Rifle Eye's house.

When Bill pounded on the door, Rifle Eye got up, poked a sleepy head out, and came wide awake. His warm smile flashed, and Bill knew that the two fishermen had found a guide. Bill swung his truck around and started back to Elk Shanty.

Just before he reached the long slope leading into the village, the truck sputtered and died. Trying the starter produced a churning sound but no life in the engine. Bill got out, raised the hood and searched for the source of the trouble. Everything seemed to be in order, but the motor wouldn't start the next time he tried it. He checked the plugs and the points. It was only when he had taken the carburetor apart and cleaned some fouled intake valves that the truck started.

Bill got back to the store at half-past-eight and Janice met him at the door. Her eyes were dancing; a smile seemed to be permanently fixed on her face.

"Bill, I've rented our other two rooms!"

"You have!"

"Not an hour after you left, four fishermen came in from Cannasport. They saw the picture in the paper and they don't mind sleeping two in a bed. I sent them out with Ten-Trap Gallagher."

"Wow!"

"And that isn't all!" Janice was bubbling with excitement. "There have been two other cars since! I sent one up to Ellery Ganson's and one to Axel Helgeson's. I'm sure they'll find rooms there."

At a quarter to ten another car full of fishermen came in, and forty-five minutes later there was another. All had seen the picture in the Cannasport paper and one of them showed it to Bill. It had a box of its own on the front page, a caption, "MONSTER BROOK TROUT," and a few words to the effect

that it had been caught by the owner of the Elk Shanty store.

The fishermen were dispatched to B. B. Jones's and Bill Gowen's houses with instructions to say that they had been sent from the store. If they could find rooms, and Bill was reasonably sure they could, B. B. and Bill were perfectly capable of showing them the streams. If they did not want a guide, they should try any stream at all because there were trout in all of them.

Before noon there was another car with six fishermen. Janice went out to find rooms for them, but she couldn't do it. None of the occupied houses in Elk Shanty were big; there were children in every family, and few rooms available. However, if they cared to do so, the fishermen were welcome to sleep in Ellery Ganson's barn.

That afternoon one of the cars that had been there earlier pulled up in front of the store and a fisherman stamped out. Bill recognized him as one of those they had sent to B. B. Jones, but this morning he had been an anticipatory fisherman. Now he was a broken-hearted one, for in his hands he held what remained of a fly rod. The butt was broken just above the cork grip; the tip was fractured too, and the line and leader were snarled around the rod. The fisherman laid it on the counter.

"Look at it!" he moaned. "Just look! Thirty-five dollars worth of trout rod, and I still wouldn't mind if I had the trout that did it!"

"A fish did that?" Bill asked.

"In a big hole about two miles up, and right beside the road! I couldn't even move him off the bottom, and when he decided

to get out of there, he just went! Sell me another rod! I'd like one that'll handle sharks!"

"We haven't—" Janice began.

Bill silenced her with a look. "It may take a few minutes. Will you drive me up the road?"

"Take the car," the fisherman said. "All I want to do is sit here and plot my revenge on that fish! Whatever you do, bring me a good rod! I want to get back in that same pool."

"You'll have a good one," Bill promised.

He drove up the valley, swerved on a rutted road that led toward the creek, and stopped in front of Asa Dorr's house. It was a three-room place, but Asa did all his living in one room. In the other two he had his work shop and cured the wood that went into his matchless rods.

Bill went around to the back and looked through the open doorway to see Asa sitting on a three-legged stool. There was an almost threadlike sliver of bamboo—Asa got his raw material through the mail—in his hands and he was caressing it as affectionately as some men might stroke a favorite horse or dog. His sensitive fingers probed the wood, feeling for imperfections and flaws so minute that they were not visible to the eye.

A shy and gentle man, Asa was always uncomfortable in the presence of more than one other person. But he and the wood he worked with were one. He was that rarest of creatures, a true handicraftsman who is also a true artist. He loved the material he worked with for its own sake alone, and into it he

worked the perfection that he felt in his heart.

Bill said, "Hello, Asa."

"Hello, Bill."

"Do you have any rods to sell?"

"There are four finished."

Bill hesitated. Asa made two grades of rods, perfect and those with some minor flaws. The laminated strips of which they were fashioned might not have seasoned as Asa liked, or they might have some slight flaw. Asa charged his good friends only the cost of the material used. Those who paid for rods were charged twenty dollars for any with minor flaws, and thirty for perfection. But the fisherman waiting at the store had paid thirty-five dollars for a rod not as good as any of Asa's, and Bill knew enough about trout tackle to have some idea of what Asa's perfect rods were worth.

"Will you let me have a couple of them?" Bill asked. "I can sell one right away, and maybe more after that. The store will keep twelve and a half per cent commission, but I'm going to ask thirty-five and fifty dollars."

"Take them, Bill."

The rods beside him, Bill drove back to the store. He must make it a point to see Fanny Gowen as soon as possible and ask her to tie an assortment of flies that he might offer for sale. But right now there was a customer waiting.

The man jointed up both the rods Bill had brought. He tested them with his left hand and switched to his right. Alternately

he picked up one and then the other, and he finally selected the better rod.

"This baby's for me. How much?"

"Fifty dollars."

The fisherman took a wallet from his pocket, laid five ten-dollar bills on the counter, unjointed the rod, and ran back to his car. Gravel sputtered from beneath the rear wheels as he rushed back toward the pool where he had lost the big trout. Bill watched him go. These fishermen, or anyway some of them, had money such as no Elk Shantyite dreamed of having. Furthermore, they were willing to spend it. Bill sat down on the counter, then jumped up suddenly and whooped, "I've got it!"

Janice looked startled. "Good heavens! What have you got?"

"The house!" Bill shouted. "The big white house on the hill!"

"What about it?"

"Don't you see? A few pictures in the right places and what happened? Fishermen are here sleeping in barns because there is no other place! Jan, if we had that house and remodeled it to make a sportsmen's hotel! Now do you see?"

Her eyes sparkled. "If we can do it!"

"Who owns that house?"

"Grandfather will know!"

Jan disappeared into the apartment. A moment later she returned with a slip of paper in her hand.

"It's owned, Grandfather thinks, by the Wilson Lumber Company. The last Grandfather knew, this was their office address." She handed him the slip of paper.

"Take care of the store, will you, Jan?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to write a letter to the Wilson Lumber Company," said Bill. "Let's hope they're still at that address."

CHAPTER NINE

Trouble

After three days, well satisfied with the sport they had enjoyed, the fishermen from Cannasport left. Almost immediately the rooms were rented again. All the fishermen who had come had taken at least one good-sized trout, and those who had left had spread news of the fine trout fishing to be found around Elk Shanty. They had also advised their friends that accommodations were hard to find, and some of the more recent arrivals brought tents.

However, though most of the campers also brought their own supplies, there was always something they forgot and they had to have it from the store. Those who boarded fishermen also needed more than usual, and now they had the cash to pay for it. Fanny Gowen's hand-tied flies were in such demand that she was working full time just to maintain the supply, and Bill had sold another of Asa Dorr's rods. He needed leaders, lines, fly hooks, reels, and landing nets, because some fishermen were always losing or breaking theirs and they did not want to go all the way to Blissville or Cannasport for replacements. Bill sent a letter to Pete Marrett, asking him to mail an assortment of the necessary articles, and Pete had sent them by return mail.

Every man in Elk Shanty who wanted to do so could guide fishermen. For the first time the store was showing a reasonable profit. But Bill was restless.

He had come to Elk Shanty hoping to find in the store a reasonable foundation for building a business of his own, and

he had stayed on largely because he had refused to be frightened away. Now, at last, he saw real opportunity. Elk Shanty had no industry, but it had natural beauty, fish, game, and peace. All of this was essential to city dwellers and they were willing to pay for it. Every fisherman had seen an abundance of game. A fair share of them had declared their intention of coming back when hunting season opened.

However, if Elk Shanty was to take advantage of this bonanza, it had to be prepared. Bill had been concentrating on how best to make ready.

As yet he had had no reply from the Wilson Lumber Company, and there were formidable obstacles in the way, even if he should manage, somehow, to acquire control of the big white house. When and if he got it, the house would still have to be remodeled into a hotel and that would take money—more than Bill had. The store's profit was by no means large, and much of it had to go into new stock to supply an increasing demand.

There was no furniture at all in the house. Every room would have to be papered. It was in need of paint, inside and out. The grounds would have to be cleared and graded. The driveway would have to be repaired, and though there needn't be a garage right away, there must be a place to park cars.

Bill strolled outside and looked intently down the road. Every day he had been on pins and needles, awaiting the arrival of Barney Jumas with a letter from the Wilson Lumber Company, and Barney seemed to know it. He took his time about bringing the mail, and often, after delivering his daily load of fresh bakery and dairy products at the store, he stood around for a half hour or more, voicing his usual list of terrible things that

were about to occur. Barney not only knew who in Elk Shanty got mail, but he was also pretty sure of what was in every letter; and certainly he read all the postcards. But though he might have done it, he had refused to give Bill his personal mail promptly. Not able to feel important all the time, Barney took full advantage of any opportunities that were presented.

Barney was not yet in sight, and Bill strolled restlessly around the store. Beneath the back porch, almost hidden, was a wooden box that had not been there yesterday. Bill paid scant attention to it. The store was a convenient meeting place. Frequently someone who went into Blissville or Cannasport brought parcels for those who couldn't go and left them at the store to be picked up.

Dripping wet, Lamb Chops came up from the creek with another sucker in his mouth. Bill had at last discovered the gaunt hound's fishing technique. Lamb Chops waded around in shallow pools until he saw a fish. When he did, he leaped upon it, and though he often had to chase a dozen before he caught one, sooner or later he succeeded. Lamb Chops wandered up the hill behind the store, scraped a hole with his front paws, laid the fish in it, and covered it by pushing dirt with his nose.

Bill walked clear around the building, looked again for Barney Jumas, and when he didn't see him he went back into the store.

There were no customers, and delicious odors from the kitchen wafted into every corner of the place. Richard Montgomery and Joe Kincaid had intended to stay only five days, but on the fifth day, in some wild stream to which Rifle Eye had guided them, Richard Montgomery had located another big trout. He had stayed for two extra days to try for it and early this

morning he had gone back for one last attempt. But now time was running short. He had to return to his office, and the two attorneys—Joe Kincaid had been entirely willing to stay and fish—would be in about mid-afternoon, have dinner, and start back.

Bill went into the kitchen and leaned on the back of a chair. He sniffed again at the good things cooking; Janice had wanted to make the attorneys' final meal one to remember.

"How about a sample?" Bill inquired.

"Hands off," she warned. "You'll get your share."

Bill grinned, stared out the window, and looked at his watch. "What do you suppose is the matter with Barney?"

"He'll come."

"Yes, but he's twenty minutes late already."

"Maybe he had a flat tire."

"Do you think the Wilson Lumber Company got my letter?"

"They must have. Otherwise it certainly would have come back to you. You did have a return address on it."

"Maybe they just threw it in the waste basket."

"Give them a little time, Bill. Maybe you had the wrong address and your letter was forwarded, or something like that."

"I suppose that might be. Jan, if we had that house and made it into a hotel—"

He told her again, as he had already told her twenty times, of the plans he had. Elk Shanty needn't ever be a ghost town. Given the right facilities, it could be a popular vacation center, and sooner or later somebody was sure to develop it.

They heard someone enter the store, and Bill rushed out to meet Barney Jumas. The mail carrier had a crate of milk and, on top of it, a carton of assorted baked goods. He put them on the counter, grunting heavily as he did so, and turned around to wipe his face with a handkerchief.

"Don't know how long I can keep hauling this," he said plaintively. "Too much lifting is like to give a man a rupture, and then where is he? He's in the hospital with big doctor bills to pay, that's where he is. Every cent he's got goes for doctor bills. I just don't know how I'm going to pay them all."

Bill asked impatiently, "Barney, is there mail for me?"

"Yeah, there's mail for you."

"Let's have it, will you?"

"I'd like to, Bill. I'd really like to. But Sadie Cadner, she hands the mail out. All I do is haul it. If I handed yours to you, and the Guv'mint found it out, they'd have the postal inspectors here in no time. You know what they'd do to a man. Why they'd—"

The door to the apartment opened and Janice appeared. "Bill, can you help me? Oh, hello, Barney."

"Hi, Jan!"

"Excuse me, Barney," Bill said.

Bill went into the apartment, closed the door behind him, and Janice winked.

"I'm a deceptive wretch, aren't I? There really isn't anything to do, but I heard him say there's mail and I know you'll develop an ulcer unless you get it. Stay here until he goes."

Bill waited until he heard Barney leave, and then waited another ten minutes. Sadie Cadner was not the one to tolerate any nonsense, and everything that she herself did not think of came under that heading. All she wanted from Barney was the mail as quickly as possible, and she didn't want it dripping with Barney's conversation. But if Bill went to the post office too soon, Barney might buttonhole him again and continue where he had broken off.

When he thought Barney must be gone, Bill went to the post office, got his mail, and thumbed through it. There were the usual advertisements and circulars. Then he came to an envelope with "Wilson Lumber Company" printed in the upper left-hand corner, and with fingers that almost trembled he tore it open. He read:

Dear Mr. Rawls:

In answer to your letter of the 19th, we do not care to sell the property in question. We might, however, consider a long-term lease.

Please advise us if you are interested.

Sincerely,

H. C. Wilson, Jr.

Bill knew a mighty disappointment, and then a flash of hope. For the first time it occurred to him that, even if the property were for sale, he wouldn't have been able to buy it. He still didn't know how he was going to lease it, to say nothing of remodeling the place so that it would be capable of receiving vacationists. Bill thought of asking some of his friends at Tennegale for a loan, but dismissed the idea. Those who weren't earning at least part of their expenses were getting by on skimpy budgets.

When Bill reached the store, he found Janice taking care of a customer. He waited until she had finished and handed her the letter. She read it, and when she gave it back her eyes were thoughtful. An orphan, too, Janice had discovered for herself that there isn't any pot of gold to be picked up, even if the foot of the rainbow can be discovered, and hopes built too high can topple with a terrific crash. She seemed on the point of speaking, but said nothing. Absorbed in his own thoughts, Bill scarcely noticed.

"There *must* be a way!" he said fiercely. "There *has* to be a way!"

"A way to do what?"

Both young people had been concentrating so intensely that neither had heard the front door open. Now they turned to face Richard Montgomery and Joe Kincaid. Both looked happy, but neither carried any big trout.

"Didn't you get him?" Bill inquired.

"I did not," the older man said cheerfully, "but I had a lot of fun trying and I'm coming back to try again. Now what the

dickens are you two troubling your heads about?"

For a moment Bill did not answer. He had a dream, but so far he had discussed it with nobody except Jan. A man with the attorney's experience might consider it a nightmare. Bill decided to find out.

"Do you think that other people would come to Elk Shanty if they knew what we have to offer?" he asked.

"Certainly they would!"

"I think so, too, and—"

Bill told him of the big white house. He spoke of fishermen who, having enjoyed themselves on Elk Shanty's streams, had expressed a desire to come back in hunting season. He was frank about his financial situation, and he knew that remodeling the house would take a lot of money. But he still thought that if he only could acquire control of the house, he could somehow find a way to do it and to make everything work out as he thought it should.

The two attorneys did not interrupt while he spoke, and for a moment after he finished they made no comment. Then Joe Kincaid said, "I've worked with Wilson's chief attorney, a chap named Graves. He's a reasonable sort. Why don't you let us take this matter up with him, Bill?"

"I just don't know what to do. If I could persuade them to accept payment after the hotel shows a profit—"

Richard Montgomery said, "You spoke of repairs, and if it's that big white house on the hill, it can certainly use some. Having their property in presentable shape should be worth

something to Wilson. Maybe we can work from that angle."

"Do you think you can?"

"We can certainly try. Let me have that letter, will you?"

"Suppose we have something to eat before talking any more shop," Janice suggested.

"Another first-class idea," Richard Montgomery agreed.

They sat down to the turkey dinner Janice had prepared, ate until they could eat no more, and the two attorneys went reluctantly to their rooms to change their clothes and prepare for the drive back. Hearing a customer enter the store, Bill went out to sell Axel Helgeson's wife a fifty-pound bag of flour.

He took the ten-dollar bill she presented in payment, counted out her change, and asked, "How's it going?"

"Busy." She beamed. "Ach yah! Iss goot!"

Carrying the bag of flour as easily as most women carry a purse, she left and started toward home. Bill looked thoughtfully at her retreating back. He was not the only one who would gain if Elk Shanty could be properly developed. In one way or another, all of Elk Shanty had already benefited. About to go back into the apartment, Bill stopped as another car rolled to a halt in front of the store.

It was a late-model car with the distinctive black and white coloring of vehicles used only by the State Police, and on its door was painted the state emblem and motto. Bill wondered idly at their mission—not since his arrival there had the State

Police visited Elk Shanty—and he waited as two natty young troopers, whose waists were encircled by gun belts containing revolvers and polished silver bullets, got out and came into the store.

There was about neither any of the blustering braggadocio which in some of the more lurid detective stories is supposed to be an indispensable accessory of all policemen everywhere. They did possess self-assuredness. Although they were courteous, it was as if they were in complete control of the store and everything in it from the moment they entered.

Bill asked, "Is there something I can do for you?"

"We would like," one said, "to see William Rawls."

"I'm William Rawls."

"Have you been in Cannasport recently, Mr. Rawls?"

Bill felt bewildered. "Yes, I was there the day before yesterday."

"What was the purpose of your visit?"

"To buy stock for my store."

"Who did you buy from?"

"Zunder Brothers, on River Street."

"Is that your only business contact in Cannasport?"

"No, I also buy from Brislow and Adams and from Pete Marrett."

"Were you at either of these places on your last visit to Cannasport?"

"No. I needed fishing tackle, but I asked Pete to mail it and he did."

"You do sell fishing tackle, then?"

"Yes. Say, what's this all about, anyhow?"

"We'll come to that, Mr. Rawls. Did you need this fishing tackle badly?"

"Yes. There are a lot of fishermen in here and there is a demand for it."

"You are acquainted with River Street?"

"Yes."

"Do you by any chance know where Chatham and Riley are?"

Bill strove to recollect, and recalled seeing the name on one of the wholesale houses—he thought a sporting goods house—somewhere on River Street. He could not remember the exact address.

"I know about where they are."

"Do you identify this as your property?"

He took a soiled envelope from his pocket and handed it to Bill. Looking at it, Bill saw that the envelope, containing a routine report from Zunder Brothers, was addressed to him. The letter had been opened, but he could not remember exactly when he had received it. As he handed the envelope back, he

saw that Richard Montgomery and his partner had come into the store and were listening.

Bill said to the trooper, "Evidently this is one of my letters."

"Mr. Rawls," the trooper said crisply, "three days ago a clerk put a box containing three dozen Maddenburg reels on a shelf in Chatham and Riley's warehouse. This morning, when he went to take them out, they were missing. This letter was found in the warehouse. Explain that, please."

Bill's head whirled. Maddenburg reels were worth fifty dollars each, and thirty-six of them were worth eighteen hundred dollars. Bill gasped,

"I don't know anything about it!"

"Yet—"

"Just a moment, Officer."

Richard Montgomery came forward, and Bill knew a vast relief. He had been overawed by the questions and overwhelmed by the implied accusation, but Richard Montgomery had had previous experience with policemen. Conversely, the young trooper had faced many attorneys. He asked, "What is your interest here?"

"I'm an attorney and this young man is my client. Bill, could someone else have put that letter there?"

"They could have picked it up around the trash pile. I burn everything I don't want, but that letter might have blown away from the fire."

The attorney asked, "Isn't that reasonable?"

"It's possible," the trooper admitted. He addressed Bill. "Do you have any reason to suppose that anyone at all would go to such lengths to embarrass you?"

"There is somebody here who would like to see me leave Elk Shanty."

"Go on."

Bill told of the slugging, and of the falling tree that had been felled to hurt Rifle Eye and himself. The trooper listened, and when Bill finished he asked, "Why didn't you report this to the authorities?"

"I thought I'd handle it myself."

"Nobody takes the law into his own hands."

"I didn't do anything about it."

"Why not?"

"I never found who was responsible."

"Do you have any ideas?"

Bill remembered the healing welt on Tarzan's cheek, and Rifle Eye's hint that a bullet was responsible. But there still was no proof, so he answered, "No."

"You deny this theft?"

"I deny it!"

"Do you object to our searching the premises?"

"Go ahead and search."

Janice came into the store. Wide-eyed, frightened, she lingered beside Joe Kincaid and listened.

The second trooper, who so far had not said a word, walked back into the apartment and Bill heard him go out the back door. Three minutes later he came back carrying the wooden box that Bill had seen under the porch. He lifted the top that was already loose, and still without speaking, took thirty-five reels out of it and arranged them on the counter. The trade name "Maddenburg," that was printed on each box pointed at Bill like so many accusing fingers.

The trooper who had questioned Bill faced him squarely. Bill stared at the reels, unable to believe what he saw, and he answered the question in the young trooper's eyes. "I *didn't* steal them."

"Who did?"

"I don't know."

Richard Montgomery said almost casually, "If you care to accuse my client formally, do so. I'll go down to Cannasport with you and take the necessary legal steps to protect his interests."

The young trooper said, almost wearily, "There will be a formal accusation when we establish definite guilt. This man claims his innocence, and I have only circumstantial evidence to prove that he is not telling the truth. Of one thing you may be sure; somebody is guilty and we intend to find him."

"It is not me," Bill said. "Will it help you to know that the box

was put there last night?"

"How do you know that?"

"If it had been there before, I would have seen it."

"You saw it this morning?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you investigate?"

"People are always leaving parcels around here for others to pick up. It was nothing unusual."

"All right, Mr. Rawls. You will be available when we need you?"

Bill's anger flared. "I'll be here! What's more, somebody in Elk Shanty either knows who put that box there or else he did it himself. Give me thirty days and I'll either find out who did it or plead guilty myself!"

Richard Montgomery warned, "Bill!" But the young trooper smiled meaningly and said, "That's fair enough. We shall depend upon it. I must, however, advise you once more that under no circumstances are you to take the law into your own hands. When you find the guilty party, and if you do, call us."

"I will. You said there were thirty-six reels?"

"That's right."

"But you counted only thirty-five. Somebody has the missing one."

"We have taken that into account. And we will see you again."

Bill said, "You'll know where to find me."

They left, taking the reels with them, and those remaining in the store watched them start toward their car. Tarzan, walking down the road, looked sideways at the store. Paying no attention to him, the two troopers stood for a moment beside the car. Exactly at that moment, Lamb Chops came around the corner.

It was as though the gaunt hound had some prearranged plan to which he had given much careful thought. Silently he glided up behind the pair of troopers, and when he was near enough he nipped the one who had questioned Bill. Before the astonished man could wheel, Lamb Chops had glided on.

Directly to Tarzan he went, and paced companionably on the far side of the beefy youngster. The trooper shouted and Tarzan looked around. Now he and Lamb Chops were beside a field of uncut hay, and Lamb Chops disappeared into it. For a second Tarzan stood stupidly, facing the two policemen, then he ran like a shot-stung deer.

Richard Montgomery's hearty laughter rang out. "That's quite a dog you have!"

"Yes." Bill stared at Tarzan, running across the field. He looked for Lamb Chops, but he was nowhere to be seen. Bill grinned wryly. Lamb Chops had nipped the trooper for reasons of his own, and then had run to Tarzan, and walked on his far side, to escape the stone or club which he was sure would come his way now. But the impression he had created on uninformed witnesses was that he belonged to Tarzan, and

Tarzan's wild flight had detracted nothing from this idea. The anger of anyone at all who is attacked by a dog is directed in equal measure at dog and master.

Richard Montgomery said, "We'll be going, Bill. We'll see Wilson for you and let you know what luck we have. As for this other matter, if there is more trouble, keep your mouth shut. Don't under any circumstances admit to anything you didn't do. Get in touch with us at once."

"Thank you very much."

The two young people watched the big car whirl down the road, then went into the store.

"What's the next step, Bill?" Janice asked quietly.

Bill said grimly, "First things first. Somebody doesn't want me in Elk Shanty."

"So?"

"I'm going to find out who it is before I do anything else. After I find him—"

"He warned you not to take the law in your own hands."

"I won't," Bill promised. "I'll abide strictly by the law. But there isn't a law in the land that says you can't defend yourself if somebody else takes the first punch!"

CHAPTER TEN

Battle

All afternoon the store was crowded, but not by people who wanted to buy a great deal, though all bought something, even if it was only a penny's worth of jawbreakers. The State Police had visited the village, and the villagers were not going to be happy until they found out why. Bill waited on B. B. Jones' garrulous wife.

"Now, let me see," she said, laying a finger beside her chin, "B. B. told me to be sure and get some gum. Give me a package of gum, Bill."

Bill gave her a package of gum and stood grimly silent while she puttered around. He knew very well what she wanted and he was as determined not to tell her anything as she was to learn everything. She scanned merchandise that she had no intention of buying.

"A stick of cinnamon," she said, after she had dallied as long as possible. "B. B. always did say that a stick of cinnamon to chew on keeps the innards clean. Too bad we don't have something to keep the mind clean, too! Then there'd be no need for State Police!"

"Uh huh."

She warmed to the subject. "When I heard they were here I just couldn't believe it! They did stop at the store, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"Oh, dear! I suppose they wanted to see somebody?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, I do hope it's nothing bad."

"So do I."

Unable at the moment to think of anything else that cost only a few pennies, and thus of an excuse for keeping Bill occupied, she told him that she would look around for whatever else she needed. Bill went over to wait on Bill Gowen, who looked at him suspiciously while he tried by the same roundabout method to find out the reason behind the troopers' visit.

Bill fought a rising irritation. These, his neighbors, were good and kindly people afflicted by nothing save a very human bump of curiosity. But right now Bill did not feel like gratifying their wish to know what had taken place; he didn't want to talk about it because he was too troubled and worried to talk. In late afternoon, Ten-Trap Gallagher entered the store and he did not bother to be subtle.

"Heard tell there was law men about," he stated.

"That's right," Bill agreed.

"Was they lookin' for me?"

"Sure they was!" hooted Bill Gowen, who was lingering in the store again. "I heard 'em say myself, 'Is there a little man hereabouts who wears a cap like an umbrella tent? We think his name's Gallagher.' Looks like they got you tagged, Ten-Trap."

"Shut up," Ten-Trap ordered. "Was they lookin' for me, Bill?"

Bill grinned, and some of his nervous tension melted away. There were rumors that in addition to running his ten traps, Ten-Trap Gallagher had an illicit still up in the mountains. Nobody had ever seen it and nobody had proof, but no trapper ever made a living with only ten traps, and Ten-Trap usually had money.

"They weren't looking for you," Bill said.

"Who did they want?"

Bill said quietly, "Me."

A sudden silence enveloped the store and those in it looked uncertainly at each other. Bill squared his shoulders and set his jaw. The Elk Shantyites had at last found out what they wanted to know, and their reactions would differ. Until late tonight some would deplore the fact that they had a criminal in their midst and would wonder what Bill had done. Some, no matter what happened, would remain Bill's friends.

"You, huh?" Ten-Trap said. "Bill, I know a good hidey-hole up in the hills. The whole blasted State Police force will never find you in it, an' if they did, they ain't but one man at a time can go up that draw. Git yourself a rifle an' a hand full of cat'tidges an' you're all set."

"Thanks," Bill said, and he knew that the offer had sprung from true friendship and a warm heart, "but I'll stay here."

"They kin find you here."

"That's the whole idea."

Ten-Trap looked puzzled, then shrugged. "Given you change your mind, come see me."

Ten-Trap left the store without buying anything, and the rest drifted away. They had learned what they wanted to find out and there was no longer any reason for staying. Tight-jawed, Bill went about his work. Sooner or later the story would have come out and he would have had to face his neighbors anyway. It might as well be now.

Bill was certain that some things added up. Whoever had slugged him and felled the tree across the road, had also planted the stolen fishing tackle so suspicion would point to him. Certainly it was someone who lived in Elk Shanty, but most of the Elk Shantyites were automatically eliminated. Bill thought his enemy was Tarzan, and he intended to find out. But first there were some facts that Jan could tell him.

The store was empty and no new customers appeared. Janice moved to Bill's side, and her eyes were soft with sympathy.

"You don't have to care what they're thinking," she said.

Bill grinned wryly. "Yes I do."

"Why?"

"I can't last here unless Elk Shanty's on my side. It's too big a job for just one to tackle. Everybody will have to pitch in hard if we're going to get things rolling."

"What are you going to do?"

"Square things with whoever's been trying to frame me, or move out. There is no other way. Jan, does Tarzan mean

anything to you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"The first time I saw you together he called you 'Sugar.' I wondered if there was a reason for it?"

She said quietly, "He was around the store quite a bit before you came, and I did go to dances and movies in Blissville with him."

"You never thought of—Well—Marrying him?"

"Look here, nosey, isn't that my affair?"

Bill said morosely, "I reckon it is."

She gentled. "I'm sorry, Bill. I didn't mean to get on my high horse. He asked me three times to marry him, and I always said I'd let him know. He did take me out and I didn't want to hurt his feelings. No, I never thought of marrying him."

"Is there anything at all between you?"

"Bill, why are you asking all this?"

"Answer me first."

"There's nothing between us. Now you explain."

"I've a notion that Tarzan's the one who slugged me, that he felled the tree across the road, and that he knows who put that box under the porch."

Her eyes became troubled. "Do you have any good reason for suspecting him?"

"Rifle Eye saw somebody that night and he shot to crease him. Remember when Tarzan came in with a welt on his cheek and said he'd spiked himself while riding a horse? Rifle Eye asked him if the horse was carrying a rifle?"

"I remember."

"You thought it was Rifle Eye's idea of a joke, but that's what he really meant."

"Tarzan tried to kill you?" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Somebody did his best."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to see Tarzan."

"Don't do it! He's very strong and he might hurt you."

"On the other hand, I might hurt him."

"Please, Bill!"

"Jan, I have to get to the bottom of this. I'll never be successful in Elk Shanty unless I do."

A battered black convertible with the top missing stopped in front of the store, and Bill looked at the three young men in the seat. All were husky and well-muscled, and all, Bill guessed, were between twenty and twenty-four years old.

Bill recognized none of them, but Janice said, "The driver is Killer Kress."

"Who's Killer Kress?"

"A boxer. He fights around Blissville and Cannasport. Tarzan took me to see him one night."

"Wonder what he wants here?"

"I can't imagine."

There was a sudden, raucous blast as the driver pressed the horn button. He pressed it again, and again, then leaned on it to make the air hideous with noise.

Already tense and nervous, Bill became angry. He whirled away from Janice, went outside, and said, "You fellows want something?"

The driver, a stocky man half an inch taller than Bill, merely stared at him. One of the others half shouted, "Yeh? You the man who stole all that fishin' tackle an' got in trouble with the police?"

Passing on the far side of the road, Bill Gowen swung around to look. A door opened and slammed shut as someone else came out of his house to listen.

Bill tried to control his rising anger but he couldn't do it. He said, "Suppose you three go back to wherever you came from."

"Hear what he said?" the one who had spoken jeered. "He steals, but when honest people come around to ask him why, he says they should go away! What's the matter, Bub? Would you like us better if we'd come out of jail?"

Bill felt leaping rage, and he clenched his fists. He was aware that Janice said something, but he was too preoccupied to know what it was. Now he knew why the three in the

convertible were there; they had come looking for trouble and certainly they knew something about the stolen reels. His anger was fanned to white heat, but he spoke clearly. "You three seem to know all about it! Which one of you did it?"

The driver, who had said not a word, smirked like a bull terrier about to go in for the kill. With the lithe grace of a trained athlete, he slid out of the car and rippled toward Bill. The other two flanked him on either side, and Bill waited. It would have been sensible to run and ordinarily he would have run; one man alone just doesn't whip three, each of whom is as big as he is. But Bill was too mad to run.

Three yards away they stopped, and for the first time the driver spoke, "What was that you said?"

Bill gritted, "Which one of you three stole that fishing tackle?"

They came on, their arms swinging and deadly intention in their eyes. The three spread a little farther apart, to take Bill from three sides.

The blast of a rifle seemed suddenly to build an invisible wall that stopped them in their tracks. The loose shirt sleeve of the man on the outside right moved as though by an invisible wind. Rifle Eye Smith slouched around a corner of the store.

He said as casually as though he were talking about his truck, "I walked this time, Bill. Took the short cut over the ol' mountain an' come down behin't your store. Which one of these mud puppies do you want? Or should we ought to send the whole business down the holler yipin'?"

Bill grinned savagely, and again he thought clearly. He was not

afraid of the three, but at the same time he knew the folly of fighting all of them at once. The only possible result would be a savage beating for himself. He said very clearly, "Let 'em pick their own, Rifle Eye."

Rifle Eye said, "You heard the man. Which one of you hair-shanked donkeys wants to be first? Or are you scare't without you fight three at a time?"

The driver stayed where he was. His two companions fell back. Rifle Eye waved his rifle almost carelessly. "Give 'em room. If anybody takes a notion to get in, don't do it."

Bill felt suddenly relaxed, as he always felt when ready to go into a fight. All his attention was riveted on his opponent, so that he scarcely saw the ring of people surrounding them. Bill waited for the other to bring the battle to him.

He came catfooting across the short space that separated them and in his eyes was a vast certainty. Killer Kress had faced too many boxers in Blissville's and Cannasport's smoke-filled halls of sport to have any doubts. He knew the game he was about to play, but he had played it only in small-time arenas.

He feinted with his left hand, flicked his right, and now he betrayed a little surprise and a little uncertainty. He knew as soon as he tried and failed to smash him down at once that he had misjudged his opponent.

Never moving his feet, Bill evaded the other's expert lunge merely by swaying his body, and in that moment he found out everything he had to know. The other was a good boxer, but not by any means in the same class with Alan Chesterton. He wasn't as good as fighters Bill had defeated, and when he

moved away Bill ducked in to swing at his midriff.

He missed, and landed an almost harmless glancing blow on the other's ribs. Bill followed up with a quick left that rocked his opponent's head and sent him staggering back. Killer Kress's ham-like fist shot forward.

Bill gasped. Deliberately low, the blow had caught him in the groin and for a moment he knew agony. His breath came in choppy gasps; red lights danced in front of his eyes. He retreated almost to the spectators, who moved back to give him room. He shook his head, gasped lungs full of fresh air, and stepped aside when his enemy charged. He had forgotten for the moment that this fight was not governed by rules of any kind and the oversight had almost been disastrous.

For another moment Bill gave ground. The burning pain in his side faded to a numbed dullness. Anger flared. He pivoted and drove furiously in. This time, when he swung for the midriff, he connected full force and he saw the other's face go a shade paler. Now he knew one of his enemy's weak points.

They sparred, neither doing more than bruise the other, and Bill ducked another deadly blow aimed at his groin. He stepped back, satisfied with what he had seen. When Killer Kress swung that way, he left his guard wide open for the fractional part of a second. That was all a boxer needed.

Bill made a direct frontal attack, feinted at the head, and swung again to the other's midriff. He felt a fist crash into his mouth and knew that he was tasting his own blood. Though he still remained almost unaware of the spectators, he heard Janice shout, "Knock his ears down, Bill! Lay him out!"

With deliberate fury Bill went in again. His cheek throbbed and he supposed he must have been hit there. He could still taste blood in his mouth. But he knew exactly how this fight was going to end.

He dropped his guard, inviting another smashing blow to the groin. His eyes remained on the other's face and he timed everything exactly. The blow, meant to disable him, skidded past instead and for the merest speck of time Killer Kress's jaw was exposed.

Bill whirled close to the other and put every ounce of weight behind his driving right fist. He connected squarely, right on the jaw. At once he followed with a left to the midriff and flung his right again. Killer Kress brought his guard up, but now it was a weak guard that could be smashed down. When he attempted an offensive, his striking fist went wide. Bill hit again, and again, smashing alternately into the jaw and midriff and now making no effort to keep his own guard up.

Killer Kress took three stumbling backward steps, looked wildly about, and fumbled with his arms. His knees buckled; his head rolled drunkenly on a nerveless neck. Like a fire-seared straw, he collapsed slowly on the ground.

Breathing heavily, Bill stepped back. Killer Kress groaned, made a feeble effort to lift himself with his arms, and slumped forward. Bill took a deep breath and looked at Rifle Eye.

"I'm ready for the next one."

Rifle Eye was grinning crookedly, and he had never before looked at Bill as he was looking at him now.

"Next man!" he sang out. "Who wants to try it?"

Killer Kress pushed himself to his hands and knees, rose uncertainly, looked sidewise at Bill, and stumbled to the convertible.

Bill knew suddenly that he was very weary. He stared at the encircling spectators, but no face was clear. He knew that he must wash his face with cold water, and after that he wanted sleep. Bill stumbled back into the store and he heard the key turn as Janice locked the door behind them.

He sat on a chair and felt the soothing touch of a cold cloth in Janice's hand. She washed the blood from his cheek and mouth, and brought a fresh compress to hold against his cuts. He noted with surprise that her hand was trembling.

"You big potato-head!" she burst out suddenly. "Brawling like a common thug!" Her voice choked on a sob. "Oh Bill! You might have been hurt!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Arrest

Lamb Chops had been uneasy for the past several days and at no time had he ventured very far from the store. Not even once had he gone down to the creek to indulge in his favorite hobby of chasing fish around shallow pools. The gaunt hound fretted because Bill was troubled and gloomy, and nothing seemed able to bring him out of the melancholy into which he had subsided.

Lamb Chops had brought Bill three suckers, a discarded inner tube that he had found and buried against the time when he might have need of such a thing, a rubber ball that he had found in the road, and a live rooster from Ellery Ganson's poultry yard. This last Lamb Chops had carried carefully, and when he delivered the chicken not even one of its feathers was ruffled.

However, magnificent though Lamb Chops knew them to be, none of his gifts had brought any response aside from the fact that Bill had taken the rooster back and released it near Ellery's house. The hound had stopped bringing presents and he was almost at a complete loss. The fact that he did not know what else to do was no solace, and lately he had been staying very near Bill. He even slept at night close to the door leading into the apartment, instead of in his usual bed in the corner. That helped a little but not much, and he was rapidly becoming frustrated.

Now he lay in his corner, stretched out but not sleeping, and

followed every move as Bill waited on a customer. There seemed to be no spontaneity whatever about him, and none of the joy of everyday living that until now had marked him and made him a delight to live with. He went about his duties as though he were a mechanical thing that was moved by the timed turning of gears.

The customer left and Bill sat idly on the counter. Lamb Chops closed his eyes and went to sleep. Lots of times when he had been unable to decide exactly what he should do he had slept, and then figured out a course of action after he awakened. The white hound began to snore.

Bill remained seated on the counter and devoted his thoughts to the many perplexities with which his days had been laden. He had known from the first that putting the Elk Shanty store on a paying basis would be a hard and uphill fight. He had almost lost, then found a way to gain, and now everything was trouble.

A week ago he had had a cordial letter from Richard Montgomery to the effect that they were negotiating with the Wilson Lumber Company and finding them stubborn. There was still hope that everything would work out very well but it would take time. As soon as there was some definite word, Bill would be advised.

Bill worried about that, but he worried more about the immediate problems confronting him. Sure that Tarzan was the one who would like to drive him out of Elk Shanty, all his certainties had been upset by the arrival of Killer Kress and his hoodlum companions. Why had they come with the obvious intention of beating Bill up? Where was the tie-in between the

three and events in Elk Shanty? Bill was sure that one existed. But he had reported everything to the State Police and after investigating carefully, they had proven beyond a doubt that Killer Kress and his friends had not been near Cannasport for a month. They couldn't possibly have stolen the reels.

The State Police had also hinted somewhat strongly that though they had probed into every corner, no other leads concerning the theft had been unearthed. In less than two weeks, the thirty days would be up and if something had not been discovered by that time, Bill must go into Cannasport for more intensive grilling. He was still suspect. In fact, he was the only suspect. There was not a shred of evidence to prove that anyone else was even remotely connected with the theft.

There were a few bright streaks in the somber clouds that darkened Bill's personal horizon. The store had suffered a small loss of business because some Elk Shantyites, certain that Bill was a criminal of no small stature, refused to trade with him. But it had gained more because, as it developed, Killer Kress was a local boy of considerable fame. Several native Elk Shantyites who fancied themselves with their fists had been defeated by him, and remote mountain families who would have found it as easy to trade in Blissville came to Elk Shanty instead.

In addition, Bill had been approached by two hopeful promoters, one from Blissville and one from Cannasport. Both advised him to forget what they described as a jerkwater store in a hick village and fight professionally. He was a sure-fire drawing card, and the promoters were vehement about the fact that he could earn more money in five years in the ring than he could in fifty in Elk Shanty. Bill had declined their offers with

thanks. He knew enough about professional boxing to know that his chances of ever rising above the Blissville-Cannasport circuit were small.

Bill slid off the counter and strolled restlessly about the store. Lamb Chops raised his head to follow him with his eyes, and Bill grinned faintly at the big hound. Lamb Chops' efforts to console him and to be a friend in time of need had not gone unappreciated, but where human beings failed, dogs could not work miracles.

A couple of fishermen driving a sleek station wagon, the rear loaded with camping gear and fishing tackle, stopped and came into the store. After buying two loaves of bread and a pound of butter, and asking where they might set up their tent, they drove away. Bill stared soberly at the station wagon as it rolled up the road.

Elk Shanty was busier and more prosperous than it had been since the lumber crews left. The first few fishermen who came might have been only venturesome souls who would go anywhere if there was even a remote chance of finding good sport. But those who were coming now were doing so because they were sure the fish would be awaiting them. All the earlier visitors were satisfied, all were anxious to come back, and they had lost no time in telling their friends of this rare place. Elk Shanty already had a reputation as a sportsmen's paradise, and that reputation was growing.

Gosmer Wisman, so out of tune with the life around him that he was only vaguely aware of its existence, came into the store and pattered meaninglessly with a folded paper. A gentle old man, and a proud one, he remembered clearly only that time

when Elk Shanty had been a rip-roaring boom town. The automobiles that purred up the Tower Hill Road were less real to him than the ox teams that had plodded it.

Janice came softly in to stand by her grandfather's side. There had been little change in his condition and he still slept a great deal of the time. It was not, Bill reflected, a bad life. Gosmer Wisman had been through bad and good, but he remembered only the good. The bad had been claimed by flying years. When he was ready, Janice quietly led him away. . . . A moment later she came back.

"I should have brought a scoop shovel," she remarked.

"You should?"

"Uh huh. Have to make a path through all this gloom somehow; it's a foot thick on the floor. Bill, why don't you snap out of it?"

"Is it that bad?"

"It's terrible," she assured him. "I think it has been a million years since I've seen an honest-to-gosh smile on your face. You look like a sky full of thunderheads."

"Oh, I don't know," he defended. "All the girls back in Tennagle thought I was pretty handsome."

She smiled. "You are, in an ugly sort of way. Now, see here, you can mope around the store for the next forty years and that's all the good it will do you. Don't you know of a fish you can go catch?"

"So! Want to get rid of me, huh?"

"Of course. There's quite a lot of money in the box and as soon as I can get you out of the way, I'm going to run off with it. Go out on the streams, William. Breathe the scent of summer flowers. Listen while the leaves rustle and the birds sing. Bare your soul to the freshening sun. Let Nature, the unsurpassed redeemer, relieve your body of its ills and your mind of its burdens."

Bill said sarcastically, "You've been reading books again."

She laughed. "I have not! I made all that up myself and I think it's good, even if some people around here don't appreciate noble thoughts. Why don't you have a holiday, Bill? You haven't been out in a long while."

"Might be a good idea at that."

"Now you're talking sense. The store has been here seventy-five years or so. I doubt if it will sprout wings and fly away in the next few hours. Are you going up to fish with Rifle Eye?"

"No, I think I'll just go down Elk Shanty Creek."

Elk Shanty was the main creek and all the upper sections were easily reached from the highway. However, it was not over-fished. Most of the fishermen who visited Elk Shanty had golden dreams of some seldom or never-visited wilderness stream where the trout were big and would hit hard. Too many of them had had sad experience with trout water close to a highway, and not one in ten ever tried Elk Shanty Creek. There were good trout in it, and that Bill knew because he had taken some and seen others.

He put on the oxfords and trousers he had worn that day—and

it seemed so long ago—when he hadn't known where Elk Shanty was and had started out to walk to it. Both shoes and trousers were battered and worn beyond hope of repair, but they still made a good fishing rig. Though all the streams around Elk Shanty were spring-fed and therefore cold the year around, they were not so cold in summer as to make boots necessary. And it made no difference if shoes and trousers that had already been soaking-wet a dozen times were soaked again.

Lamb Chops kept his nose at Bill's heels as he walked up to the bridge, and the gaunt hound sat on the bank when Bill cast. He retrieved and cast again, laying his fly in a sun-sprayed ripple and letting it float down. There was a splash of color in the depths as a trout came up, looked at the fly, and went back. Twice more Bill laid the fly across the same stretch of water, then worked his way downstream. The trout that had looked at his fly was not big.

For the first time since the State Police had visited him, Bill felt better and almost lighthearted. Troubles and problems shut in any four walls always loom larger than they really are. But the out-of-doors itself is so big that, compared to it, the many irritations which beset human beings are almost petty. It is impossible for a true fisherman to be on a trout stream and worry about anything at all.

Bill stopped and breathed his pleasure. A doe and her spotted fawn were standing belly-deep in a little side eddy. Both were watching him, and when he came nearer than they thought he should they splashed out of the pool and disappeared in the forest. Bill worked another ripple, then a pool. He took a foot-long rainbow and creeled it. Twenty minutes later he took

another of the same size, and then a third. Three such fish were all that he, Jan, and Gosmer could eat. He settled into the earnest business of tempting a big one.

Starting at the bridge, Elk Shanty Creek flowed to the base of the mountain on the other side of the valley, skirted it, and came back in a huge U, to flow within a hundred feet of where the Tower Hill Road climbed the mountain. Then the creek plunged down a wild valley to spill into the river just above Blissville.

At the farthest curve of the U was a long and deep pool, where three times Bill had seen a big brown trout. Though he had never seen it clearly, he guessed that it weighed five pounds. Each of the three times the trout had been near a trickle of water that flowed from the mountain into the pool, and Bill supposed that it liked to linger there because of the insects that washed down the smaller stream.

Lamb Chops trailed along the bank. Bill waded to his belt in the cold water, going toward a spit of land that jutted into the pool and from which he could conveniently cast toward the trout's chosen lair. Jumping down onto the spit of land, Lamb Chops joined him. The gaunt hound glanced disinterestedly downstream.

Bill followed his gaze. The pool, about three hundred yards long, trailed out in a ripple and there was a big sycamore overhanging the water at that point. Just this side of the sycamore, another fisherman was casting into the lower end of the pool and Bill recognized Tarzan. He paid no special attention. The beefy young man lived on a farm at the foot of the hill and probably this was a convenient place for him to

fish.

Bill cast and saw his fly blown back by an unexpected gust of wind. He retrieved and cast again, tensely excited as he waited for a strike and not particularly disappointed when he did not get one. Stalking one particular big fish was an art in itself. The fact that it was almost always hard to make a big fish strike only made such fishing more interesting.

Absorbed in what he was doing, Bill glanced downstream when he retrieved his fly. He saw the sycamore at the foot of the pool and now there were two men beside it, but his mind registered what his eyes saw in a hazy, offhand manner. He was too interested in trying to catch the big fish to concentrate on anything else.

He cast again, laying the fly perfectly on the water, and there was a swirl beside it. His heart pumped fast and a little smile curled the corners of his mouth. Once more he cast.

This time the line tightened and the rod bent almost double as a big fish struck so hard that he hooked himself. Bill kept his right thumb and forefinger on the reel, stripping in line inch by inch while a happy grin lighted his face. He knew that he was fighting a big trout and would need all the skill at his command to land it.

The fish—a savage, furious thing—charged straight across the pool and turned to go back. Powerfully it bored toward the bottom. Bill played it with the supple rod. Even his big brook trout had not battled more fiercely than this fish. Certainly it weighed more than five pounds. The fish started down the pool and Bill let him have line.

Suddenly the line went slack and the fish was gone.

His heart still pounding, Bill reeled in. He grimaced and swallowed a rising disappointment. He never minded losing small trout, but big ones like this were real prizes and well worth having. His lips framed a sick grin. The trout he had just lost would become a never-never fish. Of course he would try again to catch it, but no matter how big a trout he caught in this pool, it would never, never be as big as the one he hadn't caught.

Bill walked back to the bank and started downstream. About a quarter of a mile down, he knew of another pool that harbored a big trout, and evidently trout were feeding. He might have a chance at the other one. Keeping near the water's edge, so that he might avoid the tangle of weeds and brush which are usually found along stream banks, Bill ducked to avoid hanging willow branches.

He rounded a copse of willows, reached the leaning sycamore, and came face to face with Tarzan and the boxer from Blissville, Killer Kress.

Arms folded across his chest, Tarzan stood at the water's edge and blocked Bill's path. His face was expressionless. Killer Kress leaned against the sycamore. Bill halted in his tracks, looking from one to the other, and his first reaction was anger. He did not know what the pair wanted, but whatever it might be, it was not intended to do him any good.

Lamb Chops sat down close to Bill, and the latter knew a moment's uncertainty. When he had first seen Tarzan, the other had been fishing. Or had he? Bill could not be certain now whether or not there had been a trout rod in Tarzan's hands. He

asked, "Are you looking for something?"

Tarzan's thick lips were set in a mirthless grin. "Yeah. You."

Bill murmured, "Should I be flattered?"

"You was told—" Tarzan grunted. "You was told once before that we don't need no city men in Elk Shanty."

Bill remembered that spring night in front of the store, and a vague voice speaking as his knees buckled under him and he went down. His anger leaped and he stared directly at Tarzan. Now he no longer had to guess who had wielded a blackjack that night. He knew. But even while his rage mounted there was a question in his mind. Why?

He looked sideways at Killer Kress, still lingering near the tree. Bill was thankful that he had not worn boots. They would have slowed his footwork, and if his guess was correct, very shortly he would have to fight both Tarzan and Killer Kress or take a beating himself.

Tarzan said again, "You was told. It ain't as if you wasn't told."

Bill said, "I was told all right." He worked the rod up in his hand so that he gripped the heavier butt piece. When the fight started his first move would be to hit either Tarzan or Killer Kress, whichever was handiest, over the head with the reel. "What are you two gibbering idiots going to do now?"

The brush rustled. Lamb Chops, who had disappeared, came back with his jaws clamped over the butt end of a fishing rod whose mid-section and tip were dragging. Proudly, as was always his way when offering presents, he brought it to his friend. Bill looked down at the reel. The trade name

"Maddenburg" seemed to leap up to meet his eyes.

Thirty-six reels in the stolen carton, but only thirty-five present when counted! Here was the missing one. Tarzan had been unable to resist keeping it for himself, and he had thrown his rod back into the brush when Bill came along. Bill watched the other's eyes go uglier.

Tarzan's hand slid into his pocket, and when he brought it out his fingers curled around the rough-carved hilt of a knife. A four-inch blade, honed to razor sharpness, glinted in the sun. Tarzan pointed the blade at Bill's stomach.

Bill swallowed hard, and cold fingers caressed his spine. There was a vast expanse of wilderness around Elk Shanty, with numerous caves and crevices. An army might search for a year, and unless they were very lucky they could easily overlook anything as small as a murdered man's body.

Bill took a better grip on the butt of his fishing rod and kept his eyes on Tarzan. The beefy young man had to be first now, and Bill must do as much damage as he could as quickly as possible. If he could knock Tarzan out with the reel, he need not fear Killer Kress. He scarcely noticed Lamb Chops, sitting in front of him and begging with mute eyes for attention to the present he had found in the woods. Tarzan's fishing rod lay at Bill's feet.

Centering his eyes on Tarzan, Bill clenched the butt of his own rod and awaited the moment to strike. He picked his spot, a place just above Tarzan's right ear, snapped the rod back and made ready to snap it forward.

There was a sudden unearthly shriek that, for a split second,

drowned the murmur of the water and the rustle of the wind in the trees. It was a rising wail that had in it the suffering and agony of every mortal being. Tarzan, intending to close with Bill, had had eyes only for his enemy. In stepping forward, he had trampled squarely on Lamb Chops' tail. Even as he screamed his indignation, Lamb Chops whirled. And as he pivoted, he launched himself into the air. He was willing to let other dogs do the hunting, but he still knew where to strike an enemy. Straight at Tarzan's throat he aimed his terrible jaws.

Leaping backward, Tarzan threw up a bulging forearm to protect his throat. Not to be diverted, while he was still in the air Lamb Chops strove desperately for that extra half ounce of effort that would enable him to drive through the barrier. He failed, fell back, and in that split second Tarzan turned to run.

He sprang at a low-hanging branch of the sycamore, gripped it with both hands, and drew himself up. But just as he leaped, Lamb Chops jumped, too. His jaws closed over the slack of Tarzan's trousers, and when he fell back he carried a generous portion of the other's pants in his mouth. At once he shook it free and reared against the trunk, thinking only of his enemy. Tarzan scrambled to a higher branch and crouched there.

Breathing hard, Bill faced Killer Kress. He clenched his fists and advanced purposefully. The boxer retreated.

"I didn't do it! I didn't do anything!"

"Who did?"

"He did!"

"He stole those reels?"

The other nodded. Bill looked up at Tarzan, sweating in a crotch of the tree while Lamb Chops raged beneath it. He returned his attention to Killer Kress.

"He hid the box beneath the store, too?"

"Yeh! He did that too!"

"What did *you* have to do with it?"

"He'd give me a hundred dollars, he said, if I picked a fight with you so you wouldn't get on his track. I should beat you up so you'd think it was me. He said the police could prove it wasn't."

"Go on."

"He never give me the hundred dollars! I came to find out why and the man at the farm said I'd find him fishing down here. Just after I found him, we saw you. He said he'd make it five hundred if I'd help him take care of you!"

Bill's head whirled. Tarzan resented his presence in Elk Shanty so bitterly that he had tried in every way he knew to get rid of him. He had even hired the brainless clod who now groveled before Bill to help him.

"Did he tell you," Bill asked, "where he was going to get five hundred dollars?"

"Yeh. Yeh. The old man's money. He had the inside track with the girl before you come along."

"Oh, for pete's sake!"

Bill stood dumbfounded. The myth of Gosmer's wealth—and a

man who had gone to any lengths to lay his hands on non-existent money! All he had to do, Tarzan thought, was marry Janice and he would be rich. Bill looked at the man in the tree, and at Killer Kress. He spoke slowly, "If I were you, I'd go back to wherever I came from. That is, if you can still find the same den of worms. Don't come back to Elk Shanty. Not ever."

"Are you lettin' me go?"

"I am, but I can't speak for the State Police. I'm going to tell them the whole story. Get going and start now."

Killer Kress dived into the brush and Bill heard him crashing through it. He waited a moment, then turned on his heel and walked away. Killer Kress wouldn't come back, and Tarzan would be there when he was wanted. Lamb Chops did nothing by halves. He would stay at the tree for as long as it might be necessary.



Janice was talking to Rifle Eye Smith when Bill got back to the store. She turned from him to Bill with, "Hello, stranger."

"Hello who?"

"You aren't the same person who walked out of here to go fishing."

"You could be right," Bill said. "Rifle Eye, are you doing anything for the next hour or so?"

"Nothin' special."

"Do you want to take my truck, run into Blissville, and phone the State Police at Cannasport? Lamb Chops treed a possum in that big sycamore down at the bend. The possum's name is Tarzan, and he knows all about where those Maddenburg reels came from and how they got here."

Rifle Eye said, "I'm on my way."

"Tell them," Bill called as he went out the door, "that there isn't any special hurry."

Rifle Eye was gone. For a moment Janice was silent. She looked at Bill and asked, "Is it true?"

"It's true."

"Tarzan is the one?"

"That's right."

"I feel sorry for him," she said.

"Why?"

"Because he's such a big, blundering ape. Because he thinks he's terribly clever, and isn't. Because—Bill, what will happen to him?"

"Not too much. This, I understand, is his first offense."

She murmured, "Yes it is. It's too bad he had to kill his own chances just when everything in Elk Shanty is going so well. And it may get better. I'm so excited. I picked up the mail while you were fishing and there's a letter from the Wilson Company. Here. Hurry and see what it says!"

Bill opened the letter she handed him and read aloud:

Dear Bill;

I suppose you think an eternity has come and gone, but these things usually take time. I hope the results will please you.

To spare you a lot of legal terminology, you can have the place on a five-year lease if, within two years, you will repair and maintain it. After that, the lease will be extended to ninety-nine years, provided that you maintain the property in reasonable condition, pay a rental which is not to exceed five per cent of your gross, and keep a room for visiting Wilson big guns when and if they visit Elk Shanty. If you intend to go ahead with your plans, don't hesitate to sign and return the enclosed contracts. They're fair.

I spend my evenings dreaming about Elk Shanty's fishing. I don't think, darn the luck! that I will be able to get back before the trout season ends, but both Joe and I plan on joining you in hunting season. We're bringing four more people with us, so get that hotel operating!

Good Luck!

Dick Montgomery

Bill folded the letter and said, "Gosh!"

"Are you pleased, sire?" Janice asked.

Bill didn't even hear her. "Everything's easy now! Everything's

set! All I have to do is find someone who will loan me a thousand dollars to get started!"

Janice said, "If you asked me very nicely, I might do that myself."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Big Hotel

Bill grinned amiably at Janice, reread the letter once more, and glanced at the imposing legal document that was enclosed in the envelope. He did not read that; if Richard Montgomery said it was all right, then it was. His cheeks were flushed and a rising excitement made his temples throb.

He tapped his chin with the folded document and looked unseeingly at the wall. The house had fifteen rooms, including a huge kitchen, a big dining room, and a spacious living room with a fireplace. That left twelve rooms, and all of them were big enough for two single beds and a dresser. Some of them would take three beds. Bill concentrated fiercely on the problems facing him.

There was a big wood-burning range already in the kitchen and a long table could be built for the dining room. But the house had to be completely restored, with at least two coats of paint on the outside, varnish for the inside, and new wallpaper for every room. Paint, paper, and the necessary materials, such as brushes for applying them, would cost a lot of money, but furniture would cost more. It would not have to be luxurious furniture because hunters and fishermen did not ask for luxury. They did expect comfort, though. Bill tried not to think of the large sums he would have to spend before every room could be ready. He might start with a thousand dollars and have at least part of the house ready to receive guests.

He exclaimed, "Darn the luck!"

Janice asked, "What's the matter?"

"If I'd known about this letter, I'd have gone into Cannasport myself. Now I'll have to wait for Rifle Eye to bring the truck back."

"Cannasport will be there when Rifle Eye gets back."

"I'd like to get in before the banks close. Somehow and somewhere I have to raise money. We could start with a thousand dollars."

Janice took a hammer from the shelf, raised it high over her head, and let it fall to the floor. She gazed steadily at Bill.

"Did you hear that?"

He looked puzzled and startled. "Sure. Janice, what's getting into you?"

"I just thought," she chuckled, "that there must be something wrong with your hearing."

"What the dickens are you driving at?"

"You mean you didn't hear me?"

"Of course I heard you. Why—"

"I said," she spoke very slowly and enunciated each syllable almost painfully, "that—I—can—loan—you—a—thousand—dollars."

Bill had been so involved in his own thoughts that he hadn't heard her the first time. Now he stared, dumbfounded.

"Where did you get a thousand dollars?"

"Hard work and thrift," she said virtuously. "I'm the best type of American womanhood. Besides, I had some money when I came and I've worked in this old store for a year now and where would I spend anything? The fellows who take me out—always supposing somebody would, she said hopefully—pick up the checks themselves."

"Jan!"

The sound exploded from his lips. In a wild ecstasy he stepped forward, flung both arms around her, and kissed her. Bill stepped back, and Janice reached up to push a stray lock of hair into place. Her eyes were very bright.

"Oh!" she whispered. "I wish I had another thousand dollars to loan you!"

Bill breathed, "My gosh! I never kissed a girl before!"

"William!" she chided him.

"Not that way!"

"You mean," she asked, "that I kiss better?"

"The months I've wasted! I should have done that before!"

"Why didn't you? I did everything except send you an engraved invitation, and I was about ready to do that!"

There was a sudden, unaccountable shyness on the part of both, but a deep intimacy, too. They looked at each other and smiled. As though they were of one mind, they moved so that they were side by side and very near each other. For a moment

they did not speak.

Finally Janice said, "With all we have to do, a thousand dollars isn't really very much, is it?"

"It's a lot."

She said doubtfully, "Are you thinking of everything, Bill? I'll gladly go down and work on the place myself, and I know you will. But there's so much to be done."

Bill said, "Leave it up to me."

"Not everything."

He said, "No, not everything. Leave it up to us."

Rifle Eye came back with the truck. As the woodsman entered the store, being a man of wisdom, he looked knowingly on the two young people. He realized that there had been an important change in their relationship, and the smile on his face was not the smile of a cynic. A man who understood many things, Rifle Eye understood and approved of this. But all he said was, "The police are on their way, Bill."

"Good. Do you know where to find Tarzan?"

"I know."

"Want to take care of things?"

"That I do. I think I can keep ol' Lamb Chops from massacreein' Tarzan when he comes down out of the tree. You got somethin' to be done, go ahead an' do it."

"Thanks."

Rifle Eye said profoundly, "There ain't but one thing more, Bill."

"What's that?"

"I was the first one you met when you come to Elk Shanty. Right?"

"Right."

"Then," Rifle Eye said smugly, "I'm gonna be first to kiss the bride."

Janice laughed, and Bill grinned—and their final glances were for each other as he went out the door. Bill climbed into the truck, turned it around, and started down the Tower Hill Road. On the concrete between Blissville and Cannasport, he drove faster. The afternoon sun was still high when he arrived.

With him there rode a feeling that had been completely lacking on that first uncertain trip when he and Rifle Eye had come in together to buy stock for the store. No longer was he the raw and fumbling youngster that he had been. Though he knew that he still had much to learn, he had learned.

Bill drove to Zunder Brothers, parked in front of the warehouse, and entered. The girl in the outer office welcomed him with a smile.

"Hi! How's everything in the big woods?"

"Wild and woolly," Bill assured her. "Is Mr. Lawrence in?"

"I think so." She spoke into the inter-office phone and said to Bill, "He's here. Go right in."

Bill walked down the familiar corridor to Mr. Lawrence's office. He entered, and it seemed that the person he had been when he first stood here no longer existed. Zunder Brothers still held his jewelry, and the store at Elk Shanty still owed nineteen hundred dollars that would have to be paid. Bill knew only that he was unafraid. Somehow or other, during his months in Elk Shanty he had acquired confidence.

Mr. Lawrence rose to shake hands. "Glad to see you again. Business in Elk Shanty must be good."

"I'm not buying for the store this trip," Bill said. "I've come to ask a favor."

"If I can extend it, I will."

"I have money but I must stretch it. Can Zunder Brothers buy furniture, paint, and wallpaper wholesale?"

"We have channels. Don't tell me you're going to open a furniture department?"

"No, we have a hotel—"

Bill told him the story of Elk Shanty. Neglecting nothing, he spoke of the store and of how he had almost lost everything. Now the store was earning money. The fishermen who visited Elk Shanty were responsible for that; they had money and they spent it. Bill went on to speak of the hotel. Hunters would come, too, and more fishermen, if only they had a place to stay. Though no vast amount of money would be realized at the start, the hotel was sure to be a paying proposition in time. That, in turn, would affect the prosperity of the store advantageously. In the end, all of Elk Shanty would gain. Once

destined to be a ghost town, it could be a happy and prosperous community, with something for everybody.

When Bill was finished, Mr. Lawrence leaned back in his chair. "How much money do you have?"

"A thousand dollars."

"It won't be enough. Why don't you use your credit?"

"My credit?"

"Certainly."

"But—"

Mr. Lawrence laughed. "The first time you came in here, I didn't know you from Adam. Since then you've dealt extensively with us and with others. You've paid your bills on time and, all in all, you've done what you said you would do when you said you would do it. Nobody has had to press you and nobody has been cheated by you. Though you had no credit rating when you started, the way you've conducted your business affairs has earned one for you. You have a thousand dollars. Provided you aren't unreasonable, you should be able to get everything you need, pay for it on terms acceptable to you, and we'll arrange for you to get it wholesale. Can you handle it?"

Bill said, "I can handle it."

Mr. Lawrence spoke into the phone, hung up, and called another number. He looked at Bill.

"Go down to Harkins for your paint and wallpaper, and over to

Jones and Allen for whatever you need in the way of furniture. By the way, do you have any wild turkeys in this paradise of yours?"

"Plenty!"

"Will your hotel be in operation when turkey season opens?"

"Long before that!"

"Keep a room for myself and my son, will you? We always go on a fall hunt, and this year we'll hunt turkeys. You can count on us for the first week of the season."

Bill said, "There'll be a room for you, and thanks a lot!"

Bill drove over to Harkins to pick up white outside paint and dark stain for the inside woodwork. Keeping well in mind Janice's instructions and admonitions on interior decorating, he selected various simple patterns of wallpaper, bought paint brushes, sizing, and the tools needed for applying paper to the walls. At Jones and Allen he chose inexpensive beds, comfortable mattresses, and blankets. He bought lounges and chairs for the living room and thick, hard-to-break dishes for the kitchen department. When he was finished he had a dollar and fifteen cents left; but except for odds and ends, he also had everything they needed.

Bill took only the paint and wallpaper with him. The house would have to be made ready before they could move any furniture into it. At the right time he would get Rifle Eye's truck, bring his own, and between the two of them they could move all the furniture in one trip.

Finally, Bill went to see all the Cannasport fishermen who had

visited Elk Shanty. The hotel would be open for the last of the fishing season and all the hunting season, he advised them. A card or letter would reserve a room. Before he started back to Elk Shanty, he had two reservations for the small game season and two for deer. Others said they wanted to come, and would let him know as soon as they could be sure of their dates.

Night had fallen when he got back to Elk Shanty, and at the foot of the long hill he switched the lights off. Driving the truck up the crumbling road that led to the big house, he parked it and stole quietly away. He walked past the store to Ellery Ganson's house and knocked on the door. One by one, he visited the other houses in Elk Shanty.

Late at night, he finally pushed the front door open and went wearily into the store. Janice met him.

"Bill! I was beginning to worry about you!"

"Hush, woman. You behold a weary man!"

She peered through the window. "Where's the truck?"

Bill raised a languid hand. "Let us not talk shop tonight. I wish to forget toil and turmoil."

"Do you feel all right?"

"Very well indeed. But I do not wish to be harried."

She said slowly, "Well, I think you should rest tonight. Come in and have something to eat."

He ate the dinner she had prepared for him and fell asleep in his chair. When Janice aroused him, he stumbled off to bed,

and the sun was high when a sharp knocking on the door woke him.

He heard Janice's, "Bill, it's eight o'clock."

"I'm coming," he grumbled.

But it was another half hour before he got out of bed, and an hour had passed by the time he idled through breakfast. She looked at him with puzzled eyes, but said nothing. From time to time she peeked into the store.

"There hasn't been a customer all morning," she said. "It looks like a slow day. Did you bring everything we need?"

"The paint and wallpaper are here."

"Let's go down and get started."

He grinned. "Fret not your head."

"Bill, I don't understand!"

"Come along and I'll show you."

Side by side they walked down the road. They saw the house, and Janice gasped.

Standing on high ladders, Ten-Trap Gallagher, B. B. Jones, and Axel Helgeson were vigorously plying paint brushes. Guiding a grader with skillful hands, Ellery Ganson was working on the road. Carrying a strip of wallpaper, Al Courtney flicked past a window. Danny Matou, high on the roof, was re-shingling it. Almost the entire population of Elk Shanty was busy, and Janice turned excited eyes on Bill.

"Whee! But how are we going to pay them?"

"They've been paid," Bill said. "Every person here owes the store something and they're just working out their bills. Not a one of them objected. They've seen for themselves what might happen in Elk Shanty and they're looking forward to more hunters and fishermen."

"Bill, we've started!"

"We'll be open for business in three weeks. I know some more fishermen will come, and I already have some reservations for the hunting season."

She said eagerly, "There are any amount of good slopes for skiing, and the road's open all winter!"

Her hand stole into his. They stood side by side, watching while the old house shed the tattered outer coating that long years of neglect and disuse had draped about it. They saw it become clean and bright. Almost as bright as the dream in their own hearts and the years that lay ahead.

A weight settled heavily on their feet. They looked down and Lamb Chops, who had flopped down between them, looked up and seemed to grin.

JIM KJELGAARD

was born in New York City. Happily enough, he was still in the pre-school age when his father decided to move the family to the Pennsylvania mountains. There young Jim grew up among some of the best hunting and fishing in the United States. He says: "If I had pursued my scholastic duties as diligently as I did deer, trout, grouse, squirrels, etc., I might have had better report cards!"

Jim Kjelgaard has worked at various jobs—trapper, teamster, guide, surveyor, factory worker and laborer. When he was in the late twenties he decided to become a full-time writer. No sooner decided than done! He has published several hundred short stories and articles and quite a few books for young people.

His hobbies are hunting, fishing, dogs, and questing for new stories. He tells us: "Story hunts have led me from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Arctic Circle to Mexico City. Stories, like gold, are where you find them. You may discover one three thousand miles from home or right on your own door step." And he adds: "I am married to a very beautiful girl and have a teen-age daughter. Both of them order me around in a shameful fashion, but I can still boss the dog! We live in Phoenix, Arizona."

Transcriber's Notes:

hyphenation, spelling and grammar have been preserved as in

the original

Page 59, Lamb Chop's favorite pools ==> Lamb Chops'
favorite pools

[The end of *Cracker Barrel Trouble Shooter* by Jim Kjelgaard]